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Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric

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1 Kairos and the Public Sphere

In this preliminary chapter, we explore *kairos* and the *public sphere*—two theoretical concepts that will inform discussion throughout the book. Tracing the ways these terms have been discussed in both historical and contemporary contexts helps demonstrate their usefulness for a theory of multimodal public rhetoric. Ultimately, we argue that both *kairos* and *public sphere* need to be reconfigured if they are to serve multimodal public rhetors effectively.

Definitions of Kairos

Virtually all sustained discussions of kairos begin by observing, as James L. Kinneavy does, that "*kairos* is a complex concept, not easily reduced to a simple formula" ("A Neglected" 85). In his introduction to *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, Phillip Sipiora observes that

*kairos* is typically thought of as "timing" or "the right time," although its use went far beyond temporal reference... A fundamental notion in ancient Greece, *kairos* carried a number of meanings in classical rhetorical theory and history, including "symmetry," "propriety," "occasion," "due measure," "fitness," "tact," "decorum," "convenience," "proportion," "fruit," "profit," and "wise moderation." (1)

Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard (292) and Jane Sutton (413) each provide lists that are similarly various and copious. Kinneavy notes that to appreciate the full relevance of kairos for rhetoric, we need to take into account the "ethical, educational, epistemological, and aesthetic levels [of kairos], all of which are linked to each other" ("A Neglected" 87). In their explorations of kairos, rhetorical scholars have linked the concept to Sophistic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Ciceronian traditions.
(Hughes; Kinneavy, “A Neglected”; McComiskey, “Disassembling”; Sipiora and Baumlau; Sutton). Kairos is a complex and richly generative concept that stubbornly resists simple definitions.

Many theorists emphasize that kairos includes both temporal and spatial dimensions, beginning with the original metaphors that inform the concept. Kinneavy asserts, “a second meaning of kairos was ‘the right place’ in addition to the right time” (“Revisited” 83; see also, Miller, “Kairos”; Sheard). Eric Charles White usefully addresses the various temporal and spatial metaphors that merge in the concept:

Kairos is an ancient Greek word that means “the right moment” or “the opportune.” The two meanings of the word apparently come from two different sources. In archery, it refers to an opening, or “opportunity” or, more precisely, a long tunnel-like aperture through which the archer’s arrow has to pass. Successful passage of a kairos requires, therefore, that the archer’s arrow be fired not only accurately but with enough power for it to penetrate. The second meaning of kairos traces to the art of weaving. There it is “the critical time” when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being woven. (13)

Richard Broxton Onians similarly explores the roots of kairos in weaving and in archery, noting that “Euripides refers to a part of the body where a weapon can penetrate to the life within” (343). White, Onians, and others establish that in addition to “the opportune moment,” kairos is the opening or gap that allows passage to a goal or desired destination.

Most contemporary accounts of kairos are explicitly informed by ongoing discussions of the rhetorical situation (see Bazerman; Miller, “Kairos”; Sutton). Kinneavy flatly asserts that “the concept of situational context is a modern term for kairos” (“A Neglected” 83). Many of these accounts draw specifically on the conversation about the rhetorical situation begun by Lloyd Bitzer in the inaugural issue of Philosophy and Rhetoric. Indeed, this debate has become so codified that Charles Bazerman refers to it as the “Bitzer-Vatz-Consigny debate” (174). Other theorists link kairos to rhetorical context via Kenneth Burke’s concept of scene and the pentad (e.g., Sheard; Herndel and Licona). After citing the work of Bitzer, Burke, and others, Kinneavy concludes: “All of these voices saying ultimately the same thing ought to convince us that some consideration in any rhetorical theory must be given to the issue raised by the concept of kairos—the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved” (“A Neglected” 85). Sheard offers a concise encapsulation of many of these concerns in her summary of the concept:

Kairos is the ancient term for the sum total of “contexts,” both spatial (e.g., formal) and temporal (e.g., epistemic), that influence the translation of thought into language and meaning in any rhetorical situation. Kairos encompasses the occasion itself, the historical circumstances that brought it about, the generic conventions of the form (oral or written) required by that occasion, the manner of delivery the audience expects at that time and place, their attitudes toward the speaker (or writer) and the occasion, even their assumptions about the world around them, and so on. (291–92)

Kairos, then, provides a way of exploring how rhetors shape their actions in response to a number of factors. As we expand the scope of kairos to account for multimodality, new factors come into play, introducing new layers of complexity. Many kairotic determinants are beyond the rhetor’s control, a reality that complicates models of rhetorical agency. Indeed, the delicate nature of rhetorical agency is one of the abiding preoccupations of this book. Accordingly, we offer a preliminary look at agency here.

**KAIROS AND RHETORICAL AGENCY**

We sometimes talk about writing and rhetoric as if everything depends on rhetors and their compositions. Rhetors are constructed as rational autonomous subjects who craft efficacious compositions based on their mastery of the art of rhetoric. Kairos, however, reminds us of the numerous factors that rhetors do not control but that nevertheless determine what is rhetorically possible at a given moment. Kairos draws attention to rhetoric’s “bondage to the occasion and the audience” (qtd. in Sutton 415). Kinneavy explores this issue in an interview focused on kairos. Asked if kairos is “beyond the rhetor’s control” or if it can be “manufactured” by the rhetor, Kinneavy replies,
Well, I can see that a rhetor can choose the right time, and in
that sense he can create it. He may realize this is not the right
time to bring this up yet, but if he waits too long it's going to
be too late. So timing, or the right time, is sometimes in
the hands of the rhetorician, but not always. Sometimes a
situation just arises, and if a rhetorician wants to persuade, he has
to use the time, and so in that case what he can do is simply to
adapt himself to that time. Or, sometimes, say these times are
not very good or not very favorable to this idea, then he may
show you back historically how this has been a very important
idea, and we should not forget that. So, there are different
things a rhetorician can do with regard to time. It is not totally
in his control. ("Revisited" 77-78)

Kinneavy goes on to explain that if the time is not right, the rhetor
can "tell people, 'you people nowadays don't think very much of the
importance of this particular concept, but it is important'—you can
create that kind of a timing" (78). Kinneavy acknowledges that
attention to kairos means candidly confronting the constraints within
which the rhetor operates. But he also notes a space, however uncertain
and contingent, for rhetorical agency. The rhetor "reads" the situation
to determine what opportunities are and are not available.

Moreover, in Kinneavy's view, kairos doesn't fully precede rhetoric.
Instead, rhetoric plays a role in helping to construct the moment of
kairos. In Kinneavy's example, referring to the lack of kairos becomes
a way to create kairos. An audience might be resistant; a skilled rhetor
might artfully address that resistance. Some audiences, however, might
be so resistant that no amount of rhetorical skill will be sufficient.

JoAnne Yates and Wanda Orlikowski are among the most optimislic
about rhetoric's ability to create its own kairos. Yates and Orlikowski,
citing Carolyn R. Miller, emphasize a "constructivist" view in
which "situations are created by rhetors; thus, by implication, any
moment in time has a kairos, a unique potential that a rhetor can grasp
and make something of" (Miller, "Kairos" 312). Yates and Orlikowski
give the following example to illustrate the role of rhetoric in fashioning
kairos:

An especially eloquent statement of this action-centered notion of time comes from a keynote speech made by Dr. Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse College, to a 1946

convention of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) at which delegates were debating a proposed (and, at the
time, very progressive) interracial charter. In this speech, he successfully overcame inertia and motivated action, in part
through his characterization of time as something to be manipulated: "I hear you say that the time is not ripe . . . but if
the time is not ripe, then it should be your purpose to ripen the time." (109)

Yates and Orlikowski can be seen as testing the limits of rhetoric's
ability to, as Kinneavy says, "create that kind of timing." Moreover,
their example reveals the danger of citing situational constraints as an
excuse for inaction.

Thus, there is a negotiation—or, as Carolyn R. Miller, drawing
on Eric Charles White and Scott Consigny, calls it, a "struggle"—
between the rhetor and the situation. "As an art," Miller concludes,
"rhetoric engages the phenomena of concrete experience and itself is
engaged by the force of human motivation; it is thus the site of in-
teraction between situation and rhetor" ("Kairos" 313). Reviewing
Gorgias's understanding of kairos, White echoes this more dynamic
notion of the rhetor-situation relationship, stating that "[For Gorgias,
kairos] stands for a radical occasionality which implies a conception
of the production of meaning in language as a process of continuous
adjustment to and creation of the present occasion . . ." (15, emphasis
added).

The crucial idea that rhetors might "ripen the time" is usefully illus-
trated in Miller's discussion of the rhetoric of science. Miller draws
on the work of John Swales, whose research focuses on how scientific
articles are framed. Swales finds that one of the primary "rhetorical
moves" scientists make in their introductions is to "indicate a gap in
the previous work" that is "turned into the research space for the pres-
ent article" (qtd. in Miller, "Kairos" 313). For Miller, Swales's gap cor-
corresponds to the kairotic gap: the opening through which the arrow
passes. "Kairos as opening", therefore, "is actively constructed by writ-
ers and readers" ("Kairos" 313).

The kairos or opening might present itself to the archer at a par-
icular moment in time, but exploiting it depends on all of the training
and preparation the archer has received prior to that moment. Similari-
ly, the ability of rhetors to exploit kairotic moments depends, in part,
on their past experiences and training. Sharon Crowley invokes the
notion of the “prepared rhetor,” a phrase we find particularly apt (84). Preparation is required to read the situation effectively, to discern what opportunities are available, and to know how to frame a rhetorical response that is appropriate. As McComiskey demonstrates in his discussion of Gorgias’s use of kairos, an approach that works in one situation may not work in another, therefore “it is necessary for the Gorgianic orator to know and be able to apply all of the different literary devices (metra) to any logos in any kairotic situation” (“Disassembling” 213). Walker alludes to the issue of preparedness in his discussion of the enthymeme. He notes that the verb form of enthymeme (enthyemeontai) includes the concept of “forming plans,” hinting at rhetoric’s “strategic intentionality.” Crucial to this “strategic intentionality” is “kairotic inventiveness”, “an inventiveness responsive to . . . the ‘opportune’ at any given moment in a particular rhetorical situation” (“The Body” 49). In many ways, this is a book about how “kairotic inventiveness” changes in the context of multimodality.

Kairos, finally, refers precisely to the moment when theory becomes practice, the moment when all of the rhetor’s preparation, knowledge, and training is applied within a particular situation. This is hinted at in a passage from the Phaedrus cited by Kinneavy:

But it is only when he has the capacity to declare himself with complete perception, in the presence of another, that here is the man and here the nature that was discussed theoretically at school—here, now present to him in actuality—to which he must apply this kind of speech in this sort of manner in order to obtain persuasion for this kind of activity—it is when he can do all this and when he has, in addition, grasped the concept of propriety of time . . .—when to speak and when to hold his tongue . . ., when to use brachylogy, piteous language, hyperbole for horrific effect, and, in a word, each of the specific devices of discourse he may have studied—it is only then, and not until then, that the finishing and perfecting touches have been given to his science. (qtd. in “A Neglected” 86)

Given the role of preparedness, rhetorical education can be seen as fundamentally consistent with a kairotic approach. By rhetorical education, we mean the totality of experiences that prepare a rhetor to act effectively within any given situation. In this broad sense, rhetorical education begins early. Infants enter into social environments in which a variety of rhetorical practices and tools are modeled. As they grow older, they continue to be immersed in rhetorically rich settings in which they experience and practice a wide range of rhetorical activities. School settings encourage various kinds of rhetorical practices, from drawing pictures to writing essays to giving oral presentations. At the college level, rhetorical education is potentially distributed across the entire curriculum. We can, of course, point to certain locations that function as key sites, including first-year composition, upper-level writing, and other writing-intensive courses. In many ways, the idea of the “prepared rhetor” is the motivation for our book. This book is primarily addressed to those who play a role in rhetorical education: writing teachers, writing program administrators, writing center consultants and administrators, WAC coordinators—those who are charged with fostering in rhetors the subjectivities and practices necessary for “kairotic inventiveness” (Walker, “The Body” 49) and “improvisational readiness” (E.C. White 14).

Our understanding of kairos and agency, then, references the “struggle” of the prepared rhetor within complex and multifaceted contexts that are simultaneously material, discursive, social, cultural, and historical. This struggle calls for the prepared rhetor to be kairotically inventive. We ourselves are somewhat skeptical about rhetoric’s ability to “ripen the time,” particularly in light of a number of complexities that are elided in most accounts of kairos. In the three chapters that immediately follow this one, we attempt to demonstrate that rhetorical success is contingent upon networks of human and nonhuman actors, including multiple semiotic modes and multiple media of production, reproduction, and distribution. These networks can be complex, unpredictable, and chaotic. After exploring this networked understanding of rhetorical practice through a close reading of a number of specific cases, we revisit the concept of agency in chapter 5. We begin with the way agency, as Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona (following Paul Smith) put it, “exceeds the subject” (142). Drawing on Herndl and Licona, we explore the ways postmodern understandings of ideology, subjectivity, and discourse force us to posit “constrained agency” (134). We then turn to actor-network theorists like Latour and Law, who help us understand the way agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actors. We find this understanding particularly useful in our discussion the way of multimodal public rhetoric is linked to the material concerns of technology and space.
Finally, we should note that if kairos refers to the opportune moment, it is not about simple opportunism. As already hinted at in the definitions provided above, kairos is inextricably linked to ethics. Kairos is not just about what is effective, but what is fitting. Kinneavy, for instance, traces the relationship between kairos and justice from sophistic through Cicero's rhetorics. He claims that for the sophists, justice was situational, coming close at times to "complete relativism" ("A Neglected" 87). While Plato worried about this relativism, his own system of ethics was grounded in "proper measure and right time"—the two fundamental components of the concept of kairos (88). This "aspect" of kairos "continued in the Latin concept of propriety, especially in Cicero" (88). A kairotic understanding of ethics is consistent with postmodern models that emphasize the situational nature of ethics. As Porter puts it in *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*.

By ethics I do not mean a particular moral core (as in the articulation "Christian ethics"). I am referring, rather, to rhetorical ethics—a set of implicit understandings between writer and audience about their relationship. Ethics in this sense is not an answer but is more a critical inquiry into how the writer determines what is good and desirable. Such inquiry necessarily leads toward a standpoint about what is good or desirable for a given situation. (68)

An understanding of ethics as situated becomes important to us in chapters 6 and 7, when we connect multimodal public rhetoric with models of the public sphere. We examine a multimodal composition used by the prosecution in the Michael Skakel trial to explore the ways multimodality undermines the ethical goals of making reasoning transparent to an audience. We do not offer these goals as universal and transcendent, but rather as particular goals rhetors might want to embrace in certain situations. In chapter 7, we examine a different tradition of the public sphere that is not based on rational deliberation and that privileges goals aside from transparency of reasoning.

**Publics, Publicity, and Public Spheres**

If kairos allows us to characterize the inventiveness of the prepared rhetor, public sphere allows us to frame the broader social contexts within which rhetors operate. A highly contested and thoroughly vexed term, the public sphere is commonly defined as the space in which "the citizens of a pluralistic polity speak from and across their differences productively" (Ivie, "Rhetorical" 278). The term owes its popularity, in no small degree, to the work of Habermas, especially *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in English in 1989. We agree with Kevin Michael DeLuca that something akin to the "concept of the public sphere is indispensable for theoretical and practical reasons" (21; see also Fraser 57). In the remainder of this chapter, we review contemporary conversations about the nature of publics and publicity in order to establish what we have in mind when we use the concept of the public sphere. We begin with a brief outline of the defining features of Habermas's original model and then trace five broad areas of critique that public-sphere scholars have offered in response.

**Habermas and the Liberal Bourgeois Public Sphere**

In Habermas's original model, the liberal bourgeois public sphere is a social space in which private citizens (as distinct from state actors) come together to address issues of "common concern." Public-sphere activity could be witnessed in the salons of France, the coffee houses of Great Britain, and the "table societies" and "literary societies" of Germany (31–34). These institutions organized discussion among private people in such a way that social status was "disregarded altogether" (36). Not social status, but "the authority of the better argument" ruled the day (36). The "rational-critical debate" (160) that took place in coffeehouses and salons resulted in "public opinion" which in turn exerted political force on the state (52–55). The public sphere, in this conception, mediates between the private lives of ordinary citizens and the state.

**Critical Responses to the Liberal Bourgeois Public Sphere**

The model of the public sphere offered by Habermas in *Structural Transformation* has been critiqued along many lines. For the purposes of our exploration of multimodal public rhetoric, five broad areas of critique are particularly relevant.

**Critique #1: The ontology of publics.** The first set of critiques concerns the fundamental nature of the public sphere: What is the manner of its existence? Is it a sphere? Network? Rhizome? (Brouwer and Asen 1–23). The question is so vexing that some theorists recommend giv-
ing up the search for a definitive answer. Borrowing a term from Slavoj Žižek, Jodi Dean recommends treating the public sphere as a “zero institution”: “an empty signifier that itself has no determinate meaning but that signifies the presence of meaning” (105). We find the approach of Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen more productive. Brouwer and Asen begin the introduction to their recent collection, *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media, and the Shape of Public Life* by observing that

The public organizes through metaphor. Both its practitioners and theorists employ a rich range of metaphors when enacting and analyzing public activity. *Spheres, lines, networks, screens*—these terms render distinctly intelligible the qualities, realms, collectivities, or processes signified by multiple meanings of public. (1)

Brouwer and Asen resist the temptation to assert a single metaphor as superior. Instead, they consider multiple metaphors, reviewing the possibilities that each one opens up and forecloses.

As Brouwer and Asen note, the metaphor of the “sphere” has been criticized by a number of scholars. Hariman and Lucaites complain that spheres are “abstract, formally elegant, inherently rational, self-completing and self-regulating entities imagined to be freestanding in abstract space and seen from a macroscopic perspective” (qtd. in Brouwer and Asen 4). Moreover, the insistence on spatiality that is implied by a sphere (as a geometrical shape) can be both productive and counterproductive (Brouwer and Asen 3–5). If we’re not careful, we begin to speak of “entering” the public sphere, as if one could physically move in and out of it in the same way one enters and leaves a coffeehouse (for critiques of space- and place-based metaphors, see Calhoun, “Rethinking” 4; Edbauer Rice, “Unframing” 9–12; Mah). It will become clear in subsequent chapters that the metaphor of the network or web has a special resonance for us. As Brouwer and Asen observe, “Network and web metaphors invite greater consideration of relationality and temporality” (7). *Network is consonant with our understanding of kairos as involving a complex configuration of relationships between rhetors, audiences, places, and contextual resources and constraints at a particular moment in time. We are also attracted to Brouwer and Asen’s use of modality, which “foregrounds productive arts of crafting publicity,” though we avoid this term because of possible confusion with “multimodality” as it is used in this book (17).

A danger of metaphors like “sphere” and “network” call to mind entities that exist (like a geophysical places) independently of the performances that occur “in” them, in the same way a theater exists even when there is no performance occurring there. But several theorists take issue with the implication that the public sphere exists independently of rhetorical performances. Warner, for instance, emphasizes the way a public is coaxed into existence via the operation of multiple texts circulating in relationship with each other over time:

It’s the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric. (97)

Audience and attention, in this model, become crucial: “Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members” (87). In Warner’s conception, the public sphere has a fragile quality. It is always in danger of evaporating. Should channels of textual circulation become blocked or attention be diverted, the public will fade away. In this sense, a public is different from other forms of sociality, such as a “nation,” which “includes its members whether they are awake or asleep, sober or drunk, sane or deranged, alert or comatose” (87). This emphasis on circulation and attention drives much of the subsequent discussion in our book. In chapters 3–5, we offer a revised model of rhetorical invention based on links between the composing process and considerations of circulation, of what happens when the composition is done.

**Critique #2: The nature of access to the public sphere.** The second critique concerns how publics are accessed. The liberal bourgeois public sphere is founded on the idea that participation is not reliant on social status. One did not need to be a duke to enter the coffeehouse and introduce arguments. But as many have pointed out, and as Habermas himself concedes, the allegedly egalitarian nature of this public had severe limitations: It only applied to white male property owners. The ideal model of the public sphere described by Habermas insists on
what Seyla Benhabib calls a “symmetry condition,” which includes the related tenets that “each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication” and “each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, explanations, and to challenge justifications” (87). Likewise, Craig J. Calhoun writes that “[i]n a nutshell, a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both quality of discourse and quantity of participation” (“Introduction” 2). Access is partly a function of material resources. As Nicholas Garnham observes, contemporary models of the public sphere must include provisions for “the problem raised by all forms of mediated communication, namely, how are the material resources necessary for that communication made available and to whom?” (361).

Habermas’s “symmetry condition” is premised on the idea that social status and cultural difference can be bracketed or ignored and that participants can enter into rational-critical exchanges as equals. Fraser famously argues that it is impossible to achieve this form of equal access because “even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate,” there will continue to be “informal impediments to participatory parity” (63). As an example of these impediments, Fraser cites Jane Mansbridge’s finding that “[s]ubordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say ‘yes’ when what they have said is ‘no’” (qtd. in Fraser 64). Fraser concludes that “[w]e should question whether it is possible even in principle for interlocutors to deliberate as if they were social peers in specially designated discursive arenas, when these discursive arenas are situated in a larger societal context that is pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination” (65). Rather than ignoring differences, it would be better to “explicitly thematiz[e]” them (64; see also, Sanders 360-2; Young, “Activist”; Young, “Communication” 122–3).

Combining Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern” with Rita Felski’s “counterpublic,” Fraser proposes the term “subaltern counterpublics” to denote the “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67, 79). Rather than a model that emphasizes a single, all-inclusive public, Fraser proposes a model comprised of multiple, oppositional publics. This proposal is not intended to signify the desirability of a hopelessly fractured society in which groups only talk amongst themselves; instead, “the concept of a counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is publicist. Insofar as these arenas are publics they are by definition not enclaves” (67). Therefore, “subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (68; see also, Felski 167; Asen and Brouwer 7).

In this book, we have no interest in reinscribing a naïve liberal ideal of equal access for all participants. Our pedagogy is kairotic, aimed at creating the conditions within which students—as members of various and overlapping publics and counterpublics—can theorize their own situated decisions about public participation. In the approach we propose, students read public contexts and make decisions about if, when, and how to participate. These forms of participation will be various and, to a certain extent, unpredictable. At times participation might take the form of tactical planning and value formation within small, highly focused groups, while other moments might be opportune for addressing wider publics.

Critique #3: The product of public-sphere participation. Habermas suggests that rational-critical debate leads to the formation of public opinion (54). Fraser, however, broadens this goal, emphasizing that public-sphere activity leads to “decision-making” on the one hand and “identity formation” on the other (75, 68). For Fraser, productive entrance into the public sphere “means being able to speak ‘in one’s own voice,’ thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” (69). This function of the public sphere is not merely incidental, but an important political opportunity. “It seems to me,” Fraser writes, “that public discursive arenas are among the most important and under-recognized sites in which social identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (79).

For Warner, identity is both the occasion for the public sphere and a product of it. Warner writes that “conditions of gender and sexuality can be treated not simply as the given necessities of the laboring body but as the occasion for forming publics, elaborating common worlds, making the transposition from shame to honor, from hiddenness to
the exchange of viewpoints with generalized others, in such a way that the disclosure of self partakes of freedom” (61). Furthermore, a public, or counterpublic, can do more than represent the interests of gendered or sexualized persons in a public sphere. It can mediate the most private and intimate worlds of gender and sexuality. It can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy. It can therefore make new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender. (57)

Indeed, for Warner, the proper business of the public sphere is “poetic world making” (114). Warner contrasts his model of the public sphere with Habermas and those who view public-sphere practice as limited to “conversation.” In the liberal bourgeois model, publics “exist to deliberate and then to decide” and “require persuasion rather than poesis” (115). For Warner, however, “the perception of public discourse as conversation obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics” (115).

Critique #4: The nature of public-sphere discourse. If diversity and difference demand that we speak of multiple publics and if these publics engender not just public opinion, but identity, consciousness, and culture, then the kind of discursive practices we should expect to find in the public sphere are themselves diverse, extending well beyond rational-critical deliberation. For Fraser, it is crucial that subordinated groups participate on their own terms, using their own “idiom and style” (69). To insist that groups adopt a single set of norms dictated by the dominant culture would amount to “discursive assimilation,” which would lead to “the demise of multi-culturalism” (69). Late twentieth-century feminism, for instance, was not limited to a narrow understanding of rational-critical deliberation, but included such things as “festivals” and “film and video distribution networks” (67). Fraser’s insistence on valuing participants native “idiom and style” is reminiscent of conversations in composition and rhetoric that led to and were fueled by CCCC’s “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language.”

In “Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians,” John L. Brooke usefully reviews a range of historical research that explores the role of expressive practices that go far beyond the coffeehouse conversations Habermas examines. As summarized by Brooke, David Waldstreicher locates public-sphere practices of post-Revolution U.S. in such things as “celebrations, parades, toasts, songs” (50). Similarly, David Shields “finds the sociability of the eighteenth-century [colonial American] public sphere defined by wit, humor, theatricality, and satire” (53). Shields reveals a sociality formed out of “the pursuit of pleasure” that includes social, affective, and aesthetic dimensions (qtd. in Brooke 53).

For Warner, the radical potential of publics is linked precisely to the ability of groups to introduce their own forms of expressivity: their own styles, forms, and practices of semiotic exchange. Warner writes that counterpublics “might not be organized by the hierarchy of faculties that elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity; they might depend more heavily on performance spaces than on print” (123). “A queer public,” writes Warner, “might be one that throws shade, prances, disses, acts up, carries on, longs, fantasizes, throws fits, mourns, ‘reads’” (124). One of the most striking examples Warner explores is a performance of “erotic vomiting” at a leather bar (206–08).

For Warner, identity is maintained through particular forms and styles of discourse. Therefore, embracing the terms of rational-critical discourse required by a mainstream public sphere amounts to sacrificing identity; as counterpublics seek political agency, they “adapt themselves to the performative of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself” (124). In contrast to “deliberation” or “conversation” Warner uses “poesis” to encapsulate all of the various forms of expression available to would-be participants in various and overlapping publics (115).

As we demonstrate in chapter 7, critiques #3 and #4 are crucial to our own argument about multimodal public rhetoric. If we limit the definition of the public sphere to the social space where rational-critical debate leads to public opinion, we are likely to dismiss multimodal public rhetoric as of very limited value indeed. In such a case, multimodality would be relegated to a supportive role: charts, graphs, diagrams, and figures meant to lend clarity to word-based arguments. But if the proper function of public-sphere practice is poetic world
making that shapes consciousness and identity through the captivation of attention, multimodality becomes quite relevant indeed. Films, animations, fabricated objects, games, virtual reality compositions, and mixed media performances—these multimodal forms might play central role in public-sphere practices. Byron Hawk, for instance, explores the ways a punk rock album (Refused’s *The Shape of Punk to Come*) functions as “both an example of and a call to create a public rhetoric through poetic world making...” (11).

**Critique #5: The nature of agency.** Habermas has been widely criticized for embracing a “modernist” understanding of the subject as an autonomous, rational agent. The philosopher Noëlle McAfee, for instance, draws on Julia Kristeva’s notion of “subject-in-process” to develop an alternative model of agency as relational (153–54; see also MacAvoy’s review). For Warner, agency is vexed, fragile, and problematic on several levels. Warner rejects the Habermasian model in which publics appear to derive agency through rational deliberation. Moreover, Warner is insistent that no single rhetorical act can bring a public into being. Texts never exist in a vacuum, but are read in relation to other texts, forming an intertextual network, much of which is beyond the control of single individuals or groups. “Every sentence,” Warner writes, “is populated with the voices of others, living and dead, and is carried to whatever destination it has not by the force of intention or address but by the channels laid down in discourse. These requirements often have a politics of their own, and it may well be that their limitations are not to be easily overcome by strong will, broad mind, earnest heart, or ironic reflection” (128).

In our discussion of kairos above, we began to explore the notion of agency as struggle within various local and global contexts. In chapter 5, we revisit the concept of agency in the context of ideology and technology. We synthesize conceptions of agency offered by Warner with models offered by postmodern conceptions of the subject and with actor-network theory.

**CONCLUSION**

In this book we describe a kairotic approach to public rhetoric, by which we mean an approach that seeks to discover in each situation what kind of rhetorical action is appropriate. In our deployment, kairos refers to a struggle between rhetors and their contexts. Many of the factors in this struggle are beyond the control of any one individual or group; all situations demand kairotic inventiveness from prepared rhetors.

Public-sphere theorists have outlined a wide range of practices that are available to rhetors. A kairotic approach to public rhetoric means being aware of available options, aware of possibilities and constraints that operate at any given moment of action. The work of Habermas, Warner, Fraser, and others helps increase awareness of some of those possibilities and constraints. In this book, we continue to use the term “public sphere” despite the problems that inhere in that term. We certainly do not mean to emphasize “formally elegant, inherently rational, self-completing and self-regulating entities” (qtd. in Brouwer and Asen 4). Indeed, in many ways even network or web are too neat, calling to mind the elegant symmetry of a spider web or the efficiency of information traveling through the Internet at the speed of light (Latour, “On Recalling” 15–16). We continue to use the term public sphere, as many scholars do, not as a zero institution, but self-consciously as a shorthand expression for a set of social practices that are complex, multifaceted, and dynamic—often chaotic and inelegant.

To exploit the potentials of multimodal public rhetoric, we need to move past a narrow model of the single, universal public sphere constituted by physically co-present interlocutors who engage each other in rational-critical debate for the purpose of forming public opinion. Synthesizing the post-Habermasian models described by Fraser, Warner, and others, we have sketched a version of the public sphere that accommodates multiple publics whose identities and desires lead them to exploit a wide range of expressive forms: erotic, corporeal, extravagant, performative. This notion of a public is consonant with DeLuca’s definition of rhetoric as “the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures” (17). Thus, we see the public sphere as inherently rhetorical. For us, referencing the public sphere is a way to avoid the repeated awkwardness of saying something like, a set of contested and complementary, affective and desire-laden imaginary social phenomena brought into being through multiple acts of rhetorical poiesis, addressed to strangers and occurring over time and in spaces that are simultaneously discursive, cultural, and material.