



## **Beyond the Spectacle of Apologia**

### **Official Apologies as Proto-Deliberative Rhetoric and Instantiations of Rhetorical Citizenship**

Villadsen, Lisa Storm

*Published in:*  
Quarterly Journal of Speech

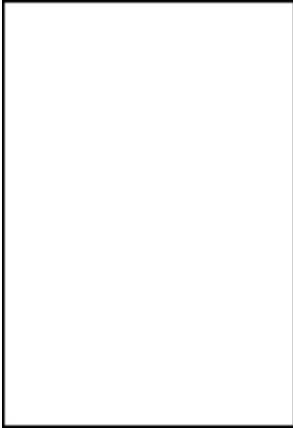
*DOI:*  
[10.1080/00335630.2012.663501](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2012.663501)

*Publication date:*  
2012

*Document version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Villadsen, L. S. (2012). Beyond the Spectacle of Apologia: Official Apologies as Proto-Deliberative Rhetoric and Instantiations of Rhetorical Citizenship. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 98(No. 2), 230-247.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2012.663501>

This article was downloaded by: [Copenhagen University Library]  
On: 23 April 2012, At: 02:41  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,  
UK



## Rhetoric Society Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrsq20>

### Speaking on Behalf of Others: Rhetorical Agency and Epideictic Functions in Official Apologies

Lisa Storm Villadsen <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Media, Cognition and  
Communication, Section of Rhetoric, Njalsgade,  
Copenhagen, Denmark

Available online: 08 Jul 2008

**To cite this article:** Lisa Storm Villadsen (2008): Speaking on Behalf of Others: Rhetorical Agency and Epideictic Functions in Official Apologies, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 38:1, 25-45

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773940701779769>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Speaking on Behalf of Others: Rhetorical Agency and Epideictic Functions in Official Apologies

Lisa Storm Villadsen

*The official apology is a discursive phenomenon with complex rhetorical significance and must be distinguished from the apologia. The main difference is that the official apology entails an element of regret and acknowledgement of wrongdoing that makes it an even more delicate rhetorical matter than the apologia—not least because it involves a collectivity such as a nation state. The symbolic nature of the assumption of guilt is therefore particularly clear. This article argues that official apologies, however circumscribed by public skepticism, nevertheless may serve important functions as loci for articulating the norms of a society at a given time. The article discusses how the official apology raises a host of issues concerning rhetorical agency and argues that this particular type of rhetoric is promising point of departure in the ongoing pedagogical and theoretical exploration of the concept of rhetorical agency. By integrating theories of epideictic rhetoric and of rhetorical agency, the complexity of the official apology is analyzed, and through a reading of an official apology by the Danish Prime minister, the essay examines how rhetorical agency is both established and undercut by the speaker.*

## Introduction

Official apologies—statements issued by an official on behalf of a public collective (such as a nation state or a government) to apologize for wrongful deeds done in the past—seem to make up a genre on the rise in the United States and worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Brooks calls our time “the Age of Apology” and

---

<sup>1</sup>Cunningham compiled recent examples and categorized them. Here are a few examples: Queen Elizabeth II, speaking for the Crown, apologized for the wrongs done to the Maoris of New Zealand in 1998, South Africa’s president F.W. de Klerk apologized in 1993 for the policies of the former apartheid system, the late Pope John Paul II expressed regret for failure of the Roman Catholics to do enough to prevent the Holocaust, and, in 1998, the Canadian government apologized to the indigenous people for decades of abuse at federally funded boarding schools that were part of the now-discredited assimilationist policy during the 1930s and ‘40s.

---

*Lisa Storm Villadsen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, Section of Rhetoric, Njalsgade 80, Copenhagen S 2300, Denmark. E-mail: lisas@hum.ku.dk*

claims that it is not just a fad or a result of sanctioned sentimentality (3). In fact, Brooks regards the official apology as a constructive gesture that combines guilt and sorrow and makes atonement and national rebirth possible. But in some cultural contexts, official apologies are also occasionally regarded with skepticism as a disingenuous measure serving purposes of political correctness, distraction, or other particular political agendas.<sup>2</sup> The official apology thus raises both pragmatic and theoretical questions.

As an “apology-by-proxy,” as Harter, Stephens, and Japp call it (29), the official apology is indeed a curious rhetorical phenomenon involving a speaker apologizing, on behalf of a group, for something neither the speaker nor the vast majority of the group did—often to a group of people who, while representative, were not among those originally wronged. The focus of this article is on how the apologetic and epideictic traits of the official apology can help explain the role of rhetorical agency in this kind of utterance. It is argued that epideictic theory is a valuable resource for conceptualizing the rhetorical agency at play in official apologies and also may serve in the defense of this rhetorical form as a site of public ethical reflection. Because an official apology implies a symbolic collective assumption of responsibility, it provides us with a constructive angle from which to examine the nature of the speaker’s rhetorical mandate to pronounce an official apology. Pronounced in collective terms and on controversial topics, the official apology likewise provides situated material from which to begin rhetorical investigation of a community’s understanding of its collective norms at a given time.

In the first section of the article, I develop the interconnection between the concept of rhetorical agency, official apologies, and theory of epideictic rhetoric. This critical framework is then applied in a reading of a May 2005 ceremonial speech given by Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen that included an apology for wrongful actions committed against German refugees by Danish officials during the Nazi occupation 1940–45. This reading illustrates how an official apology was woven into a ceremonial speech and considers the ways in which rhetorical agency is actualized in this connection.

Rasmussen’s speech is notable because it was the first official apology presented publicly by a Danish government representative and, although the nature of the apology itself clearly resonated with the majority of Danes,

---

<sup>2</sup>In an interview in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, psychologist Svend Brinkmann thus regards the official apology as a paradoxical phenomenon arguing that forgiveness is personal and cannot be obtained collectively or by fiat just because an elected official issues an apology (Surrugue).

the prime minister's all but explicit framing of it in terms of a contemporary political issue made the speech controversial. From a theoretical perspective, the speech thus raises questions about what the rhetorical agency of an official apologist rests on and how it may be challenged. Moreover, Rasmussen's statement is also notable by virtue of its self-reflexivity with regard to his rhetorical agency. Ironically, Rasmussen's efforts to create a speaking position for himself turned out to be at best ambiguous, and in the eyes of some Danes, they threatened to undermine his credibility as an official apologist speaking for the community.

### Rhetorical Agency and Official Apologies

The concept of rhetorical agency is an important and contested term in rhetorical theory. It is important because in Hauser's words it "raises questions of voice, power, and rights, which place it at the center of this era's major social, political, economic, and cultural issues ("Introduction" 183). Agency is also contested because of its "chameleon-like quality [. . . circulating] among different intellectual traditions, generating questions, methodological considerations, and levels of analysis" (186).<sup>3</sup> Hoff-Clausen, Isager, and Villadsen state that rhetorical agency focuses on the constellation of individual and structural aspects that in the interaction between the speaking agent and the situational conditions are relevant for rhetorical meaning making and action (57). Geisler observes that the concept spans questions regarding the instrumental aspects of rhetoric as well as social, institutional, political, cultural, and other factors conditioning a speaker's access to speaking and being heard (12–13).

Three contributions to the theorizing of rhetorical agency in particular have inspired the conceptualization that frames this discussion. All three focus attention on what I take to be central aspects: the fluid nature of rhetorical agency, the collective nature of rhetorical meaning making, and the interdependence of the speaker, the audience, and historical as well as physical conditions.<sup>4</sup> Clarke's call for a focus on the way rhetorical agency allows and constitutes inter-subjective speech, "creating and performing the potentials of language and reason in particular situations and processes of invention, thought, and choice" underscores the communal aspect of the

<sup>3</sup>The understanding of the term was thus a theme in itself at the 2003 ARS conference. See ensuing contributions in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly. Philosophy and Rhetoric* dedicated a special issue to the theme (37, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>All three were presented at the ARS conference in 2003 in the form of brief position papers.

concept. Herndl's thinking of rhetorical agency as "contingent on a matrix of material and social conditions" and as "a social location into and out of which social subjects move uncertainly" is helpful because of its recognition of the dependency of rhetoric on outside factors. Finally, in this article I respond to Lucaites's call to "begin by identifying the wide range of ways in which the modalities of action are constituted and implicated in particular rhetorical performances."<sup>5</sup>

Recently, Lundberg and Gunn's reaction to Geisler's report from the ARS conference challenged current thinking on the nature and role of rhetorical agency. They argue that there is a tendency among rhetoricians to speak of rhetorical agency in terms of "possession," said to be problematic because it reifies rhetorical agency into "a quantifiable ectoplasm" that can be possessed and even transferred from one agent to another (89). This is closely connected with another main point in the authors' critique of Geisler and others. When we speak of rhetorical agency as something that can be possessed, we are prone to get trapped in the very mode of thinking that the concept was first conceived as an antidote for—namely, a relationship between agent and agency resembling a more traditional modern understanding of the autonomous subject and his or her more or less instrumental use of rhetoric. Lundberg and Gunn seek to destabilize the assumed link between rhetorical effect and rhetorical agent, and they propose a reframing of the question "in terms of subjectivity and effect" (88–89). Moreover, by means of the happy Ouija board metaphor, the invocation of the concept of "ontotheology," and the flippant talk of "ectoplasm," the two authors suggest that much of the discussion of rhetorical agency has an almost metaphysical aura about it that is misguided, even naïve (89).

Yet, even if we concede Lundberg and Gunn's charge that the general discussion of rhetorical agency has its share of jargon, that does not force us to accept the authors' radically "hospitable" conceptualization of rhetorical agency as something that "possesses" an agent. Where they see an unproductive element of "ontotheology" in rhetorical theory and criticism, I suggest a focus on the need, especially in pedagogical contexts, for more accessible discussions of rhetorical agency in rhetorical criticism. Moreover, even if some of the theoretical discussion about rhetorical agency repeats traditional thoughts on rhetoric in a new vocabulary, this does not necessarily undercut its significance. Rather, it may promote the accessibility of new ideas to students and researchers alike by virtue of moving from the familiar to the

<sup>5</sup>All references to position papers are from [www.comm.umn.edu/ARS/](http://www.comm.umn.edu/ARS/). This link is no longer active, but information about the 2003 ARS conference is available at [www.rhetoricalalliance.org/](http://www.rhetoricalalliance.org/).

unfamiliar. Thus, I maintain that by studying rhetorical agency as it is played out in fairly familiar rhetorical forms (such as official apologies) and from a perspective of classically based theory (such as contemporary thinking on epideictic rhetoric), we stand to enhance our understanding of the concept as it is applied in specific acts of rhetorical criticism. Although the result is not meant to lead to a complete definition of rhetorical agency, this interpretive component of rhetorical criticism may indeed contribute to the kind of “conceptual thickening” Leff observes when “theoretical precepts [. . .] are vibrated against the particular case and are instantiated in an explanation of it” (347).

Several reasons recommend the rhetoric of official apologies as promising material for examining aspects of rhetorical agency. First, the growing incidence of this type of utterance attests to a common perception that discourse can indeed affect strained human relations. From this perspective, rhetoric’s potential for action seems to be both recognized and actualized in the official apology. Second, the fact that the speaking agent rarely has any personal responsibility for the wrongful deed (but by way of institutional position must give expression to an apology) highlights questions of rhetorical agency with respect to issues of representation and personal commitment. Finally, the growing number of official apologies may indicate that rhetorical agency is seeing more widespread instantiation. Groups formerly barred from voicing their needs and wishes publicly have increasing success in gaining public hearing and in demanding recognition of their suffering as caused by past policies. This way, such groups obtain rhetorical agency insofar as they acquire a speaking position from which to promote reevaluation of past policies as suppressive, racist, or otherwise condemnable and thereby effect change.<sup>6</sup> Together, these aspects bring to attention the dynamic between

---

<sup>6</sup>This is Cunningham’s point when he writes that: “the greater emphasis on the concepts of community or cultural identity (which is not to say that these are not slippery terms) may not only involve considerations about constitutional structures or other policies, such as affirmative action, but may also facilitate or encourage a politics of apology that, as I argued earlier, can reflect a recognition of, and sensitivity toward, both past wrongs and their contemporary resonances” (292–293).

Another aspect of the dissemination of rhetorical agency concerns the relation between the speaker/the apologizing institution and the victims of the misdeed. With what right does the speaker presume to put into words other people’s hardship and suffering? Does one risk trivializing or in other ways distorting the authentic, individual experience as Harter, Stephens, and Japp suggest (29–30)? Rollins approached some of these questions in analyses of funeral orations by Jacques Derrida. She shed light on a central challenge in epideictic rhetoric, namely the question of how one, in an ethically defensible manner, can speak “the other,” that is, one’s fellow human being in all his or her inviolable and fundamental authenticity. Rollins points to Rosenfield’s phenomenological view on rhetoric as a place to begin. More work needs to be done in the exploration of this representational aspect of rhetorical agency.



the speaker, the audience, and the context in official apologies, a dynamic thematized in epideictic theory. Before I discuss the potential for epideictic theory as a valuable resource for conceptualizing rhetorical agency in official apologies and as way to explain the genre as a site of public ethical reflection, a few comments on the nature of the official apology as a subgenre are in order.

In their 1973 landmark article on the rhetoric of self-defense, Ware and Linkugel presented apologia as a genre and suggested a terminology for the factors and modes speakers may employ in self-defense with the aim of restoring their personal public image. Downey has since shown that the genre has developed significantly since antiquity (42). The official apology resembles the individual's apologia in that it is also a response to criticism and that it aims at restoring strained relations. But on two points the official apology differs from the personal: it is presented on behalf of a collective, and it acknowledges wrongdoing—thereby recognizing censure as appropriate. An important distinction also needs to be made between apologiae presented in one's own name—what we might call *personal apologiae*—and apologiae presented in a public collective's name (such as a nation-state)—what we might call *official apologies*. Koesten and Rowland found that rhetoric intended to apologize for wrongdoing comprises a particular subgenre of apologia, namely what they term “the rhetoric of atonement” and characterized the function of this kind of utterance as “purgative-redemptive,” that is, serving as a symbolic gesture where the speaker wipes the slate clean and establishes the ground for a new beginning that can restore balance and health in the community (69–71).<sup>7</sup> They also suggested that ordinary apologia strategies are irrelevant when guilt is indisputable, and that the subgenre therefore calls for very different responses than the personal apologia studied by Ware and Linkugel. This is also the view of Harter, Stephens, and Japp who found Ware and Linkugel's terminology unsuited to capture the essence of publicly ritualized institutional apologia (23).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>I will not go into an examination of Rasmussen's speech according to the five requirements to genuine atonement rhetoric forwarded by Koesten and Rowland, but merely suggest that the speech lives up to them with the possible exception of the need for proof of “mortification.” One possible explanation for the lack of concrete suggestions aimed at avoiding a similar problem in the future may be tied to the constraints of the situation. For example, a discussion of Denmark's policy on refugees would displace the focus of the ceremony. Koesten and Rowland also mention that where expectations regarding mortification are clear when it comes to personally responsible speakers, a nation or an organization's expression of mortification may lie more in the choice of words and not least reparation showing that one will compensate for/prevent repetition of the sins of the past (74).

<sup>8</sup>Hearit has argued that corporate apology represents yet a type of apology that warrants special consideration.

Koesten and Rowland's analysis of the subgenre is both succinct and persuasive, but instead of calling this kind of utterance "rhetoric of atonement," I prefer *official apology* for several reasons. This term is a more neutral and thus more inclusive term, whereas by highlighting that specific function as characteristic of the genre "the rhetoric of atonement" may overlook other functions. The term atonement also carries strong religious connotations that may not be appropriate in communities with traditions regarding the position of civic religion in the public sphere different from those in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Thus I maintain that to understand Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's apology in terms of atonement may be misleading. Rather, his statement might be seen as an official acknowledgment of an intolerable inconsistency in Denmark's treatment of Jews in the past—in itself a painful acknowledgement to make, but not involving the level of personal involvement and contrition suggested by the term atonement.<sup>10</sup> In my reading, the prime minister's apology amounts to an act of "mortification" in Koesten and Rowland's terminology by seeking to confirm Denmark's commitment to freedom of religion and non-discriminatory policies toward minorities and denouncing official actions in violation of these principles. In this respect, he successfully gave expression to his audience's sentiments and helped strengthen collective commitment to humanistic values such as protection of innocent individuals. But nothing in the speech indicates a desire to do more than that as the notion of atonement would imply. Indeed, as we shall see, there were issues relating to Rasmussen's ethos and political commentary that destabilize his rhetorical agency when it comes to atoning for the wrongdoing of the past. To explain how these problems arise, we need to further develop the triangulation between official apologies, the concept of rhetorical agency, and contemporary epideictic theory.

### Epideictic Theory and Rhetorical Agency in Official Apologies

Theory on epideictic is particularly useful in analyzing questions regarding rhetorical agency as it concerns the role of language in relation to creating, maintaining, or questioning communal values. The symbolic importance

---

<sup>9</sup>While Koesten and Rowland's use of the term initially seems inspired by Kenneth Burke, whose use of it was not linked to a particular faith, their article explicitly invokes Jewish scripture and practice, thus making the religious connotations prominent. In an article discussing official apologia in an Israeli context, Liebersohn, Neuman, and Bekerman point to an explicit rule against apologia in the Jewish tradition and thus severely problematize a transfer of the concept of atonement from a religious to a secular context (928).

<sup>10</sup>Whereas Danish Jews in many cases were aided in fleeing Nazi persecution during WWII, such protection was not given to German Jews and Communists seeking refuge in Denmark.

of language is especially noticeable in epideictic rhetoric, and by virtue of its performative functions it is a particularly clear illustration that rhetoric in itself is a form of action and as such implies a form of agency. To elaborate on the way epideictic rhetoric can illuminate the rhetoric of official apologies, I engage three theorists who have made valuable contributions to this idea. Both Oravec and Hauser emphasize the significant function vested in the speaker's ability to give expression to shared norms on behalf of the audience. Beale, however, is more interested in the performative aspects of epideictic.

Oravec analyzes Aristotle's discussion of the role of audience in relation to epideictic speeches and concludes that there is more to the concept of *theoroi* (the term used by Aristotle to refer to the listeners of the epideictic message) than merely passive observation and entertainment. Here, I focus on Oravec's interest in the dialectical relation between the speaker and audience; if the speaker does not present the topic in a manner that resonates with the audience, his or her credibility will suffer (163). The speaker must obviously have a clear understanding of the values and experiences of the audience. The challenge lies in formulating these such that they ring true to the audience—explicating or visualizing what otherwise may only exist on an unspoken level. To the extent that the speaker is able to express the norms and values consistent with the audience's experience, he or she will establish a ground for insight into shared social, cultural, or ethical values among the audience (171).<sup>11</sup>

Hauser, too, argues that a significant function of the epideictic genre is to create a frame of understanding for the interpretation of reality ("Aristotle" 5). He stresses the pedagogical and thereby socially significant aspect of Aristotle's treatment of epideictic rhetoric:

Aristotle's notion of a properly ordered rhetoric assumes that responsible persuasion translates the theoretical contents of politics into the praxis of statescraft and citizenship. [...] In this respect, then, epideictic occupies a unique place in celebrating the deeds of exemplars who set the tone for civic community and the encomiast serves an equally unique role as a teacher of civic virtue. (14)

Hauser underscores the didactic aspect of epideictic rhetoric, suggesting that it "can educate us in the vocabulary of civic virtues that may constitute citizens as an active public, and communicate principles on which responsible citizenship may be based and a vibrant public sphere can thrive" (20).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>See also Sullivan.

<sup>12</sup>Jasinski, too, mentions that several theorists, among them Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, have worked with a much more nuanced conception of the genre and pointed to its massive significance as basis for political rhetoric because its primary function is to gain adherence to values that later make up the grounds for action (210).

While Beale is also interested in the way the speaker together with the audience explores the normative basis of the community, his focus is on the situational and performative aspects of the epideictic encounter. He finds inspiration in J. L. Austin's speech act theory and emphasizes as the most characteristic trait of the epideictic genre that, "The epideictic or 'rhetorical performative' act is one that participates in the reality to which it refers" (226). Beale's point is that the epideictic genre exists in the present in a more complex manner than other rhetorical utterances that primarily concern something outside them.<sup>13</sup> He thus makes the observation regarding the anchoring of epideictic rhetoric in a concrete situation that, "Epideictic performances tend to be informed by the 'present' in very special ways, often taking their very subjects and forms from the 'present' actions or ceremonies in which they are embedded, and often serving to [...] assess] 'where we are now' as a community" (223).

Official apologies provide a touchstone for a given community concerning the values and norms that characterize it. Unlike the personal apologia, where the nature and degree of wrongdoing is typically contested, the official apology in effect acknowledges wrongdoing, and the rhetorical act is meant to demonstrate one's recognition of the error, assumption of responsibility, and moral distancing from the act.<sup>14</sup> Whereas many theorists take an interest in epideictic rhetoric as a site of profiling the positive norms and values of a community, I also see the official apology as an instantiation of contemporary epideictic rhetoric of censure because it condemns a certain behavior or certain values and it invites the audience to distance themselves from such acts or beliefs. Via a public recognition of a breach of particular norms, the official apology constitutes a renewed statement of commitment to those norms as it distances itself from their antidote. By explicating, possibly reformulating, a normative groundwork, the official apology marks a symbolic transfer from one understanding of the collective self to another—strengthened through the acknowledgement of fault and vitalized through renewed ethical commitment. This potential to reflect the values of a community at a given time is what I see as the most interesting aspect of official apologies. At once a site of reflection and a mode of rhetorical action,

<sup>13</sup>Beale tentatively defines a "rhetorical performative" as "the composed and more or less unified act of rhetorical discourse which does not merely say, argue, or allege something about the world of social action, but which constitutes (in some special way defined by the conventions or customs of a community) a significant social action in itself. [...] The performative rhetorical act participates in actions, and in doing so may be appropriate or inappropriate, seemly or unseemly" (225).

<sup>14</sup>It seems that narrative strategies often replace or supplement more formal argumentation. See, for example, Achter and Harter, Stephens, and Japp.

official apologies more concretely than most genres tell us what to avoid and what to strive for.

### Rhetorical Agency as Mandate in Official Apologies

My purpose in bringing theories of rhetorical agency and epideictic rhetoric together in a discussion of official apologies is to highlight the special nature of the relationship between the speaker and the audience in this kind of rhetorical interaction. In the following, I shall discuss this in terms of mandate. The official speaker has an institutionally sanctioned speaking position, but this also depends on the dialectical relation between the speaker and the audience on whose behalf he or she presents the apology. The nature of the rhetorical agency of the speaker of official apologies is thus significantly influenced by the consubstantiality he or she has with the audience. A speaker unable to gauge and give expression to common sentiment will fail to achieve the consubstantiality with the audience necessary for the mandate to apologize on their behalf. If the speaker ignores or violates the norms and values of the listeners, the apology may be judged empty or disingenuous and the speaker's mandate null.<sup>15</sup> The speaker's handling of the mandate from the audience is thus critical to the apology's credibility.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this delicate interdependence where the speaker's rhetorical agency relies on the audience's willingness as a group to assume the responsibility for wrongful actions committed by individuals in the past, a particular challenge lies in theorizing the relation between the speaker and those who actually committed the wrongful act—some of whom may be among the audience and thus implicitly form a part of the mandating public. A central question is to what extent an apologist can be regarded as speaking on their behalf as well. Assuming that the apologist successfully gauges the general audience's sentiments and, speaking on behalf of the community, condemns the actions of the past, what significance does a possible lack of contrition on the part of the persons who committed the act have for the speaker's rhetorical agency? Does their potential disapproval of the apology undermine its

<sup>15</sup>With regard to the performative aspects of official apology, there may also be some conditions regarding the constitution of the audience, for example, that it should count both individuals representing the harmed party and the perpetrators' group to witness the pronouncement of the apology for it to be "official." For example, when former President Clinton offered an official apology for the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, survivors of the experiment and their families were present at the ceremony in Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup>See Sullivan (126–127). Harter, Stephens and Japp call for more systematic discussion of audience reactions in the evaluation of the apologetic rhetoric.

force, or does the majority have the right to overrule subgroup dissent? In answering these questions, Koesten and Rowland's conditions of sincerity and mortification as a litmus test of the rhetoric of atonement do not suffice, for even if the speaker is personally sincere and has community and institutional support in issuing the apology, that may not reflect regret on the part of those who were personally responsible. To the extent they or their family and descendants are still a part of the collectivity in whose name the apology is given (for example, as citizens in a state or former employees of a corporation), there may be a discrepancy between their understanding of the issue and the official rendition of it.<sup>17</sup> Such mandate deficit may undermine the speaker's rhetorical agency in the eyes of those who hear themselves being criticized publicly by an official speaker as well as those apologized to. Likewise, a lack of contrition on the part of the historically responsible parties, if disclosed, may feed public skepticism of official apologies. Similarly, an official apology risks being met with the suspicion that it was strategically motivated and meant to serve purposes of distraction or window-dressing, as opposed to an opportunity to make statements of a moral nature and to boost the credibility of the responsible institution. This kind of skepticism may be expected in a political culture where "spin-doctors" are credited with increasing strategic and even political influence. But when objections are based in considerations inspired by speech act theory, they may be countered. An important distinction here is that the official apology is not given in the name of particular individuals, but in the name of a collective—be it a government or some other organization. This distinction is well made in Kiss's differentiation between "collective guilt" and "collective responsibility" in a study of a public controversy in Hungary. She argued that:

collective guilt involves a judgment concerning a direct causal link between the guilty person and a condemnable deed. Collective responsibility in the sense meant here, by contrast, makes no such claim. Rather, it consists of two parts. The first is an honest acknowledgement that a wrong was done by members of a group with which I identify, and that this wrong was committed, in some sense, in the group's name. The second is appropriate action in light of the acknowledged misdeed. (392)

Kiss's point is that collective responsibility does not hold individuals causally accountable for things they did not do. But taking on responsibility collectively means that persons who identify with a group are willing to be held

---

<sup>17</sup>This sort of protest is documented in Kiss' study of the controversy caused by Hungarian President Göncz's official apology to victims of racist inspired violence (396).

accountable for the future moral and political development of their community. The official apology thus commits the community rather than the causally responsible individuals. Hence, it means less if the Danish officials who turned away refugees from Nazi Germany personally regret these actions. The main thing is that contemporary Danish society acknowledges the wrongful nature of these acts and commits itself to avoiding similar instances in the future. Kiss's argument is critical as she suggests the wider, cultural significance of collective memory and official apologies. If members of a community are not willing to bear this responsibility together, Kiss suggests "self-serving myths of innocence and one-sided tales of victimization can dominate images of the nation and strangle serious and open public debate on moral issues" (392). My previous point about epideictic theory's relevance for official apologies may confirm and elaborate Kiss's point in more positive terms; the official apology may be regarded as a way for a community to deal with issues of moral, legal, or political misconduct and move on. A key function of the official apology thus lies in its potential to create a rhetorical space for reflecting on the values of a community at a particular moment in time.

To illustrate the complex rhetorical nature of official apologies, I now turn to a speech given in 2005 by Danish Prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen.<sup>18</sup> Rasmussen's speech illustrates characteristic traits of official apologies but it also gives the critic occasion to reflect on his rhetorical agency and the significance hereof for the overall commemorative purpose of the speech.

### The Prime Minister's Apology

2005 was the sixtieth anniversary of the end of WWII and thus also of Denmark's liberation from the wartime occupation. In Denmark, the liberation is commemorated every year on the 4th of May with a ceremony held at Mindelunden ("Memorial Grove"), Copenhagen to mark the anniversary of the 4 May 1945, BBC evening radio broadcast announcing that German troops had surrendered. Because of the 60-year anniversary, the commemoration was given special attention in 2005, and prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke at the ceremony. In attendance were

---

<sup>18</sup>An official statement by a prime minister may not seem the most likely candidate to push the limits of our understanding of how rhetorical agency is constituted and manifested. As Geisler points out, the concept of rhetorical agency seems to have made the most headway in studies of the rhetoric of subaltern and other traditionally silenced groups (10–11). Nevertheless, I suggest that it may be a constructive starting point for appreciating aspects of the official apology.

representatives of the Royal family, former resistance members and their descendants, as well as invited British war veterans who participated in the Allied forces' arrival in Denmark in May 1945. The area of Ryvangen, where Mindelunden is located, was used by the Nazis as an execution site for Danish resistance members. As such it provided an appropriate setting for the prime minister's message acknowledging what he called the "courageous acts" of the resistance members.<sup>19</sup> He also thanked them for "saving Denmark's honor" and for "secur[ing] the self respect of the Danish people."<sup>20</sup>

The prime minister's speech was in many ways a typical ceremonial speech—employing traditional strategies such as the use of examples and amplification to praise the individuals who were the focus of the ceremony. Embedded in this epideictic speech, however, we also find elements of a different genre: the official apology. Over the course of four paragraphs, Rasmussen discussed the role of Danish authorities in the mistreatment of Jewish refugees seeking protection in Denmark from Nazi persecution. He also made note of other innocent people whom the Danish authorities, according to Rasmussen, expelled "to suffering and death in concentration camps" and "abandoned to an uncertain fate in the hands of the Nazi regime." The prime minister called the Danish authorities' actions "shameful events" and a "stain on the [...] otherwise good reputation of Denmark." He continued, "I therefore want [...] on behalf of the government and thereby of the Danish state to regret and apologize for these deeds."

The speech caught public interest for several reasons. The mere fact that the prime minister included an official apology was notable as there is virtually no precedent for official apologies in the history of Danish government rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the very thought of criticizing Denmark's

---

<sup>19</sup>By means of five named personal examples, the prime minister portrayed the breath in social background and ages among resistance members and emphasized the personal suffering they all went through, most of them with fatal consequences. Through a series of antithetical phrases, the prime minister underscored the courageous and noble initiative in mounting active resistance, for example: "They did not worry about what would be useful but about what was truthful. They did not just take care of themselves. They took action. They gave their lives for our freedom."

<sup>20</sup>All translations from Rasmussen's speech are the author's own.

<sup>21</sup>One possible exception is former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's apology to the indigenous people of Thule, Greenland for the 1953 expropriation of their hunting territory and forced relocation to make room for an American air base. The Danish government repeatedly declined to apologize for the relocation until, following a court case that decided that the relocation was forced, the Danish prime minister gave an apology in a private telephone conversation with the president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) Aqaluk Lyng, on 2 September 1998 in which he uttered the Inuit word for "I'm sorry," *utatserquatserpunga*. The prime minister also issued a written statement saying, "On behalf of the Danish state I apologize to the Inuit, the population of Thule, and to the whole population of Greenland for the way the decision about the move was taken and carried out" ([www.nunatsiaq.com](http://www.nunatsiaq.com)).



treatment of Jews during the occupation is quite controversial to a nation accustomed to a virtually unchallenged collective memory of the Danes as protectors of Danish Jews.<sup>22</sup> Of additional note, the prime minister's speech was seen as using the celebration of the resistance during WWII to bolster his own government's policy of supporting the war in Iraq. Many Danes who agreed with the prime minister's apology to the mistreated Jewish refugees felt that he misused the occasion and the public support for the apology as well as the more general ceremonial occasion to gather political support for Denmark's unpopular participation in the war in Iraq. In this way, they felt that Rasmussen implicitly made a controversial shift from an epideictic to a deliberative message. In the following paragraphs I will show how the prime minister's problematic ethos in relation to the ceremonial part of the speech negatively influenced his rhetorical agency as an official apologist in the same speech.

At first glance, Rasmussen's position as an elected official would seem enough to warrant the representative rhetorical function of the speech; as prime minister he would be expected to speak on the nation's behalf. Regardless of the uncontested nature of his speaking position, Rasmussen nevertheless made several references to his own role in relation to the situation and to the inherent message of the speech. These comments rather succinctly thematize some basic requirements for the constitution of rhetorical agency. For example, early on in the speech Rasmussen commented on his personal relationship to the situation: "I did not experience the occupation and liberation myself. But it moves me deeply to stand among these graves. It is overwhelming to think of the many fates behind the names on the gravestones." Here, Rasmussen responded to a perceived expectation of personal involvement. To compensate for his lack of personal experience with these events, he showed an emotional reaction to the surroundings and to the occasion. Although these comments were presented to solidify his speaking position, we shall later see how they also may be used to problematize the basis of his rhetorical agency in this situation.

Once he had established a personal emotional connection, Rasmussen actually used his elected office as his main access to rhetorical agency, taking on the role as spokesperson for Denmark through phrases such as "Tonight we must not forget," "In Denmark we may not forget," "Denmark will never forget," "Tonight we remember all the freedom fighters who gave their lives so that we may live in freedom, peace and progress," and "We are deeply

---

<sup>22</sup>The vast majority of Danish Jews escaped Nazi persecution thanks to help from other Danes who hid them and helped them flee to Sweden hidden in the bottom of fishing boats crossing the sound at night.

indebted to them.” Similarly, in the passages of the speech concerning the official apology, he proposed a collective rather than an individual, personal recognition of the misdeed: “Worse is that we, today, know that Danish authorities in some instances contributed to the expulsion of people to suffering and death in concentration camps.”<sup>23</sup> Stating that “recollection of the dark sides of the occupation” is a “necessary part” of the marking of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation, Rasmussen used his position as prime minister to assign the responsibility for remembering to the Danish people in the form of collective memory.

Significantly, as he turned to the discussion of the resistance members’ sacrifices, Rasmussen transcended these personal, collective, and historical levels and framed the discussion by means of a distinction between, in his words, “what is right and what is wrong.” By reframing the issue of political and military resistance as a moral imperative, the prime minister circumvented possible objections to his perceived lack of personal and historical connection with the topic and instead re-inscribed it as a timeless, ethical issue. In this move, I see Rasmussen negotiating his rhetorical agency from one of relatively limited and predictable ceremonial significance to one of greater moral and political scope. Reframing the issue of the occupation era government’s policy in this way allowed Rasmussen greater rhetorical scope than to just commemorate. Through the moral framing, Rasmussen was able to forcefully disclaim the events of the past without immediately opening himself to charges of simply giving expression to hindsight.

Rasmussen’s high level of self-reflexivity concerning the various aspects of his speaking position, and the fact that he so explicitly anchored his rhetorical agency in time and place as well as on moral grounds, suggests that these matters are crucial to the agency of the speech. This is all the more clear from the fact that the prime minister implicitly raised the question of rhetorical agency. Commenting on its value as a speech act he remarked: “An apology cannot change history. But it can serve to acknowledge historical mistakes. So that current and coming generations hopefully will avoid similar mistakes in the future.” This self-reflexive remark speaks to the symbolic significance associated with an official apology from a state leader. Rasmussen’s comments concerning the rhetorical agency of his statement of apology and its careful wording (“I therefore want . . . on behalf of the government and thereby the Danish state to regret and apologize for these actions”) suggest an eagerness to signal sincerity and forestall possible

---

<sup>23</sup>Rasmussen compares this knowledge to thinking “of the victims of the resistance fight who did not even get a proper grave.”

criticism for paying lip service or eschewing moral responsibility.<sup>24</sup> There are, however, at least two issues that complicate the rhetorical agency of the prime minister's official apology: one regards the apology's placement in the context of a speech of praise of the Resistance; the other is the connection to the prime minister's political agenda as a whole.

First, with regard to the context of the apology, it would arguably have lent the expression of remorse more weight had it been presented in an independent statement and not just worked into an otherwise relatively uncontroversial context. Second, the apology was interpreted as somewhat undercut by the prime minister's political agenda in general, and especially with his other public statements regarding that era. As we have seen, offering an official apology implies an assumption of responsibility for actions one does not condone for the sake of the future civic health of the community. But Rasmussen's speech illustrates that there may be limits to how much one can criticize others and then symbolically take responsibility for their actions. The possibility of creating the basic identification between the speaker and the guilty group to make the assumption of collective responsibility credible may be seriously weakened if the speaker has previously denounced the guilty group more generally and thereby distanced himself or herself from it. In Rasmussen's case, he had already from the beginning of the year been a harsh critic of the so-called Cooperation Government<sup>25</sup> that had sanctioned the Danish authorities' actions during the occupation. In fact, Rasmussen criticized the policies of the "Cooperation Government" again in a speech the day after the ceremony at Mindelunden.<sup>26</sup> Rasmussen's disavowal of the policy of the occupation-era government combined with his

---

<sup>24</sup>It would thus seem that he does not just leave it at *regretting* (which involves a lesser degree of personal responsibility and mortification), but successfully completes the speech act of *apologizing*. Moreover, he preempts predictable criticism that an apology cannot undo the wrongs of the past by expressing the wish that the apology will not only have an influence on contemporary understanding of the occupation of Denmark but also may serve as inspiration for a more proper behavior in the future.

<sup>25</sup>The government in place at the time of the German occupation is often referred to as the "Cooperation Government" due to its decision to work with the Nazi occupation force in order to secure as much influence as possible and in the hope that such cooperation would be beneficial to the Danish people.

<sup>26</sup>He addressed this issue in a speech given the next day, 5 May 2005 at the Town Hall of Copenhagen to an audience including veterans from the resistance movement and politicians in the city government ([www.statsministeriet.dk](http://www.statsministeriet.dk)). The prime minister's criticism of the cooperation government had been controversial. He was criticized for showing a lack of appreciation of the difficult political dilemmas of the occupation period, for being full of hindsight, and perhaps worst of all, for exploiting the liberation anniversary as an opportunity to justify his own decision to let Denmark participate as a U.S. ally in what to many Danes was perceived as an illegal war in Iraq. See also Bryld.

sharp distinction between right and wrongful deeds during the occupation in effect distanced him from those actions. In light of this distance, the question presents itself of how much of the responsibility for the wrongful deeds he really showed himself and his cabinet willing to assume: He might *regret* the turning away of Jewish refugees, but given his general moral disapproval of the historically responsible government, the question remained to many Danes whether he had rhetorically distanced himself so much from those historically responsible parties that his appeal to both collective and institutional responsibility implicit in the apology did not sound sincere. This may in the end be a matter of political opinion, but a closer look at the speech shows that Rasmussen arguably paved the way for this criticism himself.

We saw earlier that Rasmussen framed his comments on the events of WWII in terms of right and wrong; he condemned the decision of the cooperation government to work with the Nazi occupation forces and applauded the resistance members' efforts to combat the occupation. To a contemporary Danish audience, it was clear that Rasmussen saw an analogy between the political dilemmas of WWII and those of the war in Iraq and that he felt that under his leadership, Denmark had done the morally right thing by joining the Allied forces in the war in Iraq. Whereas Rasmussen characterized his own government's policy as based in morally correct judgment in contrast to what he regarded as the cooperation government's opportunistic deferral of protest against Nazi Germany, many Danes were less sure of Rasmussen's alleged higher moral ground considering Denmark's participation in the war in Iraq—a war believed by many to be illegal. To some listeners, Rasmussen's support of the war in Iraq thus presented a problem to his credibility as spokesperson for a nation allegedly sensitive to the suffering of victims of wartime crimes and thereby undermined the moral force of an apology issued by him.

The case of Rasmussen's apology suggests that there may be limits as to how much distance—historical, political, personal, and moral—there can be between the person issuing the apology and the historically responsible party. In other words, the smaller the speaker's degree of identification with the responsible party, the less committing it may be to apologize officially for their actions. The guilty may be publicly criticized, but by keeping the issue at arm's length, the speaker belies the intensity of the collective responsibility taken, and the symbolic power of mortification is thus diminished. In such circumstances an official apology may risk losing credibility. In Rasmussen's case, his enjoinder of the audience to assume moral responsibility for the actions of a former government stands to lose ethical and rhetorical force to listeners cognizant of his own moral disassociation from that government.

## Implications

I have suggested that the rhetoric of official apologies is a promising locus for examining the concept of rhetorical agency, and that the concept of rhetorical agency in turn is useful in explaining certain functions of official apologies. Further I have suggested that epideictic theory can offer a theoretical frame for conceptualizing the interplay of speaker, subject, and context in official apologies in terms of rhetorical agency. One implication of my discussion is that it allows us to recognize several aspects of rhetorical agency in the genre of official apologies, among these the question of mandate and the functions of mortification and atonement. Further, I wish to point to the cultural significance I see in manifestations of rhetorical agency in official apologies. As my discussion of the relevance of epideictic theory has shown, the official apology may provide a site for evaluating action in terms of a culture or a community's norms and values and thereby recommitting the community to certain values and norms. The discourse of official apologies is interesting to rhetorical critics because it offers insight into the values and social motives prevalent in a society at a given time by inviting "individuals to evaluate the communities or institutions to which they belong, their own roles within them, and the roles and responsibilities of their fellow constituents, including their leaders" (Sheard 771). Further, by viewing the rhetoric of official apologies in an epideictic perspective, we come closer to being able to answer questions of what kind of rhetorical agency official apologies call for and are characterized by. Although the official apology in many ways can be regarded as a genre that looks back and brings closure, I suggest that it also has an element of constructive orientation toward the future. This way it holds a potential for facilitating a measure of rhetorical agency for the auditors, too: it invites reflection on society's norms and the individual's stance in relation hereto.<sup>27</sup> As such the official apology represents a mode of reflection on the norms of society, perhaps a recollection of values that in Sheard's words "may have been forgotten, and so the disparity between existing and desired conditions becomes the subject of critique" (779), but potentially also a recommitment to values fit to inspire future collective action. Thus, the official apology may be a site of rhetorical agency for its

<sup>27</sup>Sheard discusses a similar potential in more traditional ceremonial speaking. She asks how epideictic discourse, traditionally conceptualized as not being connected to immediate action in the world, can motivate social, political, or other ideological change. Her answer is found in instances of epideictic rhetoric that arguably involves an element of social critique such as Martin Luther King's March on Washington speech, Bill Clinton's first inaugural, and Maya Angelou's inaugural poem. These examples, according to Sheard, "give significant attention to *topoi* of blame and provoke a shuffling of values" (779).

auditors insofar as it invites them to partake in an ethical re-evaluation and exhorts them to help actualize a better social order—wiser through the mistakes of the past.

Finally, in response to Lundberg and Gunn's reservations about conceptions of rhetorical agency that reduce it to "ectoplasm," a magic power transferable from one speaker to another, this study has suggested that rhetorical agency in the discourse of official apologies is not magical, but based in rather concrete elements of the communicative context. It emerges as a fusion of personal and institutional ethos on the part of the speaker, more or less explicit commentary on the speaker's access to the role as apologist in accordance with his or her mandate from the audience, and finally a more elusive sense of fidelity to the values at stake reflected in the speaker's credibility vis à vis the act of apologizing. My discussion of Rasmussen's speech and reflections on the practical, ethical, and theoretical possibilities for making public apologies have aimed to show that rhetorical agency is complex, but can be broken down and analyzed part by part. This way, we need not settle with finding a speaker "possessed" with rhetorical agency, but may indeed be able to put into words more precisely in what ways a certain rhetorical act is made to function and, not least, in what ways it may instantiate rhetorical agency for the speaker and the auditors, respectively.

By regarding official apologies in the light of rhetorical theory about epideictic rhetoric, the potentially valuable rhetorical functions and ethical potential of this type of discourse are brought into focus, highlighting the fact that it is a fertile context for formulating and specifying the fundamental values and ethical orientation of a given society or collective. Further, epideictic seems particularly promising in examining questions of rhetorical agency because it turns our attention to the importance of language in matters of creating, maintaining, or questioning communal values, and because it poses functional questions about the possibilities of rhetoric to serve as symbolic action, such as what it really means to apologize.

## Acknowledgments

This article is an expanded and significantly revised version of a paper presented at the 2006 RSA conference in Memphis and published in the proceedings volume, *Sizing Up Rhetoric* (Waveland Press, Inc., 2008).

The author thanks Carolyn Miller, Kathleen DeHaan, and the two anonymous reviewers for their thorough and constructive comments and editorial assistance in the preparation of this article.

## References

- Beale, Walter H. "Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (1978): 221–246.
- Brooks, Roy L. "The Age of Apology." *When Sorry Isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*. Ed. Roy L. Brooks. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 3–11.
- Bryld, Claus. "Hvad kan vi bruge besættelsestiden til i dag?" ("What can we learn from the occupation period to us today?") *Kritik* 38 (2005): 1–8.
- Cunningham, Michael. "Saying Sorry: The Politics of Apology." *The Political Quarterly* 70 (1999): 285–293.
- Downey, Sharon D. "The Evolution of the Rhetorical Genre of Apologia." *Western Journal of Communication* 57 (1993): 42–64.
- Geisler, Cheryl. "How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency? Report from the ARS." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34 (2004): 9–17.
- Hauser, Gerard A. "Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29 (1999): 5–23.
- . "Editor's Introduction." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (2004): 181–187.
- Harter, Lynn M., Ronald J. Stephens, and Phyllis M. Japp. "President Clinton's Apology for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment: A Narrative of Remembrance, Redefinition, and Reconciliation." *The Howard Journal of Communications* 11 (2000): 19–34.
- Hearit, Keith Michael. "'Mistakes Were Made': Organizations, Apologia and Crises of Social Legitimacy." *Communication Studies* 46 (1995): 1–17.
- Hoff-Clausen, Elisabeth, Christine Isager, and Lisa Storm Villadsen. "Retorisk agency—Hvad skaber retorikken?" ("Rhetorical agency—What makes rhetoric/What does rhetoric make?") *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 33 (2005): 56–65.
- Jasinski, James. *Sourcebook on Rhetoric. Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.
- Kiss, Elizabeth. "Saying We're Sorry: Liberal Democracy and the Rhetoric of Collective Identity." *Constellations* 4 (1998): 387–398.
- Koesten, Joy and Robert C. Rowland. "The Rhetoric of Atonement." *Communication Studies* 55 (2004): 68–87.
- Leff, Michael. "Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 337–349.
- Lundberg, Christian, and Joshua Gunn. "'Ouija Board, Are There Any Communications?' Agency, Ontotheology, and the Death of the Humanist Subject, or Continuing the ARS Conversation." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35 (2005): 83–105.
- Oravec, Christine. "'Observation' in Aristotle's Theory of Epideictic." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9 (1976): 162–174.
- Rollins, Brooke. "The Ethics of Epideictic Rhetoric: Addressing the Problem of Presence through Derrida's Funeral Orations." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35 (2005): 5–23.
- Rasmussen, Anders Fogh. Statsminister Anders Fogh Rasmussens tale i Mindelunden 4. maj 2005. (www.statsministeriet.dk).
- Rosenfield, Lawrence W. "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic Rhetoric." *Rhetoric in Transition*. Ed. Eugene E. White. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1980. 131–155.

- Sheard, Cynthia Miecznikowski. "The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric." *College English* 58 (1996): 765–794.
- Sullivan, Dale L. "The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 26 (1993): 113–133.
- Surrugue, Stéphanie. "Undskyld!" ("Sorry!") *Politiken* 4 May 2005. Section 2:1.
- Ware, B. L. and Will Linkugel. "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273–283.