The Face of Mourning:  
Deploying Grief to Construct a Nation

Eve Wiederhold

The image of a "lost community" haunts public discourse in the United States, seeming to serve as a metonym that can elaborate a range of anxieties about fragmented identities, abandoned traditions, and the dissolution of a definitive moral code. As one of our most cherished signifiers, "community" marks that elusive and desirable part of experience in which isolation is banished and a feeling of belonging restored. Without doubt, that moment when an "I" becomes part of a "we" is an empowering, validating, and potent experience.1

When coupled with the words democracy and citizenship, the term community also connotes membership within specific public spaces. This association of terms reminds us of our tendency to identify our persons with the territories we inhabit and to form attachments to signifiers of place—the local church or school, a neighborhood, the nation. We tend to treat such affiliations as inevitable, as if residency within bounded territories automatically engenders shared experiences and then common perspectives—a word that itself is suggestive of place (the Latin roots signifying "to look through"; "per" means "through," "specere" means "to look."). To share perspectives is to share angles of vision or to develop a particular partiality of vision (sight) derived from occupying the same locations (sites). Of course the word community does not conjure images of partiality; when connected to the words democracy and citizenship, it means to convey virtuous inclusivity.2 The idea of lost community, then, indicates concern about our capacities to be inclusive while suggesting that knowledge of affiliation has been unsettled. This issue was addressed more than a decade ago by Joseph Harris, whose upbringing "in a working-class home in Philadelphia," affected his sense of membership within the academy, "a community whose values and interests [he] could

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in part share but to some degree would always feel separate from" (11). Harris observes that the inference of connections between selves and places embedded in the concept of community is both seductive and vague, particularly when invoked by academics to describe utopian "nowheres," such as "The Academic Discourse Community," "meta-community—tied to no particular time and place and thus oddly free of . . . many tensions [and] discontinuities" (14).

Community, like a fugitive, wanders across borders, lurking around individual predilections and cultural narratives that already valorize the idea of belonging and provide identity categories that name how to do so. Our investments in systems of representation and our capacity to be seduced by narrative pose questions about whether signifiers of place satisfy a universal psychic need for community by channeling that need towards specific cultural forms that community takes. Would we experience a need to connect to, for example, "the nation" if the terminology were unavailable? This question is addressed in Benedict Anderson’s key study, Imagined Communities, which argues that the concept of "the nation" is a necessary social construct that articulates a human predilection for constancy and kinship; it works to enable a psychic substitution for an imagined space that cannot be experienced in face-to-face encounters. Other theorists, particularly those associated with postcolonialism, have interrogated the "aestheticized" regard for this type of affiliation by examining how subordinated populations are affected by dominant cultural categories that aim to organize how to talk about (and experience) public and private lives. Signifiers of place, such as "the nation" and "the community," are political tropes that "depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions" (Brennan 49) and that politicize the emotional experience of belonging. Any general impulse we might have to experience a connection with an identified place will be schooled by social narratives that discipline and train where the drive for connection is to be directed.3

Thinking through the role that cultural pedagogies play in policing and engendering individual attachments to symbolic constructs raises a particular problem for rhetoricians, whose stock in trade is examining how points of identification lead to persuasion, and who therefore seek knowledge about how to use language to forge connections between speakers and audiences. Arguably, rhetoric’s focus is community to the extent that argument is regarded as a way of bringing people together in civilized and productive ways. This orientation is particularly apparent in theories that envision community inhering within language’s very struc-
The concept of “intersubjectivity” foregrounds the idea of community by prioritizing dialogic relations rather than the ascription of identities through the one-way imposition of arbitrary cultural signs. “Community” marks an interpretive practice, not a noun, most notably in Jürgen Habermas’ complex delineation of why and how our ability to exchange dialogue indicates that language does not have to be used in coercive ways. If the political city is not a place, but a mutable signifier read in time, then talk about this mutability can solicit a kind of involvement that facilitates community. Accordingly, politics is envisioned as participatory communication, made possible by language-as-action that enables members of a given constituency to determine which stories about nationhood and citizenship to accept. The discipline of rhetoric, meanwhile, would seem to be most capable of facilitating dialogic exchanges by theorizing how talk about “the public good” can “craft” affiliations (Condit “Crafting” 308) and “develop . . . criticism that strengthens communities and their ability to adapt to change” (Klumpp 75). The invitation to sociability and democratic participation seems clear: Anyone can become an effective rhetor by learning how to participate in a given rhetorical situation and by “find[ing] a way to engage my intentions in . . . a socially recognizable and interpretable way” (Miller 131).

The question, however, is whether this understanding of “speech as shared engagements” fully addresses the complexities that permeate, on the one hand, the experience of forming attachments to signifiers of place marked by historicized cultural narratives, and on the other hand, the attempt to find a language to speak of each encounter with a symbolic order. How to register, in language, the impact of being at a place and being of a place? How does a community announce itself over time? And how to speak of what may well be a more “real” sensation—the bifurcated responses many of us have to signifiers that convey desire to attach as much as attachment itself; the ambivalent ways we may regard the symbols and categories that get promulgated as signs of a willingness to be part of the collective? In this paper, I will argue that the predilection for sharing speech that informs the study of rhetoric does not fully address the haunted sense of psychic and embodied displacement that can accompany the connections we make to imagined social constructs to satisfy desires for affiliation. To be sure, rhetoricians have been concerned with the ways that dominant languages assimilate and appropriate, and have paid particular attention to issues of equity and fairness when thinking through how language fosters attachments. But that concern does not exactly contend with the undefined, elusive doubled experi-
ence of connection and estrangement described in Harris' testimonial to place.

A most potent challenge to theories that conceptualize a linguistic power capable of exacting affiliations and sociability can be found in the work of theorists who study the relationships between speech and trauma, and who question whether linguistic communication can make good on the promise to offer up community. This type of study is interested in the ways that language fails to communicate collective visions and shared stories about egregious events that resist being named. Trauma theorists interrogate epistemologies that urge us to speak and, through speech, seek knowledge about our communal histories (Bernard-Donals 73). Rhetoricians might conceptualize what is at stake in this study by comparing Kenneth Burke's notion of language as linking a way of "seeing" that is also a way of "forgetting" to Cathy Caruth's understanding of language as fostering a kind of seeing that is "neither precisely remembering nor forgetting" (35), a seeing that cannot tell the difference and that therefore unsettles the categories that we depend upon to sort through confusions to render interpretations. This other seeing is significant to considerations of how to speculate about what engenders and constitutes communal perspectives, especially when rhetorical conventions are invoked to communicate to "a" public an experience of shock and grief that is presumed to unify and serve as a source of collective action. Homi Bhabha has testified to the double "civilizing mission" and "violent subjugating force" of the West's textual practices, and he has called on theorists to "bear witness to the trauma that accompanies the triumphal art of Empire" ("The Other Question" 148–49). Elaborating how both connection and alienation inhere within language practices would seem to be especially important to answer Bhabha's call to bear witness to trauma, while also prompting contemplation about what, if any, particular part of an experience with language is uniquely singular and what is shared.

National Time
The focus of this paper will be media representations of news events that have been collectively regarded as grievous disruptions to an imagined sphere of communal normalcy. For this article, I have narrowed the scope of my inquiry to three media events of 1999 as presented in the Chicago Tribune, a regional newspaper that aspires to represent the nation (like the New York Times) while simultaneously serving as a vanguard for "Midwestern-common sense." Not only is the phrase "use common sense"
frequently invoked in Tribune editorials as the preferred means of resolving perplexing issues, a kind of irreverent, anti-intellectualism characterizes the tone of discourse used by many reporters and columnists. The Tribune effectively configures "common sense" as a natural resource available to all members of democratic polities, a sentiment that may be referenced in evaluative acts, a trope that pays tribute to normalized conceptions of citizenry by inviting all to reference normativity when rendering judgments. Because "common sense" is believed to emerge spontaneously, it seems to be a disinterested and objective sentiment that provides for the inclusive participation of any individual. The Tribune's alliance with this sensibility authorizes it as a neutral source of information that targets "the general reader," while characterizing its mode of delivery as "plain-spoken" and "straightforward."

The effects of this alliance were evident in the Tribune's coverage of that most publicized event in 1999, the massacre at Columbine High School, identified by one reporter as "the worst school rampage in American history" (Graham 1). If any event seemed automatically "newsworthy," Columbine would be it. And, indeed, this perception played prominently in the Tribune not only when the tragedy occurred, but months afterward when editors asked readers to share memories of the century. These memories ran in the "letters to the editor" section during the final two weeks of 1999, jettisoning letters devoted to topics of the day, but enacting, nonetheless, a democratizing impulse to consult "the average citizen" when composing a collective history. Not surprisingly, on the first day, two letters named Columbine as the century's most significant event.

Both letter writers used a trope of identification to explain why Columbine remained formidable in their minds. "Pictures of my own friends and family going through such torment flew through my head when I heard the news, and it made me realize what a true tragedy this event was. For me, these images will never be erased from my mind. Up until then, high school meant school dances and football games" (Lindvig 30). The second letter writer, a high school student, felt a more direct connection: "I think the tragedy really hit home because of the similarities between Columbine High School and the one I attend.... One of those students could have been me" (Schneider 30).

Public responses such as these seemed natural, indeed "average," bonding "everyday" citizens with celebrities such as Celine Dion and Rosie O'Donnell, each of whom gave much-publicized benefit perfor-
mannances to aid the victims. This piling up of responses served to justify the Tribune's decision to select these letters for publication on the first day of their retrospective and to position them prominently, in the middle of the page. And that placement simultaneously naturalized the sentiments expressed in the letters, particularly those from the high school student, whose sentiments carry an "out of the mouth of babes" connotation that no one would want to contest.

Once Columbine's historical significance is established, then subsequent interpretations seem plausible as well, such as those which construct it as an index for marking a "before" and an "after" in the collective psyche of the citizenry. But the means by which "Columbine" is positioned as a threshold event involves the deployment of coded signs that attempt to stabilize the idea of "context" that would enable measurements of the "old" against the "new." This was especially noticeable when newspapers across the country remembered Columbine with "one year" anniversary stories that aimed to take stock of where "we" as a nation have gone since that first shocking encounter with the narratives that described the violence. USA Today, for example, ran a front-page story with the headline: "Columbine Changes Schools' Inner World: A New Culture Revolves Around Security and Intervention," and designated this culture as "the new face of education in America" (Kenworthy and O'Driscoll 1). A traditional logic of representation underwrites this perspective in that the word Columbine functions to stand for a range of ideas, each of which seem to be symbolically equivalent and then textually reinforced when Columbine comes to name a school and a place for events that wounded the nation. Presumably, not only can "the new face" on Columbine be represented, its image appears to be representative of communities elsewhere, the face also acting as a mirror in which other towns will find themselves reflected.

Anderson has examined the contribution that national newspapers made toward shaping readers' experiences of nationalism by influencing public perceptions of history and time. The material form of the newspaper contributed to constructing "public visions" of historical pasts and collective futures, while narrative content about "the nation" made imaginable the idea of national time that could be measured in terms of "before" and "after." Indeed, a closer look at how the dual contribution of material form and story content affect audience perceptions of events occurring within durable, national spaces can help with the project of scrutinizing theories of intersubjectivity that conflate language with community-forming action. Underwriting Anderson's analysis of the
media’s contribution to nationalism is the idea that standardized narratives function to “stage the subject’s identification” with a linguistic order that simultaneously trains the subject to “perceive the unperceivable” (Redfield 79). Not only can the “unperceivable” nation be imagined, so, presumably, can the formal procedures that structure the individual’s encounter with a given symbol system, such as that which would regularize conceptions of a collective time. Anderson argues that the means for establishing a national sensibility that is itself durable and communicable was aided by the print technology and capitalist cultures, both of which “served to ‘assemble’ related vernaculars” (47). “Print-literacy already made possible the imagined community floating in homogenous, empty time” (107). But whether giving form to an imagined nation automatically yields attachments on the part of readers/listeners is questionable once we begin to interrogate how dominant cultural categories provide a semblance of social cohesion. What we know about the psychic and emotional dimensions of representation and recognition must be questioned when considering the difficulties of identifying precisely what is yielded by narrative, particularly for those harrowing experiences that defy translation, including the experience of having one’s psyche colonized by a dominant cultural code. Theorists who explore trauma and language are concerned with the ways that narratives co-opt and commodify experiences, especially when there is an expectation that those experiences can be formulated into expressions that are recognizable, or conventional, or to use a rhetorical term, that use the locus of a “commonplace.”

One commonplace pertinent to thinking about the relationship between language and community attempts to provide a way to speak about collective reactions to a perceived threat of loss, such as “the lost community.” Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca call this “the locus of the irreparable” and explain how it functions to classify the value of a given event and then assist in generating and managing probable responses. The idea of “irreparable loss” implicates social judgment because its use automatically ascribes value by categorically naming what counts as an irreparable loss to an audience that presumably shares the feeling. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain how the idea of “irreparable loss” implicates time since it tends to be applied to what seem to be one-time, unrepeatable occurrences (90–92). That which is designated “irreparable” acquires value from an apparent uniqueness that establishes a need for talk to help sort through what the once-in-a-lifetime event means and how it will be remembered.
But the invocation of this commonplace to enable collective discussion about what is unusual engenders a paradox that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not explore: the assurance that what is singular and unique can be reformulated in a common language and known type. An interpretive dilemma is raised in conjunction with this dynamic. On the one hand, using commonplaces would seem to be necessary to enable dialogic exchange by providing familiar terms to be passed among speakers. On the other hand, because they simultaneously attach the event of loss to an already-established discursive tradition, such commonplaces function to regulate and circumscribe how a phenomenon such as loss and its effects are imagined, and risk turning a specific story of trauma into a cliché (Caruth Trauma vii).

This paradox was played out in Tribune narratives about Columbine, wherein references to time, both unique and commonly experienced, became an organizing motif enabling the specific events at Columbine to be depicted as of concern to “the general public.” “At 11:21 a.m., Thursday, the moment the nation’s worst school shooting began one year ago at Columbine High School, this battered community paused,” (Deardorff 3), read the opening sentence of a one-year anniversary story. “Thursday was, as the first anniversary theme encouraged, ‘A Time to Remember, A Time to Hope’” (3). References to time not only formalized answers to questions about where and when time was arrested, they also articulated a desire to “move on” to a new time and to use narrative to do so, as was evident in a second anniversary story that gathered a collection of stories from community members, each of which portrayed Columbine as a unique event that could be read nonetheless in terms of the timeless motif of “birth and redemption.” The ability to move seems possible from narrative’s very structure, which occurs in time and unfolds as chronology, so that it structurally creates “the old” and “the new” in the very act of telling. Therefore, stories about the possibility of redemption-through-narrative seem to provide a means of contending with the enormity of the aftermath of Columbine in their very recounting, but especially by invoking the thematic of time to “make sense of a senseless tragedy” (Graham 16).

At the same time, however, both anniversary articles conveyed the difficulty of actualizing the promise of narrative to renew, and indicated doubts about whether language can enact movement to a “beyond” space in any coherent and comprehensible way. This dilemma was introduced thematically in the second article, which opened with a description of the way that signs of the massacre linger for residents who continue to see
reminders of the tragic event within “common sights” such as daffodils. “Unable to let go of the past, uncertain about the future, this community is gyrating between a desire to pay its respects to the tragedy and a need to move beyond it” (Graham 1), a gyration resulting from narrative’s multiple and doubled effects. Any narrative about the possibility of rebirth poses a threat of forgetting the past, and thereby engenders a second loss of that initial impact in an imagined future (Krell 18). This dynamic complicates any attempt to chronicle “the story” (and history) of an “irreparable loss” and to construe narrative as the palliative for a collective healing.

To work through these complications, the reporter of the second anniversary story divided her article into sections labeled with recognizable categories, each of which signified communal relationships and kinship: “The students,” “The sister,” “The father,” “The doctor,” “The pastor,” and one nominally strange, “The pariah,” a story about Judy Brown, who warned police about the threat of one of the killers, Eric Harris, prior to the massacre. Her story about the loss of narrative’s impact is not central in this anniversary tale, nor is speculation about why her warning did not appear to have any urgency to police. Instead, the recognizable identity categories that labeled survivors functioned, at least initially, to insure that “aftermath” stories could be told. But the mechanics that enabled the illusion of telling an anniversary story were interrupted by another, less formally recognizable story that bespeaks ambivalence about the healing promise of narrative itself. This other story recounts not knowledge about the “after” time of redemption, but the pain of realizing the imposition of form and the simultaneous need for it to enable speech, even as form remains inadequate to the historical event itself. While the act of telling may be necessary to establish a collective for the purposes of reflection, what comes from that is open to question. Will reflection yield knowledge via narrative integration? Will a telling deliver a meaning if the text disrupts its own purpose?

This conflict was most apparent in “The students” section, which recounts the experiences of Heidi Johnson, a member of an evangelical movement who delivers “a Christian message of hope and faith in God” to youth and religious groups around the country. Heidi and her father are reported to have booked speaking engagements well into the next year. The reporter explains that Heidi came upon her calling after delivering a rousing speech about Columbine that prompted “two hundred kids” to come “running up to the altar to be near her” (16). Heidi states, “I knew then this is what I wanted to do; tell people God was with me that day and
that he would not forsake me” (16). In the context of the article, her testimonial not only gives evidence of her convictions, but also undermines her credibility by hinting at egotism as the motivation for her speech. She is described somewhat pejoratively as “a Columbine superstar,” as if to suggest that she has earned a compromised fame through the repetition of her tragic story about tragedy. The reporter reports that Heidi repeats a theme of birth and redemption that was being promulgated by high school officials, but then casts doubt on its legitimacy. Indeed, the reporter seems to want to distance her anniversary story from the school’s Christian-inflected representation of “the aftermath,” a maneuver made apparent when she shifts attention from Heidi to other students who reportedly have a less than enthusiastic response to the “redemption” version of recovery, their rejection indicated by their methods telling. “Columbine students repeated those themes [of birth and redemption] at a recent evening meeting near the school, emphasizing hope and their readiness to move on with their lives. But their voices were flat, and their faces impassive” (16). By noting the quality of this mimicry, the reporter rejects what might otherwise be read as a reductive, even clichéd telling in the aftermath of the shootings and indicates a discomfort with standardized narratives. That discomfort simultaneously poses questions about whether narrative itself—including media reports—are necessary to allow for regrouping and healing, or even capable of speaking about time’s ability to constitute a “we who grieve” and then redeem ourselves with additional acts of speech.

Yet the reporter must employ standardized narrative strategies in an attempt to break with the mechanical, rote recounting attributed to the students who, the article implies, were gathered by school officials in a calculated bid to assist with public relations. As if to shatter the lulled comfort offered by the faithful, the reporter follows “The students” section with a description of a scene of unspeakable violence. “The sister” section tells the story of Bethanee McCandless, who “has chosen to learn everything she can about the way Rachel Scott, her youngest sister, died” (16). Bethanee desires knowledge and turns to narrative to present a description of what happened and an explanation of why. What she comes to know is bluntly recounted: “She knows the killers shot Rachel three times and then returned to pull her up by her long brown hair and shoot her again when the girl said she believed in God” (16). The invocation of this scene—its matter-of-fact inclusion—raises two complicated issues. The first involves a presumption about the ability of language to historicize an event by recounting what is seen and known, as if it were possible to
testify to what really happened. The second asks about what should be retold in the context of a news article that aims to memorialize and take stock upon the occasion of an anniversary. Is the narrativized reproduction of that historical moment of death necessary to the act of telling this anniversary story, particularly if it functions to allow the reporter to indicate that her own narrative is not mechanical and that she is distanced from the Christianity theme?

A justification for this representation of violence would seem to emerge from the complex and subtle associations embedded within dominant interpretive frameworks and their implied propositions, such as the notion that factual content gives information, that information is inherently evidentiary, and that it can be collected into a pool of knowledge that will yield explanations of what happened and why. But we don’t know, specifically, what happened to Rachel. What we might come to know is that we are able to make sense of the nausea-inducing, gut-wrenching description in the article, and that we have the discursive means of conveying a brutal scene of death. Ostensibly, this specific story is told as a reminder of the violence, and speaks to a general obligation on the part of a public to “never forget.” This is the surviving sister’s story and it has every right to be recounted. But justifying its matter-of-fact recitation is the promise of redemption. The sister, and by extension the anniversary story itself, puts faith in the power of narrative to bring about healing: “If I pay attention to the things that have taken place as a result of Columbine, something as simple as a parent reconnecting with a kid, that’s healing” (16).13

And yet the sister’s most poignant and vulnerable desire to know what happened and to turn that desire into revelation gets right to the heart of the distinction between what can be said and what can be known and whether any telling can do justice to the events that precipitate speech acts. As Michael Bernard-Donals observes, “Writing—any writing—involves two moments that work against each other: the moment in which we create a name for the object and that in which the object itself, which becomes lost in the moment of writing, exerts a pressure upon the language of the name, or narrative, of history” (82). Rather than tell what happened, the use of this testimony in “The sister” story indicates how the “bewildering substitution” (Caruth, Unclaimed 85) of narrative for event attempts and fails to attach sense to the ineffable. There is no meaningful continuity between the girl’s death—its singular brutality—and redemption through talk about it. The reference to that death is incapable of encompassing its singular horror and marks not knowledge of what
happened, but another kind of violence that aestheticizes, through narrative form, the lived experience of violence and then compromises the narrative that would act as witness to the violence, that would reactivate the event of death in story form, but at the same time, and most reassuringly, not doing so, only symbolically doing so, for the community of readers scanning this harrowing tale. From this perspective, “The sister” story presents a betrayal of the particular moment of death it would describe by inserting that moment within Bethanee’s history, and then the reader’s history, a maneuver that involves a conversion of literal vision to figuration in a story that appears to enable understanding by “subsuming the event of death in the continuous history of her life” (Caruth, Unclaimed 32), and in the context of this article, the continuous history of the life of the nation.

The reader’s ability to understand those substitutions and integrate this story into one about the nation indicates how symbolic forms of violence are sanctioned to “educate emotion” in the sense that Lynn Worsham describes. Worsham questions how tropes get authorized to name emotion and through that naming mystify the ways that cultural categories participate in a discursive economy that establishes a “pedagogy of emotion” that influences how subjects experience what ostensibly is natural and spontaneous. Instead, argues Worsham, emotion refers to “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings” (216). Tribune readers are educated to inscribe the specific description of Rachel’s death into a general narrative about community and become distanced from its overwhelming impact by participation in a collective attempt to “get beyond” with the assistance of an anonymous, “mechanized” encounter with narrative. Any ability to construct a credible sense of community in the aftermath of this violence reveals not the existence of a benign community, but a familiarity with a “curriculum” that teaches how to react (and not react) to represented violence.

Community, then, figures as a haunting locus for describing a space and a means with which to bind to each other and to the structure of meanings available within a given social order. The Tribune’s anniversary story was titled “Inside We’re All Hurting,” a headline that invites anyone who recognizes that “we” to read and then share the pathos and pain. Armed with a sense of identification and possibility of community, the reader becomes an “attentive addressee” (Felman 44) who presum-
ably already experiences the sense of loss and reads this story in the interest of marking that loss by identifying with its symbolic representation. The last word about Columbine and community is given to an authoritative speaker, the Reverend Billy Epperhart of the Trinity Christian Center, who described the parameters of shared pain by observing, “This community, even today, is raw. People are asking, Why us? What’s wrong with us? What have we done wrong? The biggest change is that people now doubt themselves, doubt who we as a community are” (qtd. in Graham 16). While one might read the Reverend’s statement as posing questions about whether a discursively constructed place automatically represents the people who live within its boundaries, and whether the resemblances drawn in one geographic location apply to readers who inhabit others, the article positions his quote as a concluding statement, suggesting that the experiences of the citizens of Columbine are ones that readers in Chicago will recognize. To make this recognition possible, another context must have been in place that already prioritized certain markers of community and of its violent dismantling. The article’s invocation of the Reverend’s “we” in the headline and its positioning of these words at the end seem at least in form to make the concept of community—and here lost community—meaningful to readers who, through their readings, will become part of one. Because the Reverend’s words are situated as a concluding statement, they are presented to give comfort by resurrecting the idea of community unproblematically, as if the shock experienced in Colorado is transferable, and as if the means by which one community identifies itself transfers to modes of identification between self and place made elsewhere. Such a premise naturalizes the idea that a singular kind of symbolic engagement occurs in all moments in time and can function as a basis for forming a collective.

Public Recognition
An examination of the ways that the signifier Columbine manages to rally “the public” is in some ways coextensive with an account of the workings of rhetoric as a pedagogic tool, a cultural analytic, and a means of managing emotion. Rhetorical explanations of how language’s symbolic action generates unification—or persuasion—begin with the belief that if everyone argues in good faith, they will come to experience what Thomas Farrell calls “privileged moments of mutual recognition occasionally yielded by conversation” (xix). Habermas uses a similar logic in his delineation of how consensus formation is made possible by an inherent transferential property embedded within language that directs
linguistic action towards a sharing that will be realized in time. "The reciprocities undergirding the mutual recognition of competent subjects are already built into the action oriented to reaching understanding in which argument is rooted" (Habermas, "Discourse" 98). Intersubjectivity, as distinct from objectivity, "implies that there is some sort of communication between those minds; which in turn implies that each communicating mind is aware of . . . the other('s) intention to convey information" (Honerich 414).

It is not too difficult to see why this conception of language use would appeal to rhetoricians who have sought to shift the theoretical context away from speculation about the isolated thinker developing propositions of truth to an examination of speech acts that do multiple things in complex social situations. References to dialogic and dialectical movement between texts and interpretations establish an epistemological framework that stays open to "the strangeness of the text" and calls upon "an active, sympathetic imagination" (Grady and Wells). A hopefulness seems to permeate such conceptions of a linguistic energy, as does the belief that that energy may be gathered and channeled into discursive practices that perpetually issue a "welcome." Unlike the Althusserian coercive "hail," this configuration hints at agency by holding out for the ability to rationally choose which linguistic invitations to accept. At the same time, isolated reason is not prioritized. The dynamic of "mutual recognition" suggests that spectacle and embodied reactions combine to engender shared perspectival space in ways that complicate the discursive construction of sight and knowledge brought to us by the West's epistemological traditions. Upon first glance, mourning would seem to be a spontaneous, de-politicized, and most private reaction to loss—what audiences feel without any cultural influence over the ways they read symbols. The shock of the new, the grip of the unthinkable, seem to arrest time and separate the experience of symbolic engagement from the arena of cultural literacy. The turn to an intersubjective grounding of language, however, addresses how "mourning" is a text that we learn to read. The media's discursive codes, for example, are not neutral conduits that merely inform readers of what has happened; they also influence how a given event is regarded, as when headlines are sized to indicate the weight and depth of public horror. This does not mean that experiences of sorrow are not genuine, but it does raise questions about the relationship between emotion and rhetoric and how narratives that would explain that association affect which cultural events come to be regarded as fundamental to social and political life.
Certain epistemological assumptions must be made if the dynamic of "mutuality" is to explain why some rhetorical situations create an apparent need for public pronouncements but not others and how narratives of community generate the "we" who feel threatened by a specific representation of irreparable loss. For example, intersubjective theories of communicative action tend to presume sameness in the way each of us is positioned by language. Presumably, we are all similarly trained to incorporate (or refuse) into our private psyches public signifiers such as "the nation," and that presumed sameness in acts of negotiation allows for talk of how collective responses to symbolic codes can become a basis for formulating political community. It also seems possible to discern and talk about a dialectical pull to join the collective that inheres within the very processes of language itself and that seduces each of us into reading our identities in terms of group perspectives. The benign equity ascribed to these dynamics is made possible once they combine to form subtle associative networks that underwrite those paradigms that would explain how power flows through discourse. Indeed, by beginning with such presumptions, it seems possible to describe linguistic action as a source of socialization, and then to conflate that description with the very purpose of speech, and then the study of rhetoric as strategic argumentation. The seemingly natural connections drawn between these associated terms informs the perspectives of influential theorists such as Perelman, who maintains that the social energy of language provides the means for transferring ideas from speaker to audience to engage intellectual adherence "to gain a meeting of minds" (11). Words establish locations for such communion, especially those that already have recognizable value, while a speaker's use of recognizable terms can be read as an intention to communicate. Hence, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca conclude that "the terms 'right,' 'liberty,' 'democracy' can bring about communion in the same way as the unfurling of the flag" (The New Rhetoric 165). If mutuality is figured into the very aim to represent and to convey information to an other, then rhetoric can be identified as a resource for community-building; even if linguistic reference is unstable and intentionality unknowable, then it seems plausible to argue that the task of rhetoric and rhetoricians is to "identify the places where rhetorical opportunities exist" (Condit, "Rhetorical" 16) and to examine how talk about community "transforms the tension between the assertion of individual identity and the embracing of community identification into the energy that creates discourse about values and the identity of the community" (Klumpp 79).
But can an epistemology premised on an inherent dialogic pull in narrative that aims towards recognizability account for what is elusive, doubled, and refuses categorization within a bounded scene of representation? If language forges bonds between citizens, which languages and which bodies establish what kinds of connections? From a Lyotardian perspective, the universal equity that would appear to be available through linguistic mutuality can act as a source of injustice if it functions as a metanarrative that regulates perceptions of local discursive practices. Prioritizing the concept of community formation through language situates the “address” as a means of addressing a lack of a hearing, and configures recognition as a kind of visual listening. But this presupposes the ability to craft a symbolic form that will make “visible” that which eludes—the ghost of community meandering around and through identities and identifications.

If we presuppose an inclination toward sharing that precedes all utterances, then we have already established an expectation of a particular type of perception that will somehow be manifested and available to be read by others. This expectation can itself be traumatic to survivors who, when telling “what happened,” are dependent upon language to locate the loss, while facing the question of whether any language can do so (Krell 9–14). As the analyses of the Tribune reports on Columbine suggest, the substitution of event for story incorporates an ambivalent dynamic: an attempt to occupy that space and perhaps “do justice” to the event by sharing in its horror without being able to do so, and the potential to destroy that singular horror in the very attempt to enact a substitution with a narrative replacement. The inadequacy of calls for community can perhaps be heard more clearly in that other scene in which such calls have been put forth—that is, in the media’s cry to determine why the Columbine violence occurred and to offer “community” as a means of preventing violence in the future. “All of us need to look at our communities, our neighborhoods—indeed, our own homes—to determine what we can do . . .” (“Stopping”); “Parents, schools, and communities must work together . . .” (“Nation”); “A community cannot really heal until its members rehumanize youths who commit criminal behavior . . .” (Elke). What appears most resolute and explanatory is also most mechanical and reductive; explanations reveal the inability to explain, the mechanisms that form meaningful linkages get entangled with already established rules. Representing trauma by giving voice to the cultural narratives that allow for a hearing risks reproducing violence (Hesford 193) or commodifying it, as did Time magazine, which published a multi-page
spread that made the conventional spectacle of violence, as if spectacle itself can engender understanding (Gibbs and Roche 41). (The layout, which included a horizontal row of sidebars with capitalized titles, was particularly offensive: "WARNINGS WERE IGNORED; THEY PLOTTED FOR A YEAR; "THERE WAS NO BACKUP PLAN"; GUNMEN WERE EQUAL PARTNERS.") Media reports about Columbine established multiple ways of reading community through selected terminology, such as invoking the language of an “us” versus “them” that resonated on a number of levels: “The violence at the Colorado school was not the work of foreign terrorists. Students said the gunmen were members of a clique of misfits” (“Nation” A.12). The declaration of identity terms is indicative of a complex interpretive framework that is meant to be reassuring by offering an implicitly ethno-racist comfort (at least it’s “our misfits” attacking us, not foreigners), positioning the invasion of an exterior “other” as an even more terrifying possibility. Violence gets narrativized, types of violence preferred.

Derrida’s examination of the simultaneity of presence and absence within the logic of writing suggests that when we identify a context of normality, we can do so only by identifying what deviates from the norm. Indeed, the very act of recognizing what is shocking simultaneously affirms what is normal. Signifiers become meaningful by drawing upon what isn’t communicated for sense to be made. The space between words, for example, is as significant to a written text as are the words themselves. This structuring logic is crucial for thinking through the politics involved in theoretical explanations of how the dynamic of “mutual recognition” promotes common perspectives and shared orientations. To share perspectives means that a “we” will share a method for determining what is “present” and what will be left out, what will function as a “space between” to enable a “here” to seem recognizable. Hence, when journalists tried to make sense of the high school massacre, they presented Columbine as a place where abnormality crept into the “space of normality” that is occupied by a “we” who now see the difference. That this “we” was constructed as middle class and predominantly white seems irrelevant given the assumption that any normal person would experience grief upon hearing of that event. As a rhetorical strategy, the invocation of loss is context specific, but when that context is associated with a neutral, equitable power of language, then the signifiers of loss perform to construct an image of a singular kind of mourning and an “average” citizen who both experiences such grief and recognizes where to direct it.
The intersubjective paradigm implies that rhetoric can be used to ward off the structural loss and that speech can keep memory alive. But the linguistic sign simultaneously marks what will be absent in time—the signature that is meant to “stand in place” and survive the body; the story meant to encapsulate the historical event. This doubled status of the sign speaks to a poignancy in acts of telling that puts a different inflection of what we think we’re doing when we try to communicate. Inhering within the time and space that separate witnessing from narrative, the loss of what will no longer be at a future point in time is also always and immediately present, haunting the scene of signification itself. Because this dynamic permeates all narratives, writing itself becomes associated with mourning, with the attempt to ward off this loss by perpetually bringing to presence that which will no longer be. From this perspective, the volume of news stories devoted to Columbine are themselves acts of mourning that get entangled with referential instability, lamentations that, in describing the loss of community, simultaneously attempt to create a community and necessarily fail, generating more lamentations and more instability.

Mourning Materialized
Rhetoricians invested in the communal (and by extension, pedagogical) functions of rhetoric might explore more fully what counts as a “here” and a “there” within analyses that cast community as an enactment made possible by language’s power. The “here” of intersubjective theories demands that observations of action be manifested via discernible interpretive results. By implication, action itself can be formalized because it is a common and recognizable occurrence that necessarily functions to generate affiliations. The general ability of the intersubjective power of language to perform, to act, to draw us in, to create an intersubjective dynamic—all of this is expected to be shared and that sharing presumably establishes the means by which to identify collective responses and requisite belonging to a given discourse community. Its potential would seem to be available always—with every utterance, every use of symbols and this faith in its temporal inevitability resurrects the promise of commonality and then community. Because the “fact of speech” appears to be an equal-opportunity phenomenon, mediation gets imagined in terms of adequation, reinforcing the idea that democracy and inclusivity inhere within linguistic processes. Indeed, the fact of the sentence—the ability to craft a sentence (and then another)—is read under the rubric of “dialogue,” and then seems to “naturally” fit within a universe of
sentences that get read under the sign of "democracy." Consequently, whether mourning is described as a spontaneous, depoliticized reaction or one engendered by the performative powers of a text, it seems possible to predict that there will be an effect that can be known or read, and to reference common experiences with texts to determine that speech has acted. The ability of *Columbine* to function as a recognizable signifier for "lost community" seems to provide proof of a benign/moralizing/unifying/repeatable dynamic of language's power, the verification evident from the follow-up stories and letters from "average citizens" who mourned not only the physical violence, but also all that it seemed to encompass: soiled purity, ruined memories, permanent damage to the signifiers *high school* and *community*. In this discursive network, loss was configured not only as lost life, but also as the loss of a perceived way of reading, indeed the loss of common sense itself—if common sense is understood as reading from shared perspectives or angles of vision that seem common and therefore normal.

It is exactly this slide from "shared" to "common" to "normal" that requires attention because it helps elaborate what functions as a "there" that enables the performative to be made available for recognition. When rhetoricians describe cultural experience in terms of an equal-opportunity discursive space that allows the subject to learn how to identify with normalized forms of narrative, they effectively neutralize that space in which ideologically inflected constructs become meaningful, and aestheticize our understanding of how identifications do and do not occur, so that the processes by which a concept gets "publicly" constructed and individually internalized converge. For example, the idea of "community" (or "the nation-state") is already prioritized, already regarded as a proper subject for communicative acts, embedded within metanarratives that prefigure what the outcome of linguistic action will be. Not only is the cohesive production of "the nation-as-community" presupposed, but so is the idea that the configured state can represent the community to itself "thereby giving the community form and in a certain sense giving it an ethical imperative and a future . . . because it signifies the formal unification both of the citizen with the community and of the community with universal humanity" (Redfield 59). By incorporating this logic, the study of rhetoric can be read as harboring an "ethical aura" (Redfield's phrase), since studying this socializing process makes intelligible how to use language to achieve sociability, which is already regarded as inherently "good." Indeed, there is an epistemological tendency to theorize in terms of "the group" and as a consequence to offer
normalized analyses of language practices, in response to linguistic fragmentation, to encourage the invention of “a text suitable for criticism” (McGee 76), or advocate the “incarnation” of messages that aim to “reconstitute audiences” by “facilitat[ing] identification” (Hammerback 21). The tendency to regard group reactions as most significant converts a practical strategy into a moral imperative by positioning “respect for norms and normative standards” as an agent for democracy. Indeed, when assigning identity categories such as “the good citizen,” measurements get taken and evaluations are made about the quality and significance of individual reactions to symbolic engagements that presumably represent a group perspective. To not mourn those stories that are deemed to have national, or even global, significance is to be excluded from the democratic community itself.

The recourse to “standards” is problematic because it misses what is inherently pedagogic and political: the ways that discourses of power establish in advance what will count as a specific sign to be recognized, what will count as a recognizable gap, and how these already established visions of what is included and excluded from the scene of representation enables articulations of the “we-who-share” responses to an evocation of “irreparable loss.” Indeed, when the “general” idea of using language to provoke “mutual and therefore democratic” recognition is imposed within the time/space that precedes any specific attempt to communicate, it will elide the potential trauma of what Diana Taylor has called “border crossings” (193)—those disruptive and sometimes painful attempts each of us makes to move from one context to another, from, for example, immediate embodied responses to private musings to public pronouncements that may or may not accord with a majority view. During each crossing from witnessing to memory to public narrative, multiple (mis)understandings may occur. The goal of using language to “achieve community” articulates a demand that subsequent expressions be interpreted and judged in terms of whether they participate in furthering that goal. But how to articulate a bona fide “communication” versus, say, an “incantation” is not immediately recognizable and therefore is a source of ambiguity and debate.

When norms are referenced to determine what action has occurred within a field of communication, they unfold as a continuous, historical arc obligating the reader to reference “what has been” with every attempt to cross anew. But this downplays the ways in which discursive practices become empowered to “make sense” not because of some new time involving a clarified act of recognition, or a “new” manifestation of a
transcendent force, but because of the lessons we take from the socially situated, time-inflected contribution of habit and repetition. As Judith Butler has so persuasively argued, a “historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms . . . constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (187; emphasis added). The repetition of signs of “what is normal” informs the ability of some signifiers to perform to engender emotional reactions such as “the shock of the new,” and to make those reactions seem inevitable, indeed natural responses that result from engaging with symbolic forms.

All of which suggests that if language’s performative power emerges not from its own volition but from a logic of difference that gets normalized-via-repetition, then “common sense”—or a sense of “what is common”—would seem to emerge from the force of habit. Habit and repetition enable a given “us” to decipher a given representation to distinguish, for example, a tragedy from a “mere incident,” and to situate those interpretations within an economy of communication in which mediation appears in the form of adequation. Indeed, to what extent does “force of habit” inform an embodied response to whether a symbolic construct seems to adequately describe a given event? The seemingly democratic means by which commonplaces such as the “loss of the irreparable” concretize loss and function to construct a “we” who belong and recognize an abnormality versus a “they” who don’t gathers its power from the quite conventional habit of measuring loss with common, familiar categories. As Robert Cox points out, our understanding of “unique” loss is rendered even more poignant when “juxtaposed against the usual, the ordinary, the vulgar, that which is fungible or interchangeable” (145). In other words, the “unique” circumstances of Columbine become more poignant when juxtaposed against the “usual” loss of life that occurs elsewhere, losses that are effectively interchangeable, and not specifically memorable. It is possible to argue, then, that one reason why the image of Caucasian boys in trench-coats loading guns and shooting students seems more tragic than the image of an urban, “youths of color” doing the same is because that latter image is itself a norm—a discursive construction to which Tribune readers have become habituated. For non-white students in less than affluent neighborhoods in Chicago, this behavior, presumably, isn’t abnormal and so recognizable within certain city boundaries as to be barely noticeable. Indeed, when these tragic events are perceived as “normal,” then presumably they do not carry a force that will produce grief and shock. And they are reported accordingly.
Hence, the “two Fenger high school students” who were injured “when a gunman opened fire on a crowd of students walking home” did not run on the Tribune's front page on September 22, 1999, and earned only fifteen paragraphs of coverage (Keoun and Donato 1). The story of Julia Flores, identified as a generic “girl, fifteen” who was taking a “stroll” and then fatally shot by a group of three who asked if she belonged to a gang, earned five paragraphs and did not run in the section devoted to national news (“Girl” 3). Nor did the story of Roy Dunbar, a beloved community center worker who hosted an after-school club and encouraged kids to stay out of gangs, and was fatally shot September 26, 1999 (Keoun and Hill 1). And neither did the May 14, 2000 story—not directly about a school, but chilling nonetheless—of four people shot on Chicago’s west side while they attended a funeral. A gunman opened fire on a funeral procession for twenty-three-year old Shaundell Hubbard, who died after he had been shot nine times (Donato). That story received eleven paragraphs. One can imagine the coverage that would have been given to an attack on a funeral procession had it occurred in a community believed to be “representative of the nation.” If part of what gets recognized includes what gets left out, then these other stories function as a backdrop, as part of the structuring logic that creates a “there” against which the events in Columbine can appear to be all the more abnormal and then shocking.

What is the effect of listing these other stories, of piling up narrative after narrative that didn’t get recorded in officially designated public memory? And how does the answer implicate the logic of inclusivity promised by language theories invested in the concept of sharing based on a dynamic of mutual recognition? While we can continue to issue exhortations to “be inclusive,” doing so doesn’t guarantee that a given act of telling will provoke social bonding. Indeed, the sharing of perspectives can also induce shared fatigue—as reactions to other stories about school violence that followed Columbine make clear. When strategies for determining value get linked to “common sense” or to “normative trajectories” brought about by presumed dynamic of mutuality in acts of recognition, then the “rhetoric of belonging” becomes empowered to exclude in ways that regularly can go unnoticed. The idea that words are empowered to “form attitudes” and “induce cooperation” localizes attention on words themselves and by implication supports a pedagogy that aims to teach how to select the right ones and put them in an appropriate order to achieve results. But what we name as strategies elaborates a curriculum that prioritizes the reproduction of known categories used in
familiar patterns and consequently the reconstruction of the familiar when determining what counts as legitimate modes of conception and perception. By describing the process of mutual recognition as knowable and predictable, rhetorical theories effectively make familiar a particular image of what it means to be symbolically engaged and in the process, produce a perspective—a partial vision—of how each of us experiences our encounters with symbolic texts.

The elaboration of an alternative curriculum would require patient explorations of the ways that categories and ways of seeing become familiar and get inserted into interpretive frameworks that enable sense to be made. It may be possible to reconsider the parameters of singular and communal mediation by attending to stories that don’t seem impactful and therefore don’t seem to generate social bonds, stories about loss that are recognizable but fail to engender collective grief. As Caruth suggests, “in the event of . . . incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding,” another kind of witnessing “may indeed begin to take place” (Unclaimed 56).

The Violence of Rhetoric
The hierarchical layout of a newspaper provides a way of noticing how we learn to make sense of an “embodied text” and subsume the chaos of grief into a narrative order that determines which events provoke a need for communal pronouncements about loss. Major metropolitan newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune sort through bodies of texts by establishing sections (or genres) that categorize the significance of a given story to an imagined audience. The “front section” is devoted to “hard news” that presumably has international and national significance and is therefore of significance to everyone, while a second section called “Metro” is directed to local audiences, or members of bounded and identifiable places. On a given day, the contents of the second section may change from city to suburb, and suburb to suburb. Placement ascribes value, especially when “local” stories make the jump to the front page, a maneuver that is made intelligible via an interpretive framework that suggests the “general “ stories have automatic value above and beyond those read as “specific.”

One of the most sensational local stories in 1999 to make the transition to the Tribune’s front page involved a forty-one-year-old Caucasian woman who killed her three children. Marilyn Lemak, distraught over a pending divorce, hailed from the Chicago suburb of Naperville that, like Columbine, connotes middle- to upper-middle-class
affluence, “good schools,” and general decency. When the story of how Lemak drugged and then suffocated her children was broadcast on March 6, 1999, the large-print headline read: “Three Kids Found Dead in Naperville House,” indicating that place was central to the story’s significance (Chase and Coen). This news was followed by a week’s worth of headlines that suggested this story was not just about the person who committed the crime, but also about a collective: “Aftermath an Ordeal for Parent, Kids”; “A Pall over Naperville”; “Slayings Deal Blow to Naperville.” These stories included statements publicizing neighbors’ disbelief that such a crime could happen in such a space. The phrase “the Naperville mom” was repeated in most accounts, as if socioeconomic context automatically justified the publicity given to this event, which was conceived as a shocking abnormality to the norm of white, upper middle-class maternity. Neighbors testified to having witnessed Lemak fulfill the “good mother” role: working a lemonade stand with her kids, waving to neighbors when jogging, splashing in the backyard kiddy pool the previous summer. “She was the basic Naperville woman,” reported one neighbor who, the article notes, recently hosted a party at which gourmet cooking utensils were sold (Ko and Coen). Another described the Lemaks as “just the typical American family” (Chase and Coen).

The signifier typical became the dominant trope used to organize the telling of this story, and the series of articles that followed posed questions about how this tragedy could have happened. One put this directly: “Unanswered for days during the bleak progression of mourning and criminal proceedings in Naperville has been the fundamental question about the slayings of the three children and the attempted suicide: Why?” (Ferkenhoff and Coen). The answer was provided in a variety of ways by family members, attorneys, psychiatrists and academics who were experts on literary representations of matricide. The Tribune editorial board itself took up this question in an editorial entitled “What to Think of the Unthinkable?” in which editors admitted that their fascination with this story stemmed from the fact that this was “such a normal family” (22). Editorial writers answered their own question of “why” by invoking a moralizing ending that, like the discourse of the Columbine stories, attempted to recuperate Lemak’s act into an anonymous and pious narrative about community by addressing and then formulating a “we” who collectively reflect and draw what appear to be explanatory conclusions. Marilyn Lemak’s catastrophic act “is a reminder that, for many among us, the structures of everyday life are often infinitely more complex and fragile than we have ever imagined” (22).24
In this context, the challenge that Lemak's brutal act puts to the sentimentalized construction of maternity seems both measurable and indicative of the health of this specific community, and because of the front-page placement, that of the nation. But while this knotted association seems to be conclusive, the more than one hundred follow-up stories that sought answers to why this happened also conveyed, like Columbine, a preoccupation with the question of disclosure—how to disclose and whether disclosing will bring knowledge, especially if speaking at length means doing so in recognizable terms. This was most apparent in articles that attended to the question of what Lemak's speech acts disclosed about her state of mind. After her arrest, the reporters interested in her behavior noted that at the local jail, "Lemak was not talkative" but "answered routine questions" and seemed "cogent" (Barnum and Gregory 9). Nine months after the story broke, the Tribune ran a front page story publicizing the call Lemak made to emergency personnel after she killed her children, headlined, "Lemak's 911 Call—and her Chilling Admission," which suggested that judgments about her state of mind at the time of the murders could be rendered by determining if her speech acts were comprehensible. "Although she sounded fairly lucid through her tears, she sometimes digressed onto seemingly trivial matters" (Hanna). The Tribune printed the entire transcript of her call, which, along with the accompanying article, took up a full page. Tribune editors obtained the transcripts after filing a motion with a Circuit Court judge who had refused to release the 911 tape to the media and the public. Editors then constructed a narrative justifying this bid for publicity by claiming that the public had "a right to know" and that Tribune staff worked diligently to protect "freedom of speech." Citizens who read the transcripts, meanwhile, were constructed as judges able to read Lemak's language and determine for themselves whether she should be held accountable for the murders. Disclosure in this context ostensibly functioned as an agent for democracy.

At the same time, however, the narratives that told the Lemak story also conveyed a curious tone of decorum and solemnity, as if reporters did not want to disclose too much detail about the violence itself and do damage to those cultural narratives that valorize suburban life. Rather, the disclosures contained literary flourishes that aestheticized the way information about this event was reported. The first paragraph of the first story set the tone for the rest of the coverage: "As police sifted through their evidence Friday, and friends and neighbors sorted through their memories for clues to what had happened at the cranberry-red Victorian house

\[Eve Wiederhold\]
in downtown Naperville, there was one horrid and indisputable fact: Three small children had been killed” (Chase and Coen). Each story included mundane details as if doing so might offset the violence that provoked these acts of telling. The first paragraph in the first follow-up story: “Bundled in a winter coat, his eyes reddened with tears and robbed of sleep, Albert Lemak stopped shoveling his driveway Saturday to describe how his oldest son, David, came to him about a year ago to say his wife, Marilyn, no longer wanted to be married to him” (Chase). Later, readers learn about the family’s history, that husband David attended a Baptist elementary school where he spent time “noodling on the guitar and playing basketball” (17). And they read about how the news affected neighbors: “Eight-year-old Will Prescott asked his mom if he could hang out after school Friday and play, but she told him no, they had to go home. There was something she needed to tell him.” (Black). Indeed, several stories conveyed a sense of hesitation, as if every article performed an act of figuring out through narrative what could be known about this unspeakable violence. In the article “Clues Hint at a Motive in Slaying,” unnamed sources disclosed details about Lemak’s state of mind before the slayings: the crumpled wedding dress on the bathroom floor, the X-acto knife put through a wedding photograph, piercing the image of her husband (Ferkenhoff and Coen).

Like the news articles about Columbine, in the Tribune’s coverage of the Lemak story, a perceived threat to the category of normalcy associated with white, economically affluent, suburban communities motivated the need to tell, while the stories themselves attempted to reaffirm the legitimacy of referencing norms to enable a recitation and the possibility of a recognizable conclusion. The political implications embedded within this ritualized version of mourning become clearer when considering, as does Jonathan Bignell, that “an event attains news value because it can be narrated in the terms of an existing narrative code” that functions to confirm what people already know (19; emphasis added). This knowledge is obtained via the repetition of narrative strategies that seem normal, such as the endeavor to moralize and assign a communally shared “meaning” to the deaths of three children. The complexity of values and apparent logics organizing this interpretive framework might be interrogated in two ways. First, by examining the lack of media attention given to bodies that are not contextualized in terms of white norms to expose the underlying racism in judgments about those issues that appear to have “general” significance; second, by questioning how to speak about a lack of speech. What should be
reported when the impulse to tell or explain or moralize is not part of the story?

Newspaper editors were less interested in another story of matricide that occurred seven months after Lemak’s, involving a mother who also suffered from depression, Shirley Combest, a thirty-three-year-old African-American woman from Chicago. On October 5, 1999, Combest drove her car with her two young children, Shaniqua and John, into Lake Michigan. All three perished. According to witnesses, Combest took a sharp turn off a boulevard, drove down two flights of concrete steps, pointed her car toward the water, paused for about five seconds, and then drove into the lake. Unlike Marilyn Lemak’s private act of brutality in her suburban home, Combest’s very public act of violence was committed in a central tourist area, near Buckingham fountain, a memorial that is associated with Chicago itself. And yet this story received little publicity and was not read as a threat to the city’s identity. It did not appear to inspire a need to tell by Tribune staffers, nor did it provoke letters to the editor. As compared to the many articles that carefully analyzed “the why” of Lemak’s crime, Combest’s story was introduced on October 5 via a six-paragraph “Metropolitan Brief” that ran on page three of the Metro section under a generic headline: “Divers Pull Three from Car in Lake.” The story described the experience of those who attempted a rescue and their clinical descriptions of what they encountered. “Zero visibility,” said police diver Milton Story, . . . Once the car was found, however, nothing impeded [the] removal of the victims” ("Divers"). There was one brief follow-up story that ran on October 6, also in the Metro section. This story was narrated with a matter-of-fact tone, evident from the headline, “Before Plunge, a Troubled Day,” which drew attention to “the plunge,” rather than the people affected, complete with accompanying photos—one of tire tracks on the beach where the car took off, the other a fuzzy image of the officers who tried to save “the car occupants”—so designated in the photo’s caption (O’Brien and Keoun). With few questions asked, a limited story, and this headline, the article effectively explained the reason for her act in terms of cause and effect: a bad day and therefore the plunge.

Shirley Combest was mourning the recent death of her sister, who had died in a car accident three weeks earlier. What readers learn about Shirley’s life is provided by her mother, Ruthie Mae Combest, who is given all of two sentences, rather than several lingering paragraphs, to tell Shirley’s story: “She was taking it [her sister’s death] awful hard. But I didn’t ever dream she’d do something like that” (qtd. in O’Brien and
Keoun). And in a chilling example of the violence of grammar, the reporter latched those baffled sentiments onto the next quoted source, the Reverend Willie Williams, who also was unable to explain what led to Shirley's final desperate act. Immediately following Ruthie Combest's statement of not knowing, the reporter added, "Nor did Rev. Willie B. Williams, Pastor of the Healing Temple Church of God in Christ, who said Combest and her two children were living in his spare bedroom since May" (1). Here, one efficient sentence functioned to establish how different Combest's life was far from the suburban "norm" recognizable to readers who presumably identify with families like the Lemaks.

The day after the drowning, police were not sure about whether to classify "the plunge" as an accident or a murder-suicide. This lack of knowledge did not prompt a need to fill an interpretive gap, or to question what might have led to Shirley Combest's actions. There was no front-page story, as there had been with Lemak, publicizing "Mother's Path From Despair to Tragedy," because Combest's case was not read as a "tragedy," in part because she was constructed as a woman who was already beyond the bounds of normalcy, having been under a doctor's care and, according to Rev. Williams, prone to waking and screaming. The morning of the drowning, she screamed so intensely, Rev. Williams had to phone the police (O'Brien and Keoun). Readers come to know nothing about the two children who perished in the car but their names and grades: Shaniqua, a third grader, and John, a first grader. No reporters interviewed their classmates. The prolonged mourning over the death of the Lemak children included front-page coverage of the funeral headlined "Life is Ultimately Fragile," a lengthy description of the father's eulogy, and several photos of the town representatives who attended the services, which included Naperville's mayor, police officers, firefighters, and business men and women (Kendall and McRoberts). The single article on the Combest drowning ends with an abrupt acknowledgment that "one child who does have an ordeal ahead of him is Combest's remaining son, 15-year-old Marcus," who was staying with his father at the time of the death of his family (O'Brien and Keoun 12). Rather than consult neighbors, psychiatrists, lawyers, and literary critics to puzzle over why Shirley Combest committed this brutal act, or how the drowning affected family members and a community, reporters hinted that Combest made a habit of being brutal. The only follow-up to Combest's story in any edition of the Tribune was another three-paragraph "Metropolitan Brief" two days after the drowning that raised speculations from the coroner about whether the Combest children had been harmed before they drowned.
("Children" 9). It turns out they weren’t, but that possibility contributed to constructing Shirley Combest as different from the sentimentalized white norm that organized the telling of Lemak’s act of matricide. And this difference presumably justified the scant attention given to Combest’s decision to gather her children into her car and accelerate into the lake. In effect, anyone who might identify with Combest’s life or situation is not constructed as part of the Tribune readership, and by extension, does not belong to the mythic community of “average citizens.”

A comparison of these two narratives indicates how stories of trauma become recognizable not because they are intrinsically connected to an immediate sense of irreparable loss born out of a common sensation of grief, but because they can be connected in a variety of ways to literacy practices that prioritize talk itself. The goal of speech-as-action establishes the expectation that engagement with symbols will have a discernible outcome including the production of more speech and more opportunities for recognizing familiar signs of engagement. This leads to prioritizing speakers who have a facility with language and who exhibit a desire to speak at length in normalized and therefore recognizable terms. And it leads to reaffirming the value of dominant cultural narratives that affect judgments about which narrative content has significance. There is also a lack of serious public attention given to mental illness, as well as bonds between women (including sisters). Because neither “category” is read as having national significance, no effort seemed to be needed to name what was lost and translate the significance of that loss to a community of readers.

That lack, however, can be read differently to indicate how texts about bodies convert to texts as bodies that are brought before “the public” to enable a collective telling that has already assigned value to the particular bodies about whom stories are being told. Not only do we learn how to read textual embodiments, more vaguely and crucially, we learn how to read how bodies interact with embodied texts. We learn how to read signs of how bodies experience embodied texts and which parts of that experience appear to be significant, which parts are recognizable to a group that seeks to bond over embodied reactions to events symbolized in narratives. Systematizing signs of engagement regularizes conceptions of when language is productive, raising expectations that signs from that engagement will be mutually recognizable within a context that has already determined what kinds of engagements with what material signifiers will have value. There is, most subtly, the expectation of a shared affective drive or desire to participate with symbols, and the
expectation that signs of such (desirable) participation will be manifested in homogeneous ways, such as the desire to tell, to say, to explain.

The imposition of this interpretive framework impacted how the Combest and Lemak stories were told and remembered. While there were plenty of people to speak for Marilyn Lemak, no one cleared a space in which to consider the significance of Shirley Combest's story to a community of readers. And her mother's seeming inability to tell the story contributed to its abrupt representation. Ruthie Combest had no explanation. In a culture that prioritizes the fact of speech, and that associates speech with community, a lack of speech will necessarily seem alienating. Indeed, when we imagine engagement as action, as a discernible force that presents itself via speech acts that achieve effects, then statements of "I don't know why . . ." by definition will not provoke, and that lack will serve to justify diminishing the significance of such statements to the nation. In the context of the article, Ruthie Combest's claim about not knowing functions to bolster the premise that acts of representation—or the very fact of speech—can be read as signs of democratic equity. Ruthie Combest was given an opportunity to "have her say." That she didn't have much to say is not read as significant to a context for mourning. Rather, her words function to place the reporter in time, doing his or her job to capture and re-present "the moment" of this family's reaction to this event. As a consequence of this normalized reading, Ruthie Combest was assigned a hegemonic status of "truthfulness" (as offering general and generic proof of the reporter's doing his job to get a quote and make the story "true"), and was emptied of its own particular significance. Readers who placed her words in the context of the reporter simply "telling the news" were unburdened of considering how these words fit into an overarching narrative that demands representation to confer legitimacy. The "unquotable" person effectively becomes unrepresented.

Conclusion

If language is action, what does it compel us to do? Susan Wells' observation is pertinent here: literature is not a category of texts but a practice of reading (Sweet Reason). If reading acts emerge from a cultural milieu that prioritizes the performative, then we learn how to read action, as well as to read for action by insuring that each statement "fits" within a discursive context that precedes its utterance. In our "normal" use of language, we are preconditioned to look for past articulations and read
them as models for future ones, and to value continuity in meaning at the expense of disruptions.  

When Lyotard counsels that we should remember the "event" of each sentence, he attempts to craft a different paradigm that would respect the singularity of any one experience with symbols. Each symbolic engagement involves an immediacy (a "now") that cannot be represented but is nonetheless part of the temporal narrative process. From this perspective, we would read sentences not as empirical claims, but as locating "signs of history" (see Lyotard, *Differend* 151–81)—that is, locating signs of a history of various symbolic engagements that occur within multiple and conflicting ways and that do not guarantee cohesion and fidelity to narrative. This framework respects moments of apprehension themselves: watching the film footage of those high school students fleeing in terror, the planes hitting the towers, the "smart" bombs exploding over desert territories that seem far removed from suburban normalcy—the unspeakable horror of witnessing an experience before cultural narratives subsequently take over and affect whether and how we offer an explanation.

The point, here, is neither to deride the act of telling, nor to ask journalists (and other chroniclers of public memory) to do it better. Rather, the structural doubled haunting of presence and absence in narratives that mourn suggests that readers adopt a doubled vision and remember that the "face" of memory and mourning is disfigured by the various crossings we make as we engage with symbols. As witnesses to each other’s engagements, we might read as well for that disfigurement, read for wounds that resist narrative frameworks and for silences that are not merely negative, nor necessarily attach in discernible ways to narratives that precede them. We are vulnerable to narrative. We become attached to and invest our emotions in narratives and symbols. This kind of investment is both beautifully potent and potentially damaging, particularly when such investments carry the expectation that specific attachments can be inserted into a general narrative of "always" and arrange for a reckoning of who belongs.

*East Carolina University*

*Greenville, North Carolina*

**Notes**

1. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the many people who have helped me as I wrote this essay. An early draft was presented at the 2000 Rhetoric Society of America Conference in Washington D.C., and a later version was
presented in January 2002 to faculty and students at George Washington University. Both audiences posed wonderfully provocative questions that pushed me to consider new directions. Several readers have given extraordinarily sensitive and helpful feedback as I struggled to articulate arguments that I feared were remote and ineffable. These include Lynn Worsham, Jim Sosnoski, JAC reviewer Patrick McGann and another reviewer who has remained anonymous. I would also like to thank Laura Micciche for encouraging me to continue to work on this essay at a time when I needed it and Jim Gayley.

2. Attention to (and anxiety about) community abounds. See, for example, Hogan. The CCCC 2001 convention in Denver was organized around the theme, “Composing Community.” The proceeds of the 1996 RSA conference, Making and Unmaking the Prospects of Rhetoric, included the subcategory, “Rhetoric, Community, and Social Action” and an essay in which Klumpp advocates “the building of communities as a central rhetorical task” (78). For a resource that summarizes and problematizes how compositionists invoke community to describe the classroom, see Foster.

3. For examinations of the relationship between nationalism, multiculturalism, community, and the concept of citizenship, see JanMohamed; Parry; Miller; Goldberg; Mohanty; Bhabha (“DissemiNation”); and Guibernau and Rex.

4. Grady and Wells examine the significance of Habermas for rhetoricians. See also Wells’s Sweet Reason.

5. For provocative analyses of the relationship between the first-year writing class and institutions of power, see Harkin; Bleich; Clifford; Flannery; Crowley; Bizzell; Russell.

6. See also Hasian (23). Rhetoric would seem to be especially suited to generating such analyses, especially since, as Terry Eagleton noted some time ago, its systematic study of discourse and power in the name of political practice can be read as simultaneously subversive and affirmative, a “textual training of the ruling class in techniques of political hegemony” (qtd. in Kelleher 86).

7. For a historical analysis of how the Chicago Tribune came to associate itself with a “plain folks” sensibility, see Halberstam (214–18).

8. See, for example, the editorial “Mark Common Sense Absent” and the guest column “Don’t Follow John Brown.” See also articles by regular contributors Ron Grossman, John Kass, and Bob Greene.

9. For examples of other articles in which Columbine was constructed as a threshold event, see “Lessons”; Cloud; Sink; Streisand; Marcus; Schrof; Broder; Harper.

10. Chatterjee offers a concise summary of Anderson’s analysis of how print technology aided the public’s ability to imagine nationhood and community and laid the bases for national consciousness: It produced “unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars”; it gave “a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation”; and “it created new
'languages of power' as certain dialects, closer to the print-language, gained prestige and ground over others" (19–22). See also Redfield and Bhabha ("DissemiNation") for responses to Anderson's analysis of narrative and national consciousness.

11. Wells argues that rhetoricians should regard narrative as a key rhetorical term, especially when thinking about the component parts of persuasive processes. She explains that narrative marks a double-time: the immediate reaction one has to a text as well as temporally delayed moments of reflection. For other critical examinations of the concept of time in connection with nationhood, see Lyotard (Lessons); Docherty; Deleuze; and Bhabha ("DissemiNation").

12. Brown's story invokes competing definitions of literacy. She reportedly read threats posted on Harris' website and was alarmed enough to go to police, who didn't take her seriously. In the Tribune anniversary story, Brown maintained that her critique of the local police expressed a kind of dissension that resulted in her exclusion from the Columbine community. Interestingly, post-Columbine, what had previously been regarded as an "alarmist" sensibility will subsequently be read as being "reasonable" and "attentive."

13. The same complex dynamic organizes "The doctor" story that chronicles the experiences of Christopher Colwell, the emergency room physician who volunteered to go to the scene to identify the deceased. The reporter's aestheticized story invokes suspense and a climax: "At the entrance to the library, Colwell saw a normal-looking scene of tabletops, bookshelves, and computers. Inside 12 bodies" (16). This description of a general scene is followed by a grisly description of one particular body, the memory of which still haunts the doctor. Colwell is described as suffering from his act of witnessing. "Even years of training didn't prepare him for the sight of so many dead children," a sentence that focuses attention on what appears to be unique about Columbine violence, rather than engage in a discussion about what makes the scene of violence recognizable. Colwell's story ends by referencing the possibility of redemption. "At home he takes less for granted and asks himself, 'Am I happy with how I treated people? And with what I've done with my life?'" a question that returns attention to the need for community in the time of aftermath, and the need for reconciling one's interpretations and behaviors in terms of community.

14. Farrell states this in the context of a summary of an article by Thomas S. Frentz.

15. Habermas maintains that an emerging literary public in the eighteenth century acted as a precursor to participatory democracy in the late twentieth century. The mass printing of novels provided citizens with a tool that enabled them to reflect upon what they read, and to negotiate an understanding of the relationship between their public and private selves. In other words, he prioritizes a particular kind of literacy when arguing that a specifically literary public "provided the training ground for critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness" (Structural 29).
16. For analyses of visual theory and its relationship to knowledge, see Levin and Jay.

17. If rhetoric is the ground for political community, then the means by which “Columbine” is erected as a marker of a specific tragedy worthy of collective remembering can be questioned by considering, for example, why so much telling was provoked by this specific tragedy. Certainly, the number of victims was horrifying, but it is important to remember that referencing numbers is not itself explanatory given that information about bodies is always contextualized within other narratives. In the August that followed the events at Columbine, thirteen Mexican farm workers were killed in a truck crash on a California highway (“Crash” 5). While the number of casualties was the same as those in the school massacre, the report focused on the general issue of vehicle safety rather than the victims.

18. The dynamic of mutual recognition suggests that personal, subjective, and private experiences with language will at some point be available for collective review. Recourse to the collective reintroduces the possibility of distanced disinterest that allows for critique and judgment because it seems to involve a formal and “anonymous” socializing process that impacts each of us in the same way. “Interest,” like the performative (or like desire) is imagined as a singular and therefore generalizable type. We may each have our own interests, but those interests are interested to the same degree. (Which implies that “interest” will be formalized to the same degree.) This obligates the speaker who is interested in community to articulate and form narratives about his or her private interests in recognizable terms and to develop the same and equal strategies for referencing public contexts when speaking publicly. But as Worsham argues, the logic of mutual recognition promises equitable interaction in a world that doesn’t provide for it, and that subordinates specific members of populations as it establishes the promise of equity (especially women-as-nurturers, as the locus of bountiful plenitude of recognition). The promise and failure of mutual recognition can function to encourage the replication of acts of violence by reinforcing conceptual boundaries of inside and outside, and by reaffirming “a hierarchical social order [that] is nothing more than an efficient arrangement for doing out what Sennett and Cobb call badges of recognition and unequally distributing tokens of human dignity” (240). See Warner and Kahn, for discussions of how conceptions of “common interest” emerge from a liberal humanist tradition. See Goldberg for an analysis of how modernist narratives have assigned value to the abstract universal subject and in the process, have established race as a cultural category that appears to have an inherent and immediately recognizable social significance.

19. In his examination of rhetorical processes, Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca suggest that speakers consider “what is normal and likely” (71) as a starting point to achieve audience adherence, and as a way of using rhetoric to achieve a just society. See also Farrell’s *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, as well as
Leff, Zhao, Condit, and Doxtader for arguments about the democratic role of discursive norms.

20. Theorists interested in revising the legacy of Kantian philosophy note that in *The Third Critique*, Kant problematizes the ability to explain how to connect on the one hand, the realm that precedes speech and makes speech possible, and on the other, emergent speech acts themselves. Kant holds out a space for that which cannot be represented or comprehended through human concepts (Japaridze 21), including speculation about what enables communication to occur. See *The DifJerend* for Lyotard’s rereading of Kant, in which he argues that the order of the transcendent (or “the law of grammar” that would appear to organize embodied reactions to symbols to formulate community) can only be thought of indirectly and that any conceptions we have about those processes are themselves rhetorical, ("human concepts” in Kant’s terms), including the concept of mutual recognition. Theories that posit the ability to mutually recognize form (or rationality or “good reasons”) convert that which is “indirectly sensed” into static concepts that aim to explain how cognitive processes work, and to enable understanding by positing a conceivable “end” to dialogue, figured in the recognizable terms to describe and formulate community.

21. For a discussion of how (white) teen crime sprees have become normalized, see “Teen Angst.”

22. For a lucid elaboration of the relationship between pedagogy and decolonization, see Worsham’s discussion of Bourdieu and Passeron (221–23).

23. Indeed, Chicago’s two major competing newspapers get evaluated accordingly. To some audiences, the *Tribune* is regarded as more “serious” because it has a front section devoted to international and national news that is presumably of interest to “the general” readers, while the *Chicago Sun-Times* and its tabloid format has less regard because it often uses the front page to publicize local stories and large photos, many of them depicting local residents in positive and very specific circumstances—birthday parties, graduations, picnics. Often the subjects of these photos are African-American, indicating how editors at the *Sun-Times* employ a type of coverage that differentiates the paper’s priorities from the *Tribune*. Meanwhile, a third paper, the *Chicago Defender*, is not read as a “general” news source because its stories and its constructed audience is primarily African-American. See Fraser for a discussion of the limitations of this logic.

24. Meanwhile the follow-up stories about Lemak were ceaseless, including intermittent updates on the status of her trial, a March 2001 article about a memorial service held in Naperville to mark the second anniversary of the deaths of the Lemak children (Barnum), and then a resurgence of front-page publicity after Lemak was convicted of murder in December, 2001.

25. Naperville’s edition placed Combest’s story in section two, under the rubric “Region and State.” The *Chicago Defender* also depicted Combest’s story as a routine event, relegating it to a section called “Police Round-up”
(Ballard). This version also focused more attention on the efforts of police rescuers and less on the victims.

26. The information that Combest had not harmed her children before "the plunge" appeared online but not in printed editions of the Tribune.

27. The requirement when we speak is that we link onto a prior context. But how or whether our own ways of creating linkages will be recognizable is another matter entirely, and it is here that we might remain receptive to the possibility of our own ignorance and lack of familiarity with the ways that linkages occur. All we can do is respect the contingency of each linkage, as well as the singular event (or context) of each utterance (Lyotard, Differend 136–40).

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