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INTRODUCTION

Let us begin with a few episodes in the everyday life of public discourse in the United States:

ONE: When the city of New Orleans began removing monuments commemorating the Confederacy, a decision that precipitated heated debate, legal challenges, death threats, and violent protests, the action so upset Republican State Representative Karl Oliver in neighboring Mississippi that he took to Facebook in May 2017 to express his displeasure. Oliver wrote:

> The destruction of these monuments, erected in the loving memory of our family and fellow Southern Americans, is both heinous and horrific. If the, and I use this term extremely loosely, "leadership" of Louisiana wishes to, in a Nazi-ish fashion, burn books or destroy historical monuments of OUR HISTORY, they should be LYNCHED! Let it be known, I will do all in my power to prevent this from happening in our State. (Wang 2017)

Oliver included with his post a picture of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee, whose statue was the last of the monuments to be removed. Before he deleted his post two days later, many people had weighed in to support or excoriate Oliver's comments, including two fellow Mississippi lawmakers, Representatives John Read and Doug McLeod, both of whom "liked" the post. Oliver later issued an apology, acknowledging his use of the word "lynched" was wrong. "I humbly ask for your forgiveness," Oliver wrote (ibid.). He did not address comparing New Orleans city officials to Nazis.

TWO: As a controversial bill expanding a school voucher program in the state of Arizona was being sent in April 2017 to Governor Doug Ducey for his signature, Democratic Representative Jesus Rubalcava was outraged. Rubalcava, an elementary school teacher, was among a number of Democratic and moderate Republican critics of the bill, which they viewed as an effort to "dismantle" public education because it would redirect money from public to private and religious schools (Sanchez, O'Dell, and Rau 2017). Writing to a Facebook friend about the bill's sponsor, Republican Senator Debbie Lesko, Rubalcava stated, "I wanted to punch her in the throat." (Sanchez and Pitzl, 2017). Lesko,

a self-identified survivor of domestic violence, said she found Rubalcava's comment, "very disturbing and totally inappropriate." After initially defending his Facebook post, Rubalcava subsequently removed it and made a public apology to Lesko and his colleagues in the legislature.

THREE: When media critic Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of *Feminist Frequency*, a website on which she analyzes patriarchy and misogyny in gaming culture, launched a fundraising campaign in 2012 for her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* video series, she became the subject of a vicious online harassment campaign, much of it gender-based. Sarkeesian's webpage was hacked, her Wikipedia page vandalized with sexual and violent imagery, and she received multiple rape and death threats, including a message from someone who had tracked down her home address and threatened to kill her and her parents (McDonald 2014). To illustrate the vitriol regularly directed at her, Sarkeesian published on her blog a collection of the tweets she received in a single week. Sarkeesian's "content warning for misogyny" noted the tweets included "gender insults, victim blaming, incitement to suicide, sexual violence, rape and death threats" (Sarkeesian 2015).

FOUR: On March 31, 2009, the influential conservative pundit Erick Erickson published a short piece on his blog, *Red State*, expressing his exasperation with a Washington State law prohibiting the sale of dishwasher detergent containing phosphates, a measure designed to prevent water pollution. Arguing that phosphate-free detergents did not effectively clean dishes placed in the dishwasher, and that some Washington residents were driving across state lines to buy detergents containing phosphates, Erickson decried the law as "lunacy." "At what point," Erickson asked, "do the people tell the politicians to go to hell? At what point do they get off the couch, march down to their state legislator's house, pull him outside, and beat him to a bloody pulp for being an idiot?" Warning that "rage" was building in response to "government control" of people's lives, Erickson concluded, "Were I in Washington State, I'd be cleaning my gun right about now waiting to protect my property from the coming riots or the government apparatchiks coming to enforce nonsensical legislation" (Erickson 2009).

FIVE: On November 2, 2018, the fact-checkers for the *Washington Post* marked an ironic milestone. President Donald J. Trump, elected to roughly two years earlier, had surpassed 6,000 in his catalog of what the fact-checkers described as "false or misleading claims" (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2018). Noting that in the first nine months of his presidency, the president had made 1,318 false or misleading claims, an average of five a day, the fact checkers stated that "the flood of presidential

misinformation" increased dramatically in the seven weeks leading up the 2018 midterm elections. In that period, according to the fact checkers, the president made a total of 1,419 false or misleading claims, or an average of 30 a day. The fact checkers confessed to being overwhelmed by the pace of the president's false and misleading statements. After one Trump rally, the fact checkers wrote that "the burden of keeping up with this verbiage" was "too daunting for our deadline."

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Welcome to public discourse in the contemporary United States: intolerant and irrational, venomous and violent, divisive and dishonest. What is perhaps most startling about the episodes above, or any of the other mendacious, rage-driven examples I might have referenced, is how utterly routine they have become in the context of contemporary public argument in the United States. With each passing news cycle, it seems, there are fresh reports of the demonization, incendiary metaphors, and virulent historical analogies that now characterize public discourse. Cable television, talk radio, and countless portals on the Internet have made toxic rhetoric a fact of everyday life, an emotional release, a form of entertainment, and a corporate product.

More, such rhetoric has managed to undermine discourses grounded in rational argument and logical proofs, formerly considered authoritative. Our toxic public arguments have contributed to a rhetorical climate in which we no longer share common understandings of the nature of a fact, or what counts as evidence, or how to interpret what evidence may be presented.[1] Even scientific matters, such as climate change and the safety of vaccines, are subject to rancorous, ideologically driven debate.

Indeed, many people in the United States seem to have lost confidence in the very existence of factual information that stands apart from partisan interests, while the institutions formerly entrusted with supplying such information—those of government, science, public schools, higher education, traditional media, and others—are regarded with suspicion and even contempt by large numbers of people. A study by the Pew Research Center (2015) found "the American public is deeply cynical about government, politics and the nation's leaders," while a Gallup survey reported, "Americans' confidence in major institutions continues to lag below historical averages," with confidence in newspapers and organized religion dropping to record lows (Norman 2016). Perhaps this loss of faith explains the conspiracy theories that routinely achieve wide purchase among sections of the public: George W. Bush was responsible for 9/11; Barack Obama was born in Kenya; Hillary Clinton operated a pedophilia ring from the basement of a Washington, DC, pizzeria.

Nor is the deepening distrust of empirical reality confined to the darker fringes of US life. The 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent election of Donald J. Trump ushered into US political and cultural life a new vocabulary of "post-truth," "alternative facts," and "fake news." Mr. Trump himself, regardless of whether or not one agreed with his politics, routinely trafficked in falsehoods throughout his unconventional campaign and into his presidency, such as when he claimed without evidence that millions of illegal votes prevented him from the winning the popular vote in the election (Jacobson 2016), or when he falsely asserted that Barack Obama had wiretapped his phones (Heigl 2017), or when he implied that Texas Senator Ted Cruz's father may have been implicated in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a claim the fact-checking organization Politifact called "incorrect and ridiculous" (Jacobson and Qiu 2016).

Perhaps the rhetorical moment was most succinctly captured by Trump surrogate Scottie Nell Hughes, who was interviewed on NPR's *Diane Rehm* show just days after Trump's victory. Responding to critics who accused Trump of repeatedly lying throughout his campaign, Hughes said:

> And so one thing that has been interesting this entire campaign season to watch is that people that say facts are facts, they're not really facts. Everybody has a way, it's kind of like looking at ratings or looking at a glass of half-full water. Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true. There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts. And so Mr. Trump's tweet amongst a certain crowd, a large—a large part of the population, are truth. (*Rehm* 2017)

Hughes was widely reviled for her statement, "There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts," but she accurately described a juncture in contemporary US public argument.

Surveys of public attitudes indicate widespread pessimism regarding the state of public discourse. A 2017 study by NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist, for example, found that 70 percent of Americans believe the tone of political discourse has declined since the election of President Trump, a finding that held true across both major political parties (Santhanam 2017). A study by the public relations firm Weber Shandwick (2016) offered even more discouraging numbers, reporting that 95 percent of respondents say the lack of civility is a problem in the United States, with 70 percent saying incivility has reached "crisis" proportions. While the term "civility" can obscure more than it reveals, as I shall discuss presently, studies of "incivility" suggest that it lowers political trust (Mutz and Reeves 2005), promotes negative attitudes toward political leaders

(Cappella and Jamieson 1997), and leads to increasing suspicion among Americans of one another (Rodin and Steinberg 2003). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that a report by the Pew Research Center (2017) on political polarization in the United States asserts that the partisan divide on political values reached "record levels" during Barack Obama's presidency, and that "the gaps have grown even larger" during Donald Trump's first year as president.

Vituperative rhetoric, of course, is nothing new in US political life. In his book, *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy*, historian Marcus Daniel reminds us that, "there was no golden age of American politics when public spirited men debated issues of great moment with a rationality as sharply honed as their classical rhetoric, when public debate was conducted within well understood and widely accepted limits of civility . . . On the contrary, scandal and incivility have always been part of American politics" (Daniel 2009, 5). Historian Thomas Bender supplies a similar narrative, writing, "Nineteenth-century politics was rife with insult; reasoned argument was often eclipsed by spectacle, liquor and corruption" (Bender 2003, 27). And communication scholars Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg recall that abusive discourse has deep roots in US history, observing that Presidents Jefferson, Lincoln, Cleveland, and the Theodore Roosevelt were subject to "vicious" and "uncivil" attacks (Rodin and Steinberg 2003, 3).

Nor was such discourse necessarily destructive. Daniel argues that the "tempestuous, fiercely partisan, and highly personal" politics of the eighteenth century post-revolutionary United States contributed to the creation of a "vibrant and iconoclastic culture of political dissent" and "the emergence of a more democratic social and political order" (6). In similar spirit, Bruce Thornton, a research fellow at the Hoover Institute, writes in "Three Cheers for Incivility," that the "dislike of political rancor is at the heart of a dislike of democracy" and that efforts to "moderate or police, based on some subjective notions of 'civility' or decorum, the clashing expressions of passionate beliefs often is an attempt to limit the freedom to express those beliefs, and a way to benefit one faction at the expense of others" (Thornton 2015).

Yet if we properly reject nostalgia for a golden age that never was, neither should we dismiss the badly degraded condition of our present public argument. In the last twenty-five years, social scientists Jefferey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj contend in their meticulously researched book, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*, the discourse of what the authors call "outrage," characterized by "hallmark venom, vilification of opponents, and hyperbolic reinterpretations

of events," has moved from its marginal position in the broader media landscape to become "a new genre of political opinion media" (Berry and Sobieraj 2014, 5). Nor can the corrosive state of contemporary public argument, insists communications scholar Clarke Rountree, be understood as simply the latest expression of the invective, constructive or otherwise, that has long characterized political rhetoric in the United States (Rountree 2013a). Rather, Rountree argues, it represents something "completely new," a product of developments in media, political party affiliations, campaign finance laws, and what Rountree calls "our post-9/11 culture of fear" (431).

Whatever the causes, we appear to have arrived at a historical and cultural moment in which there is little place in our civic arguments for deliberative language that might explore ambiguities, express doubt, admit error, or accommodate ideas that contradict our own. We seem increasingly incapable, as scholar Danielle S. Allen puts it, of "talking to strangers," or constructively engaging with those who disagree with us questions of war and peace, wealth and poverty, sickness and health (Allen 2004). The result is arguments reduced to assertions and counter-assertions, claims and counter-claims, often expressed in language that is shrill, irrational, duplicitous, and violent. The discourse of "crisis" is cheaply purchased in US public affairs—we are told of the literacy crisis, the economic crisis, the environmental crisis, and others—but if we are not experiencing a crisis of public argument, one that divides along political, cultural, economic, and demographic lines, we are near the edge of something like it.

What does all this mean for teachers of writing, and for the discipline of Writing Studies?[2]

WRITING STUDIES AND PUBLIC ARGUMENT

The state of contemporary public argument presents an unsettling paradox to those of us who identify, whether as teachers, scholars, administrators, or others, with the discipline of Writing Studies. By many measures, our discipline has never been more robust. Once a derided outlier in departments of English, today Writing Studies is characterized by major scholarship, vigorous graduate programs, and well-organized national advocacy associations. The first-year writing course, the central project of the discipline for much of its existence, continues to be the subject of serious scholarly work, serving as a site for pedagogical innovations that link the teaching of writing to political activism (Kahn and Lee 2010), community engagement (Mathieu 2005), multilingualism

(Matsuda 2012), digital rhetoric (Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe 2012), and so much more.

Yet despite the sustained scholarship devoted to the study and teaching of writing, despite the highly-trained Writing Studies faculty leading writing programs across the nation, and despite the impressive numbers of students enrolled in our courses each year, we seem to have little influence on the conduct of US public argument. The principles we teach are largely absent from the public square, and our conceptions of rhetoric as methods of inquiry and community building seem as so much folklore, appealing mythologies that have little purchase in the worlds beyond our classrooms. Moreover, as historians, journalists, and others are called upon to analyze the problems of public discourse, we in Writing Studies are largely incidental to the discussion, our disciplinary expertise unacknowledged or obscured by perceptions of our work as a form of remedial service. In conversations concerning the character of public discourse, I mean to say, we are mostly irrelevant.

This disconnection of our work from the conduct of public discourse is symptomatic of a greater disciplinary problem: our failure to explain to the general public, to colleagues in other disciplines, to our students, and perhaps even to ourselves what we do, why our work matters, and what is at stake in the teaching of writing. We have not successfully communicated what David W. Smit termed our "teleological reason for being" (Smit 2011, 1). We appear to have no prevailing disciplinary narrative, and our diverse and contending theories, methods, and pedagogies, Smit argued in *The End of Composition Studies*, "have no common theoretical basis, no shared assumptions about the nature and value of writing, and no communal sense of what kinds of writing should be taught and learned" (Smit 2004, 223). Moreover, the pluralism that so invigorates the discipline paradoxically threatens to isolate us within increasingly specialized discourses that have little to say to one another. As one respondent put it in an April 2014 WPA-listserv discussion on engaging the public, "Unless I miss my mark, the sea of folks out there teaching composition do not even form a cohesive group themselves. I'm just saying I'm confused about who we are . . ." Perhaps it is no surprise we continue to debate among ourselves the identity of the discipline and its future (Hansen 2011).

There are advantages to such contentions, certainly. Debates over disciplinary identities can be a sign of intellectual vitality, and the refusal of "grand narratives" has encouraged the development of approaches to writing research and teaching that are grounded in the political, cultural, and material realities of learners. Rejecting what Deborah H.

Holdstein has described as "a prudent, if sometimes misguided, desire to promote a narrow scope or focus" (Holdstein 2005, 406), we have become an intellectually capacious discipline, one that has made space for such diverging standpoints as classical rhetoric and cultural studies, expressivist pedagogy and critical theory, feminist pedagogy and queer studies. In what Lance Massey calls "The (Dis)Order of Composition" (Massey 2011) we continue to grow.

Nor are we lacking in white papers, outcome statements, and other such documents that attempt to articulate our disciplinary priorities. The *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0)* (2014), for example, provides a cogent representation of "the writing knowledge, practices, and attitudes that undergraduate students develop in first-year composition." Similarly, *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011), endorsed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (2011), provides a description of "the rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success" (1). Our writing textbooks, too, may be said to offer a collective representation of aims, language, and practices common to the writing classroom.

However, such efforts have not resulted the formation of a prevailing disciplinary narrative, or a common set of assumptions concerning the nature and value of writing. As Writing Studies is undermined by the same forces destabilizing higher education generally—budget cuts and rising tuitions, a growing reliance on adjunct labor, and increasing public skepticism about the value of a postsecondary education—we have yet to offer a common vision, a shared rationale for our work. We are constrained in telling our story because we are not agreed on just what the story is. What are teaching when we teach writing? Why are we teaching it? What is the ultimate purpose, the *telos* of our work? We appear to lack a shared language for answering such questions.

However, such a language, or so I will argue in this book, has historically been available to us and is available to us still, if we would reclaim it. It is a language derived from the particulars of our classroom practices, but one that provides a common rationale for the intellectual project of our discipline. I refer to the language of *ethics*, that branch of philosophy given over to questions of how to live a good life. What does it mean to be a good person? What kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life?

Such questions are relevent in the context of the writing class because to teach writing is to teach the communicative practices, such as making

claims, offering evidence, and considering counter-arguments, among others, through which writers propose and navigate human relationships. And it is in the context of navigating these human relationships that we are necessarily engaged, students and teachers, with the values, attitudes, and actions that fall within the domain of the ethical. "At the point when you begin to write," James E. Porter has written, "you begin to define yourself ethically. You make a choice about what is the right thing to do—even if that choice is a tentative and contingent one" (Porter 1998, 150).

I do not mean by this that we *should* teach rhetorical ethics in our classrooms, or that we are *obliged* to do so. Rather, I am suggesting that as teachers of writing we are *always* and *already* engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics; that the teaching of writing *necessarily* and *inevitably* involves us in ethical deliberation and decision-making. I am proposing that the very act of sitting down to write places before the writer and teacher of writing those questions that speak to the kinds of people we choose to be, the sorts of relationships we seek to establish with others, and the kinds of communities in which we wish to live. Have I been truthful in making these claims? Have I been fair-minded in considering views that oppose my own? Shall I use this inflammatory metaphor in my essay? Why or why not? When we discuss such questions with students, when we engage them in conversations about why they make some choices over others and what principles might guide their choices, we are in effect teaching ethics; more specifically, we are teaching practices of ethical discourse. We are teaching students what it means to be, in the ethical sense, a "good writer" in the twenty-first century.

To say that writing and the teaching of writing involve ethical reflection and decision-making is not to suggest that individual writers should be judged as ethical or unethical, in the sense of being moral, upright, honest, and so forth. Nor it is to say that writers necessarily reflect on ethical concerns as they write. They may or may not. Neither is it to assert, finally, that every text can be regarded as ethical or unethical based on its content. Many texts, perhaps most, are devoid of the subject matter typically associated with ethics. Rather, to say writing involves ethical choices is to say that when creating a text the writer addresses others. And that, in turn, initiates a relationship between writer and readers, one that entangles writers, and those who would teach writing, in the questions, problems, and choices associated with ethical reflection and reasoning.

And it is in the discourse of ethics that we teachers of writing find a language that, should we choose to reclaim and share it with our

students, will expand and complicate students' understandings of what it means to write, showing students that what they write ultimately says as much about the kinds of people they are as it does about the content and effects of their texts. More, the discourse of ethics offers us, teachers of writing, a common narrative, a story we might tell to students, to colleagues in other disciplines, to deans, to legislators, and to the general public, about what it is we teach, why our work matters, and what is at stake in the teaching of writing in the twenty-first century. Finally, the teaching of ethical rhetoric, should we acknowledge and embrace it in our classrooms, provides a vocabulary with which our students might learn to "talk to strangers" and perhaps begin to repair the broken state of our public arguments.

These, at any rate, are the claims I will argue in this book. Before going further, however, we need to say what we mean by the word, "ethics."

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ETHICS?

Until recently, ethics was defined in Western philosophy by one of the two preeminent moral theories, the so-called "Big Two": deontology, the ethics of rules and obligations, and consequentialism, the ethics of outcomes and results. In recent decades, these theories have been challenged by the emergence of postmodern ethics, which has become the dominant ethical paradigm throughout much of the humanities (Berlin 1990; Porter 1998). Each of these theories provides a moral framework, or a set of principles, for guiding ethical decision-making in the course of everyday life: What is the right thing to do in this situation? What are the consequences of taking that action, or not taking it? How do I decide between irreconcilable truths?

Applied to the writing classroom, each moral theory offers students and teachers a set of principles for guiding ethical decision-making when reading or composing texts. Each provides, to say it another way, an understanding of "the good" that informs a conception of "the good writer." And yet none of these frameworks, the deontological, the consequential, or the postmodern, provides a fully adequate account of how writers might define themselves ethically as they make choices, recalling James Porter's apt phrase, about "the right thing to do."

I recommend in this book a different conception of ethics for the writing course, one derived from a moral theory that is both old and new, discarded and recovered, and one that inevitably engages us in discussions of truthfulness, accountability, open-mindedness, courage,

practical wisdom, justifiable anger, and more. There is a word for such qualities. They are examples of what Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* called "virtues," from the Greek *arête*, or, broadly, "excellence," and they are today the subject of that branch of moral philosophy known as "virtue ethics." A virtue, according Rosalind Hursthouse, one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of virtue, is "the concept of something that makes it possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right" (Hursthouse 1999, 13). For Richard White, in *Radical Virtues: Moral Wisdom and the Ethics of Contemporary Life*, "the virtues, including justice, courage, and compassion, are the ways in which we typically grasp the nature of goodness" (White 2008, 1).

Plato and Aristotle analyzed the virtues in their writings, and philosophers from Confucius to Alasdair MacIntyre have explored virtue-based approaches to ethics. Virtue ethics, which Philip Cafaro notes is sometimes described as "the ethical system that takes 'virtue' or 'the virtues' as its primary ethical category" (Cafaro 2015, 442, n.1), offers an alternative to ethical traditions grounded in the rules of deontology or the anticipated outcomes of consequentialism. More, virtue ethics offers a moral theory that takes us beyond the resolute skepticism of postmodernism. And it is in the language of the virtues, in what I will call "rhetorical virtues,"[3] by which I mean the discursive enactments of truthfulness, accountability, open-mindedness, and the like, that students and teachers of writing can find "principles for action,"[4] or rationales for making ethical decisions in the writing class.

Talk of "virtue" may sound strange, or worse, to our modern ears, having faded, Brian Treanor writes, "from common use and public language, to the more narrow and private sphere of sexual or religious morality" (Treanor 2014, 15). Certainly, the term has little purchase in Writing Studies. While we have embraced Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, we have mostly ignored his *Ethics*. Perhaps this is because "we postmodern skeptical academics," as Patricia Bizzell wrote more than two decades ago, "are habitually fearful that any talk of teaching virtue will tend to introduce exclusions, as socially privileged groups in our diverse nation arrogate to themselves the right to define what virtue is taught" (Bizzell 1992b, 6). If we are to teach an ethics of virtue, I understand Bizzell to be asking, whose virtues are we teaching?

Perhaps, too, we are wary of the historical and ideological inflections of the word, which has been associated with the subjugation of women, with neo-conservative ideology, and with an exclusively—and therefore

exclusionary—Christian worldview. Feminist philosophers, for example, have made a compelling case that virtue-based ethical theories have historically accommodated concepts of "feminine virtues" central to the subordination and control of women (Jaggar 1991; Grimshaw 1993). Others have argued that the concept of virtue has been appropriated by neo-conservatives who have used it as a racialized discourse through which to shift conversations about poverty and inequality away from social causes and toward the supposed "individual character deficiencies" of the poor, particularly African Americans (Tessman 2001, 89). And then there are the theological undercurrents of the word, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the Catholic Saint Thomas Aquinas's ([1911] 1981) conception of the "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and charity, which are said to be imparted by God and therefore available only to believers—meaning non-believers are effectively excluded from the virtuous life. In short, there are reasons why the term "virtue" is not exactly trending in Writing Studies.

Yet while these historical, ideological, and theological attachments can inform our considerations of virtue, they need not restrict our understanding of the term, nor foreclose to us its possibilities. Recent work in feminist virtue ethics, critical virtue ethics, and non-Western virtue theories, as I discuss in chapter 3, offer evocative and expansive interpretations of the term that complicate the ways we might read and use the notion of virtue. Indeed, I will argue that while the history of virtue has complicated the term, we may yet find, those of us who teach writing, that the provocations of virtue are ultimately affirming, generative, and rich with possibility.

In discussing virtue in this book, I will make a distinction between two kinds of virtues. What I will call *virtues of rhetorical practice* refers to the virtues enacted in the practices we teach, our claims, evidence, counter-arguments, and the rest. What I shall term *virtues of rhetorical interpretation* refers to the virtues we judge to be enacted in the readings we undertake or in the rhetorical situations to which we respond. So, for examples of the latter, we might speak of the virtues of justice and righteous indignation expressed in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam" speech, which called for an end to the war (King 1967), or the virtues of courage and compassion enacted in Mary Fisher's "A Whisper of AIDS" speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention (Fisher 1992). While both the virtues of practice and interpretation express the qualities, traits, or dispositions through which we might, in White's phrase, "grasp the nature of goodness," I am primarily concerned in this book with virtues of rhetorical practice.

THIS, NOT THESE

Let me say what I am not proposing in this book. First, I am not propos-
ing that we teach in our classes established codes or standards of behavior
associated with a particular culture, religious faith, or ideology. Virtue
ethics, which Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe describe as "an
umbrella term covering a plurality of theoretical and even anti-theoretical"
approaches to ethics (Walker and Ivanhoe 2007a, 3), resists the applica-
tion of such codes and standards, locating the rightness of wrongness of
actions in the character of moral agents whose judgments are informed by
the particulars of situation. I am not recommending to writers or teachers
of writing, then, a set of rules or standard practices to follow.

Neither am I advocating that we renounce previous practices,
approaches, or pedagogies for teaching writing. I am not calling for
writing programs and teachers to discard previous knowledge, abandon
what has worked, and reinvent themselves and their classrooms. Rather,
I am suggesting that whatever theoretical and pedagogical approaches
may prevail in a given writing program or classroom—whether expres-
sivism, critical pedagogy, writing about writing, or others—ethical ques-
tions and considerations will inevitably be present, percolating under
the surface or boiling over it. I am proposing that programs and teach-
ers of writing address these questions and considerations directly and
intentionally, integrating them into ongoing discussions and making
explicit what is often left implicit in the writing class. I suggest ways such
conversations might be structured in chapter 5.

Finally, I am not offering in this book yet another jeremiad on the
decline of civility and the need to restore it to public life. Certainly,
there is much to admire about civility, which Stephen L. Carter defines
as "the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake
of living together" (Carter 1998, 11), and which John A. Hall (Hall
2013) describes as a "precondition" of truth and moral development.
In Writing Studies, the scholar Craig Rood has argued thoughtfully
and persuasively for what he calls "rhetorical civility," which he defines
in part as "the rhetorical practices committed to understanding and
being understood, respecting and being respected" (Rood 2013, 344).
Conceived in such terms, civility is more than the historical association
with manners, etiquette, and politeness; it is beyond these a precondi-
tion of democratic practice and a set of shared norms that offer an alter-
native to violence (Hall). Indeed, Cheshire Calhoun contends that civil-
ity should be understood as a virtue, one that communicates, Calhoun
writes, "basic moral attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness"
(Calhoun 2000, 255).

Yet civility can also be an equivocal if not a masking word, obscuring more than it reveals. In contexts of asymmetrical power, civility can function as a politically regressive term used to preserve an unjust social and economic order. Nancy Welch, for example, has observed that civility can function "to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic . . . and unequal in distribution of wealth" (Welch 2012, 36). Welch takes as her example the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike, in which striking immigrant millworkers in Lawrence, Massachusetts were condemned as unruly and "uncivil" by Lawrence's social elites and textile barons. Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud have similarly argued that when privileged interests exclude as "uncivil" those voices deemed controversial or subversive, the call to civility may function as a strategy "to effectively silence and punish marginalized groups" (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 2009, 223). In this view, civility can serve to check legitimate expressions of protest, while accusations of incivility can be used to manage public discourse in ways that serve the interests of dominant classes. The meaning of civility, it would seem, is conditioned by those who call for it, and those who are called upon to observe it.

The virtues, in contrast, offer a vocabulary that is explicit, exacting, and wide in scope. While the language of virtue expresses, for example, attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness—those attitudes prized in civility—the vocabulary of virtue also encompasses demands for justice, judgment, and righteous anger. There are times and places, the language of virtue allows, when the attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness that characterize civility may not be possible or appropriate. A virtue-based conception of discourse recognizes that rude, confrontational, even incendiary speech can be a necessary and, indeed, an ethical response to inequality, oppression, environmental destruction, and other abuses. What is called for in a virtue-based ethics of writing is the quality of what Aristotle termed *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, the ability of know when such speech or writing is called for, at whom it should be directed, and how it may best be expressed. An ethics of rhetorical virtue, then, demands more than mere civility.

REASONS TO DOUBT

There are good reasons to doubt this project. I will discuss just three. We can doubt the value of argument. In making the case for the explicit teaching of rhetorical ethics, I focus primarily on the teaching of argument, which I define, quoting Douglas Walton, as "the giving of reasons to support or criticize a claim that is questionable, or open to doubt"

(Walton 2006, 1). I concentrate on teaching argument rather than, say, narrative or poetics,[5] because argument is the common currency of many college writing programs, the subject of our classes, curricula, and textbooks; because it is the dominant discourse throughout academia, the genre in which our students will most often be asked to write after leaving our classrooms; and because I hold the view that argument remains, despite everything, an essential means through which to participate in civic conversation and promote a more just and inclusive society.

But perhaps this view is wrong. The rationale for making arguments rests on the assumption that the giving of good reasons grounded in relevant evidence can result in changes of attitudes or behaviors, that is, persuasion. Recent research, however, suggests the opposite outcome is just as likely, if not more so.

A study by political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler found that when people were presented with factual information that contradicted their deeply held beliefs, not only were they unlikely to be persuaded, they effectively doubled down on their beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Nyhan and Reifler call this "the backfire effect," in which corrections to a belief actually increase the original misperceptions. Rather than effecting persuasion through the reasoned presentation of claims and evidence, the ideal of many writing courses, arguments may cause listeners or readers to become even more entrenched in their views, even when it can be conclusively demonstrated these views are grounded in misinformation.

Perhaps, too, the teaching of argument is politically regressive. Writing Studies scholar Todd DeStigter (DeStigter 2015) has questioned the widely held assumption that argumentative writing promotes critical thinking, provides training in the rational deliberation essential for a functioning democracy, and offers students a form of cultural capital enabling upward social and academic mobility. Instead, DeStigter writes, the "cognitive ideal" (15) of argumentation taught in secondary and higher education rests on epistemological assumptions, rooted in the writings of Kant and Descartes, which hold that there exist "real truths" accessible through abstract reasoning processes. However, modern philosophy, asserts DeStigter, has exposed rationality as just another discourse masquerading as truth, and argument as just another culturally privileged mode of communication. Rather than enabling practices of deliberative democracy and promoting upward mobility, according to DeStigter, argument can have an adverse effect, limiting what counts as legitimate political discourse by excluding, for example, the discourse

practices of minority groups, thereby inhibiting actions that might address economic inequality. DeStigter recommends that teachers of writing recognize "more agonistic and even revolutionary models of public activism," in which people might do "impolite, illegal, or even violent things in their struggle for justice" (24).

Next, we can doubt reason. Recent research in human cognition suggests that the purpose of reasoning is not to assess the validity of claims or discover impartial truths but has instead developed for the more competitive purpose of enabling one group of people to prevail over another (Mercier 2011b; Mercier and Sperber 2011; Mercier and Landemore 2012). In what has become known as "the argumentative theory of reasoning" (Mercier and Landemore 2012, 243), people who argue are not seeking consensus or promoting understanding but are instead intent on persuading others of the validity of their views, that is, winning. More, the cognitivists suggest that what are generally perceived as fallacies of reasoning, such as confirmation bias, the tendency to interpret information in a way that supports one's preconceptions, are not design flaws in the system but are instead products of human evolution. Patricia Cohen explains that "bias, lack of logic and other supposed flaws that pollute the stream of reason are instead social adaptations that enable one group to persuade (and defeat) another" (Cohen 2011). Truth and accuracy, in this conception of argument, are mostly incidental.

This suggests that teaching students, as many of us do, to view the research process as an opportunity for inquiry and exploration, and not as a pretext to confirm pre-existing biases, effectively places us at odds with human evolutionary development. And attempting to reform students' reasoning processes by persuading them to abandon their biases is akin to proclaiming, cognitive scientist Hugo Mercier has written, "hands were made for walking and that everybody should be taught that" (Mercier n.d.).

Finally, we can doubt the possibility of virtuous discourse. As if cognitive and ideological objections to argument were not enough, there is, for lack of a better term, the realist objection. Let us concede there is something quixotic, if not naïve, in the notion of a virtuous public discourse, particularly one rooted in the everyday practices of the first-year writing class. For one thing, history is not abounding with examples of enlightened public argument, and even the ancient Greeks, from whom we inherit much of our thinking on rhetoric, virtue, and democracy, created a society that oppressed women, discriminated against immigrants, and sold their enemies into slavery. Moreover, to argue that teaching

the rhetorical virtues of honesty, accountability, practical wisdom, and the like will somehow liberate our society from its addiction to toxic public discourse, to say nothing of promoting a more just and inclusive democracy, seems to call for extended periods of magical thinking. More, it runs the risk of reviving, zombie-like, the literacy myth, or the fiction that certain privileged forms of literacy practice can overcome the structural barriers that maintain social and economic inequalities (Graff and Duffy 2016).

Yet if there are reasons to doubt, there are equally reasons to counterbalance such doubts. A study by the political scientists Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter (Wood and Porter 2016), for example, tested 8,100 subjects on 36 issues for evidence of Nyhan and Reifler's backfire effect. On only one issue—the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003—did the researchers find evidence of a cognitive backfire, or a refusal of participants to acknowledge their own misconceptions. "By and large," the authors write, "citizens heed factual information, even when such information challenges their partisan and ideological commitments." Wood and Porter's study suggests that we may not yet fully understand the interactions of persuasion, ideology, and cognition, and that discounting the role of argument in promoting the common good may be, at the very least, premature.

DeStigter's critique of argument, moreover, may be interpreted not so much as a rejection of the genre but a call for its expansion, or a conception of argument that admits diverse rhetorical traditions, especially the discourse practices of minority groups, as well as one that recognizes non-textual modalities, such as oral narrative, music, and dance. Should we see these as arguments, as means through which students propose and navigate human relationships, then we are once again returned to the realm of the ethical. Each of these new and expanded forms of argument, in other words, would equip their practitioners to argue in ways that have enabled them, paraphrasing Hursthouse, to act and react well, rightly, as they should—to get things right.

Similarly, the argumentative theory of reasoning can be read not as a nihilistic rejection of argument as a means for achieving consensus and searching for truth, but rather as a repudiation of the Cartesian view of reasoning in which the individual privately examines her beliefs for the purpose of discarding erroneous beliefs and finding more accurate ones. In place of the individual model of Cartesian reasoning, the argumentative theory offers a fundamentally social theory of reasoning. When individuals are left to their own devices or surrounded by like-minded believers, the cognitive scientists tell us, they will persist in their

confirmation biases, motived reasoning, and other habits of mind that impede good decision-making. However, when opposing groups come together to argue, each presenting their own conceptions of what is right and true, the better arguments ultimately emerge.

If we are hard-wired to press ahead with our biases and motivated reasoning, in other words, we have equally evolved to listen for the better argument, and to adopt such arguments for our own benefit. "If the people who listen to argument were not better off on average," Mercier has written, "they would evolve to stop listening to arguments" (Mercier 2011a). For this reason, Mercier and Landemore contend that the argumentative theory of reasoning is compatible with practices of deliberative democracy, in which debates featuring diverse opinions ultimately produce better outcomes on questions that may be evaluated from "a factual, moral, or political point of view" (6).

And what of the realist objection to teaching an ethics of virtue? Is it chimerical to imagine that our classrooms might serve as locations for a transformative ethical discourse, one that might reform our toxic public argument and promote healthier forms of civic engagement? Is it another expression of the literacy myth and evidence of magical thinking? Perhaps. But let us consider, before we decide, the intellectual and structural state of Writing Studies in the twenty-first century.

Intellectually, we find ourselves as professional inheritors of the rhetorical tradition. This means, among other things, that we are charged with teaching the rhetorical knowledge that comprises the materials of academic and public argument. To that end, we have studied the structure of arguments, the relationship of argument and situation, and the delicate, sometimes murky interplay of argument and persuasion, belief and truth. We have at our disposal, moreover, a vocabulary for teaching students how to read, analyze, and write arguments. Nor do we limit ourselves to the study of argument in a single discipline—how arguments function in, say, philosophy or biology—but instead teach broader, transferrable principles that will enable our students to make effective arguments in venues as varied as a college essay, a county courthouse, or the editorial pages of the *New York Times* or *The National Review*. In short, while the field of Writing Studies is not defined by the teaching of argument, we have nonetheless been at such teaching for a long while. We know what good arguments look like, we know how to make them, and we know how teach them.

Structurally, there is nothing else quite like us. Our courses in writing and rhetoric are required at most postsecondary institutions in the United States, and the demand for enrollment is such that we typically

lobby to reduce our class sizes, not increase them. In her 1998 essay, "Composition in the University," Sharon Crowley, citing data at the time indicating that more than twelve million students were enrolled in US colleges and universities, suggested that if just a quarter of those students were enrolled in freshman composition courses, enrollment in writing courses would exceed four million students (Crowley 1998, 1). Using Crowley's same calculations today, when the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 20.2 million students were enrolled in US postsecondary education as of 2014, the number of students in our classes would exceed five million annually. Nor are the numbers likely to decrease anytime soon. The most recent NCES report predicts a 15 percent increase in postsecondary enrollment between 2015 and 2025, raising the number of students in our courses, using Crowley's thumbnail calculations, closer to six million annually (National Center of Education Statistics 2016). Of course, we do not know exactly how many of these students will take a first-year or other writing course, but even the most conservative estimates suggest the numbers will be substantial.

Who is better positioned, then, intellectually and structurally, to influence the future of public argument in the United States than teachers of college writing? Who is more qualified? Decades in the making, we have built in Writing Studies a dynamic enterprise, a powerful engine for shaping the way people speak, write, and argue. We have the capacity in our classes to engage hundreds of thousands and more likely millions of students each year in introductory conversations about the relationships of writing, rhetoric, argument, and ethical discourse. What have we done with this extraordinary opportunity? What could we do? What possibilities are available to us?

There are reasons to doubt the arguments of this book. We need not dismiss such doubts. Skepticism, too, is a virtue. I wrote this book, however, to offer my fellow writing teachers reasons to believe.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

In chapter 1, I discuss the construct of "toxic rhetoric," its features, causes, and effects. What is "toxic rhetoric"? How shall we define the term? What are its origins, and what forces work to sustain it in the twenty-first century? And why does it matter? What are its effects? What is so "toxic," finally, about toxic discourse? In addressing these questions, I consider the meanings of such terms as "incivility," "hate speech," "outrage discourse," and others. I examine specific language practices that

comprise toxic discourse and review several of the explanations for its rise in US society. I conclude the chapter by reflecting upon the effects of toxic rhetoric upon our civic friendships and upon our students.

In chapter 2, "Imagining The Good Writer: Moral Theories in the Writing Class," I review the moral theories that have most influenced ethical decision-making in Western culture, deontology, consequentialism, and, more recently, postmodernism. I argue that each theory presents a conception of the "good writer," but that each of these conceptions is, for different reasons, inadequate as the basis of an ethical rhetoric in the twenty-first century writing classroom. I conclude the chapter by calling for an expanded ethical vocabulary, which I locate in the tradition of the virtues.

In chapters 3 through 5, I discuss the virtues and virtue ethics. In chapter 3, "Habits of the Heart: Virtue and Virtue Ethics," I provide an introduction to virtue and virtue ethics, reviewing ancient and contemporary treatments of each term. I provide an introduction to Aristotle's theories of virtue, briefly consider neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and offer summaries of alternative accounts of virtue, including sentimentalist, feminist, non-Western, and applied virtue ethics. In this chapter, too, I address the "vices of virtue," or the association of virtue with the subjugation of women, with neo-conservative ideology, and with an exclusively, and therefore exclusionary, Christian doctrine. I argue that while each of these associations informs the understanding of virtue, they neither define nor foreclose its possibilities for teachers of writing.

In chapter 4, "Rhetorical Virtues: Toward an Ethics of Practice," I look more closely at the relationship of argument and the rhetorical virtues. I contend that teaching the practices of making claims, presenting evidence, addressing counterarguments, teaching revision inevitably and necessarily involves teachers and students in questions of truthfulness, accountability, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and other expressions of rhetorical virtue. I conclude by reflecting on how argument, typically conceived in terms of domination and control may be understood as an act of radical humility and community with others.

Chapter 5, "Teaching Rhetorical Virtues," offers strategies for discussing rhetorical virtue in the writing class. I offer the concepts of situation, naming, modeling, exemplars, and dissensus as means of stimulating ethical discussion in the writing class, and present examples of each for consideration. I emphasize in this chapter that discussions of rhetorical virtue can be accommodated within diverse approaches to teaching writing and do not require teachers to abandon closely held pedagogical commitments. Finally, I discuss the role of institutional

culture in promoting ethical rhetoric in a writing program, concluding with a "thought experiment" in which I imagine what it might mean if writing programs across the nation were committed to the teaching of rhetorical virtue.

The conclusion of the book, "Revisiting the Q Question," is a meditation on Richard Lanham's brilliant essay titled, after Quintilian, the "Q Question" (Lanham 1993). Is there, asks Lanham, a demonstrable connection between "specific reading and writing practices and the moral life"? (173). To put it another way, do good writing and speaking skills help us, as Quintilian assumed, become good people? And might that lead to a better, healthier public discourse? I argue that while colleges and universities continue to pose contemporary versions of the Q Question, we are no better able to answer it today than Quintilian was in ancient Rome. I suggest that the Q Question is for us the wrong question, and propose instead a different kind of question, which I term the "P Question," the answers to which, I propose, may help students and teachers of writing begin to repair the toxic discourse of contemporary culture while gaining a better understanding what it means to be a Good Writer in the twenty-first century.

So much for preliminaries. Let's begin.

NOTES

1. Who are "we"? "We" includes writing teachers, scholars, administrators, and anyone else reading this book.
2. I use the term Writing Studies to stand in for all designations of the discipline: Rhetoric and Composition, Composition Studies, and others. I choose this term over others as it seems to me the most inclusive designation of the work of writing teachers, scholars, administrators, and others concerned with writing and writing instruction.
3. See also, John Gage 2005. "In Pursuit of Rhetorical Virtue." *Lore*: 29–37.
4. I am grateful to Norbert Elliot for suggesting this phrase to me.
5. Of course, narrative and poems can also function as arguments.