05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 217

5

Paradoxes of Personalization

Race Relations in Milwaukee

One idea that you should have gained from reading Chapter 4 is that criticism is *not* meant to be a cut-and-dried, lockstep procedure. You do not conduct, say, Marxist criticism by slavishly following the "five easy steps to a Marxist analysis." In fact, the best critical studies will be those in which the critical machinery is not too obvious. You should use the concepts and categories that a theory or method offers, but you should not feel that you cannot bend those rules. You want your reader to learn about your subject matter and the insights that you bring to that subject. When criticism too obviously announces, "Now I am doing the first thing you do for feminist criticism; now I am doing the second thing," and so on, its power to change people's perceptions is diminished. The real payoff of criticism is insight into what texts mean. Critical methods should serve that end.

Also, as we noted in Part I, schools of thought in criticism cross over into each other, borrow from each other, and often work well together. It can be unnecessarily limiting, therefore, to determine in advance that a criticism must be only dramatistic or only media-centered. On the other hand, some focus of attention is needed in criticism, too, so that the critic can help the reader to focus on certain issues.

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05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 218

In this chapter, the focus of the critical methodology will be largely *dramatistic/narrative*. We will be concerned with some motivations that arise out of some operations that public discourse performs. But, if the criticism is done well, insight into the subject matter overall will emerge from the analysis. Let us turn now to consider the general problem that the criticism addresses.

The Problem of Personalization

One of the most serious problems that democracies face today is a gap between the locations of democratic decision making and the problems about which such decisions are made. Increasingly, events that powerfully affect individuals are occurring at an international level. For example, today, decisions about world trade tariffs made in the U.S. Congress may very well have profound effects on shoe factory workers in both Italy and Massachusetts. And the good people of Anytown, U.S.A., may be asked to vote on the performance of their senator regarding arms treaties with Russia and humans rights in China.

The average citizen is required to make decisions about a wide range of issues today. Those decisions are either made directly, as in voting on referenda, or indirectly, as in voting on the performance of elected leaders. In either case, the citizen must find ways to understand problems that may be distant (possibly even international in scope), and that are likely to be extremely complex for that reason. Perhaps two hundred years ago, the citizens of Bent Whistle could concern themselves only with local politics and affairs. But those days are gone. A French conglomerate is thinking of building a factory in Bent Whistle, and if the citizens are to be certain about whether or not they want that factory, they must acquire an understanding of business and international commerce, environmental impact, and many other issues.

The challenge for the average citizen today, then, is to *personalize large and complex issues* in ways that make them understandable, without distorting those issues so much that good decisions cannot be made. We personalize issues when we translate vast and impersonal problems into smaller, more manageable images, stories, and texts. Personalization, in other words, is a *strategy of textualization or narrative*. We understand the problems of the Middle East by seeing them compressed into stories about specific hostages who have been kidnapped, or by making certain leaders the embodiment of good or evil (depending on our politics). The kind of textual strategy that is used in personalization is called *metonymy,* or *metonymization*. Metonymy occurs when something complex is reduced to a more manageable sign of that complex thing, as when the complexities of British government are reduced into the public figures of the Prime Minister, or of the reigning monarch.

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 219

Any public issue is in principle personalizable (or not); whether or not an issue becomes personalized is an entirely subjective, perceptual matter. I may know that environmental problems are important, but be unable to personalize that issue for myself; that is, I may be unable to imagine what ecological disaster would mean for me, what choices I might make now to undertake direct action (by stocking food or boycotting certain products, for example) or indirect action (by voting for Senators on the basis of their ecological records, for instance). So I may avoid personalizing that issue, and remain instead at the fringes of the issue, as a spectator.

On other issues, I may be motivated to personalize a public problem to a much higher degree. It would be possible to feel closer identification with war victims in El Salvador, for instance, if we shared the same religion. I might try to understand the conflict in Central America by personalizing it into images of its victims—by reading all I could about them and by forming my attitudes and opinions from stories about them. If we are able to personalize a distant and confusing issue, we are then in a better position to participate in decision making about that issue.

In the United States, people have often personalized race relations. Race relations are both a vast and complex issue *and* one on which every person is required to participate in decision making. Even whites who actually encounter African Americans in the flesh no more than once a week may still entertain the most passionate and vocal opinions about them, while African Americans and other nonwhites are understandably sensitive to the ways in which public issues near and far might affect their personal abilities to get and keep jobs, live comfortably and with dignity, and so on. Ours is a very race-conscious society. The issue of race relations therefore provides particularly good examples of the ways in which large public issues are personalized or brought to more manageable size.

The personalization of race relations must be done textually, through discourse or narrative, by way of metonymy. Someone who wants to understand their place in any large public problem cannot have immediate access to the whole of that problem. Instead, that person looks for ways in which the problem is expressed in texts and narratives. Someone who wants to understand the problem of pollution cannot examine all pollution; that person must turn to texts that personalize pollution and express it in a manageable way. In this chapter we will see that the strategy of personalization generates two troubling paradoxes. These paradoxes arise from the very act of personalizing vast, abstract problems; they arise as those problems are textualized and dramatized in metonymy.

The vehicle for our exploration of race relations in this chapter will itself be some personalization, based on the author's experience. We will focus our attention on race relations during the 1980's in the greater Milwaukee area,

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 220

and on the relative economic, social, and political status of African Americans and whites living there. I am white, and used to be a resident of the Milwaukee area. I lived in a largely white western suburb close to the center of the city, and I drove to work at a university on the other (eastern) side of town, situated next to another suburb. My route to and from work took me through that part of town in which most African American residents of Milwaukee live (some 97.5 percent of African Americans in the greater metropolitan area live in the inner city). Many of my personal friends were white (although many were not), so I could observe the general tenor of discussion in the community. My situation therefore paralleled that of many white Milwaukeeans; I was placed in a good position for understanding how many people in that city (or in other similar cities) might use texts to understand the large, confusing issue of race relations. Therefore, I will self-consciously assume the position of a white exposed to an average mix of texts in the city of Milwaukee, and I will attempt to show how whites might personalize race relations there. Although the incidents reported here happened some decades ago and in one particular city, many of the racial dynamics studied here are still with us, and not only in Milwaukee. The reader might think as we go about more recent parallels that he or she has experienced.

In considering both the theory and the ethics of personalization, I will explore some paradoxes of personalization that arise specifically in the area of race relations (though I think these paradoxes may be generalizable to other public issues that entail personal involvements). I will focus specifically on the ways in which the complexities of race relations in Milwaukee were metonymized in the public discourse revolving around two disastrous, fatal house fires within the African American community. One of these fires killed twelve people on the night of September 30–October 1, 1987; the second killed six people on the night of October 14–15, 1987.

I began gathering public discourse from the press concerning these two events, and for a period of about two months kept track of stories with any mention of the fires, African Americans, and race relations in general in Milwaukee. My research led me to take note of a great many texts, not all of them explicitly about racial issues, but all of them "fuel" for metonymizing complex racial issues. Most of my material is taken from the print media, especially newspapers. Although some television broadcasts are included in the texts that I examined, logistical problems involved in obtaining ephemeral news broadcasts kept those texts to a minimum. I believe, however, that the printed material that I gathered is representative of material found in other media as well.

Finally, I want to be very clear that the personalization—the metonymies—that I construct are from my assumed position as being representative of other

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 221

whites; I do not attempt to say how October and November of 1987 looked to African Americans in Milwaukee. Therefore, what follows is a reconstruction of how race relations probably look to most whites in Milwaukee; the reader may take nearly every sentence as preceded by, "In one likely white perception of events . . ." The conclusions I reach will be directed at how whites might re-evaluate some of the ways in which we understand personal roles in race relations through metonymy and personalization. Let me now don the persona of the Average White Observer and begin.

The Scene and Focal Events

The context of race relations in Milwaukee is a particularly rich one, drawn from vivid memories and much public discussion of problems between African Americans and whites. One does not have to live in Milwaukee very long to get a sense that African Americans here are in economic and political trouble, and that racial strife is a decades-old context for present woes. Longtime residents will remember the racial discord of the 1960s, in which actual armed tanks rumbled through the suburban streets and Father James Groppi led African Americans on protest marches into predominantly white (and violently outraged) residential areas. Within the recent memory of residents is the controversial tenure of a "law-and-order" police chief who was notorious for organizing squads to investigate political activists and dissidents, especially civil rights activists. Within the past two years have come indictments of numerous real estate agents for practicing racial discrimination by attempting to protect traditional racial boundaries between neighborhoods.

Problems in the African American Community

Milwaukee's sizable African American community was lured to this town of Germans and Eastern Europeans by the growth in industry in the 190s and 1950s. Unlike African Americans in other Northern industrial cities like Chicago, African Americans in Milwaukee have no long-standing political base. Furthermore, the construction of Interstate 94 in the early 1950s destroyed the core of what had been a vital African American business and residential area. Consequently, the failure of Rust Belt industry in the 1970s and 1980s has had exceptionally severe consequences for the African American community. A Milwaukee Urban League study released during the period under study here details the resulting unhappy statistics: 77.6 percent of African Americans born in Milwaukee in 1986 were born to single mothers, and 29.9 percent of the African American population lives below the poverty

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 222

line, with an unemployment rate of 25.9 percent (McCallister, Nov. 12; Cole, Nov. 5).[1] Furthermore, these figures do not reflect the widespread *underemployment* and inadequate compensation of those African Americans who *are* employed.

In addition, residents of Milwaukee have available to them countless press reports of crime from the African American community that seem to outweigh stories of disturbances anywhere else in the city. It is the policy of the major newspapers, the *Journal* and the *Sentinel,* not to specify race in any news stories unless that is relevant to the issue. But race is often implicated by other information provided in stories. Milwaukee is a "city of neighborhoods," a euphemistic way of saying that it is highly segregated. Therefore, any address from or reference to the north, near north, or northwest side of the city may be read as likely to involve African Americans, while references to the south side (except for the near south, which is heavily Hispanic) and suburbs will suggest conservative, blue-collar whites, and references to the east side will hint at more liberal, white-collar whites.

Also, Milwaukee's ethnic makeup is such that some names are highly identifiable as white names; Hyrniewicki, Czysz, Kuemmerlein, and Anagnastopoulos, for example, are names that prompt readers to view their owners as Central, Eastern, or Southeastern European in origin. In general, of course, no such marker exists for African Americans, except for those few names which seem to be associated somewhat more frequently with African Americans than with whites in recent years (Jefferson and Washington, for instance, were two family names of persons killed in the fires) or names which seem to be chosen strategically as alternatives to traditional European names (Shanika, Shavonda, and Sharinda were names of children killed in the fires). Therefore, the seemingly neutral texts provided in crime stories are often racially marked or at least racially suspect, and thus guide the ways in which people personalize the environment of race relations. If Anton Drabowicz runs amok with a meat axe on the south side, one is likely to read that as a story about a white. James Jones murdering his mother downtown is hard to peg, but Chavarte Jefferson assaulting his wife on the near north side will quite probably be read (correctly or not) as a African American crime.

In sum, then, the media feature many crime stories that point—by way of location or, less often, by way of name—to the African American community, thus facilitating the perception of African Americans as living in a violent context. So it was around the time of the two fires in the fall of 1987. For instance, one story depicts a struggling family on the near north side, in which the mother was found by the father shot to death; according to the father, "it was like walking into a nightmare, only worse" (Sykes, Nov. 17). A picture

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 223

some weeks later confirmed the race of the family as African American. The continuation of this story on an inside page accompanies another story, with a picture, of an African American woman who was slain at home ("Funeral set," Nov. 11).

News reports on the day of the second fire include a story about African American suspects arrested for killing a white ice cream delivery man (Gribble, Oct. 15), and another about Milwaukee Brewers' player Gary Sheffield, a African American, who was arrested for drunkenness and violence in New York (Faust, Oct. 15). Other prominent news reports around this time included renewed interest in a recent killing of a African American child by African American children in nearby Beloit (Ward, Nov. 15), another story of a stabbing in the African American community (Cuprisin and Lisheron, Oct. 25), and the tale of a mother in the same neighborhood who was so incapable of caring for her children that she did not understand how to flush a toilet (Knoche, Nov. 5). In short, the picture painted by the press about life among African Americans is grim and unflattering. Thus, the social context for the period under analysis here is likely to be perceived as one of poverty, violence, and failure for African Americans.

Violence against African Americans

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 224

African American crime and hopelessness did not make up the only ongoing story at this time. Violence and discrimination against African Americans and other minorities by whites was also a prominent story. On the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin, recent racial incidents had prompted a march by 300 protestors (Esposito, Oct. 16). The issue was not resolved, and doubts persisted about the ability of the University administration to control racist fraternities and to curb individual acts of racial violence (Jones, Nov. 9b). Other press reports (Jones, Nov. 1a, Nov. 1b) cited long lists of insults and attacks—both verbal and physical—upon African Americans and Jews in Madison, a town and campus that had always prided itself on its liberal atmosphere. One African American parent was prompted to wonder in print, "Is my child even safe at that place?" and called the incidents in Madison an "unconscionable blight" on the state (Short, Nov. 15). Also prominent in the news at this time was an ongoing attempt in the United States Congress to allocate reparations to Japanese Americans who had been stripped of property while in internment camps during World War II (Cunibert, Oct. 11), which added to the context of racial tension and white guilt.

The School System

Another important part of the racial context was concern over the quality of the Milwaukee public school system, which was widely perceived to be failing, especially in its work with minority students (Bednarek, Oct. 25). A longstanding and costly lawsuit among several parties had raged for months over the issue of how to arrange court-ordered busing for integration. The suit was settled amidst mistrust and suspicion on all sides during the two month period studied, further intensifying the focus on racial issues (Bednarek, Oct. 22).

White Political Attitudes

A final factor in constructing the context for the fires is the taxation and social service mix in the city and state. Milwaukee and Wisconsin have traditionally been high-tax, high-service, liberal Northern polities. But an election the year before the fires had replaced a liberal Democratic administration at the state level with a moderate Republican one. This change was based largely on the mood reflected in a letter to the editor of *The Milwaukee Journal,* complaining that middle class people "haven't received raises in years and some of us have taken huge cuts in pay. . . . Without our hard work there would not be money for welfare, food stamps, or heat assistance" (Dlugi, Nov 15). Another disheartened taxpayer complained that "it just is very disturbing to me and my husband, as taxpayers who have worked continually for 32 years, to read in the newspaper about a 38-year-old woman who has

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 225

13 children and five grandchildren. . . . I am really getting fed up with going to work every day, paying my federal and state income taxes, and for what?" (Conrad, Oct. 25).

This resentment of welfare recipients and the poor—specifically, resentment at having to support them in the midst of a faltering Rust Belt economy—led to such measures as Republican Governor Tommy Thompson's "learnfare" proposal, which would have tied welfare payments to regular attendance by schoolchildren (Schultze, Oct. 25). Although the plan was defeated by the legislature during this time (Gill and Romell, Nov. 5), it highlighted the issue of public support for social services and an attitude toward the poor that was frequently expressed at the time. (A revised version of the plan was later passed.)

Tragedy and Metonymy

Into this scene of texts featuring images of African American oppression, failure, violence, disadvantage, and plain hard luck came two events which could serve as centers around which a text of race relations in Milwaukee could be written. The first was the worst house fire in Milwaukee's recorded history: Twelve people, ten of them children, died during the night of September 30–October 1 (Romell, Oct. 1). Most of the victims were members of an extended family living in the house, though some were merely guests for the night. A little more than two weeks later, six children in a family were killed in another house fire less than a mile from the first ("Six children," Oct. 15). In this fire, the oldest victim was a teenage sitter who was caring for the other five children while their mother was in the hospital giving birth to another child. The fact that all victims were *identified* as African American (actually, five of the second set of victims were biracial; more on this in a moment), the close proximity of the houses, and the long-term economic problems of both sets of victims allowed the two fires to become a metonymy for the problems of African American Milwaukeeans in general.

Metonymizing the Tragedies

It was clear from the start, even before the second fire, that the potential for metonymizing complex social problems through the image of this disaster was great. A newspaper report of the first fire clearly linked the general state of African Americans in Milwaukee with these particular victims: "The predawn fire Wednesday that killed 12 people, 10 of them children, is tragic evidence of Milwaukee's need to do something about decaying Inner-City housing and hard-core unemployment, officials said Wednesday" (Romell, Oct. 1). A newspaper headline following the second fire further signaled a

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 226

clear pattern of metonymy: "Diverse social ills had role in tragedy" (Gill and Romell, Nov. 5).

Soon articles discussing the trend among the poor people of doubling up on housing, with resultant dangerous overcrowding, began to appear (Hajewski, Oct. 16). Noting that "the similarities are chilling" between the fires—among them that "the families in both fires were on welfare"—another article referred to the deteriorated condition of inner city housing (Kissinger, Oct. 16). Some letters to the editor used the two sets of victims as symbols for the effects of Governor Thompson's cuts in welfare (Deshotels, Oct. 25). Although it was apparently not the case that playing with fire caused either blaze, an article discussing pyromania in children also appeared, explicitly linking the two fires with a larger social issue in its statement that "many of these [pyromaniac] children come from chaotic families or single-parent homes" (Wilkerson, Oct. 25).

Even articles not directly linked to the fires could nonetheless be incorporated into a metonymy insofar as they bolstered the image of African Americans as poor, wretched, violent, or victimized. One article reviewed the centrality of "suffering" in the lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Kren, Oct. 15b). Another article described a group home for delinquent teenage boys, and the accompanying pictures showed only African Americans (Norris, Oct. 8). According to this article, these unfortunate youngsters seemed not to have much going for them: "Bill . . . is struggling with deep psychological hurt. Jerome uses joking to cover immaturity and insecurity. Robert angers quickly and is given to lying."

Telecasts concerning the second fire followed that story with one segment after another depicting failures and heartbreaks that could be read as hardships specific to the African American community. Channel 12's story (Ten o'clock, Oct. 15) was on a "scared straight" program at a local jail, featuring footage of (predominantly) African American inmates bemoaning their wasted lives. Channel 4 emphasized that the fires were within the same neighborhood, thus implicating the African American community directly as a site of tragedy (News 4, Oct. 15). Channel 6 (News at 6, Oct. 15) covered the failure of the National Football League strike, with footage of its unsuccessful (and African American) leader, Gene Upshaw. In short, it was apparent that the fatherless family configuration and economic suffering of the victims of these two fires were being used to symbolize widespread concern over illegitimate births, high crime, and welfare dependency within the African American community.

Metonymy and Paradox

Let us consider metonymy itself a little more closely. Metonymy can be either positive or negative. For instance, a single person can be made to stand

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 227

for whatever is good or bad about an entire group of people. Thus metonymy is clearly a rhetorical strategy; indeed, it is one of Kenneth Burke's "four master tropes" explained in *A Grammar of Motives* (1969a). When metonymy moves broad public issues into images of and about people, the metonymy has the effect of personalizing. When metonymy motivates individual actions and attitudes, it also serves to personalize. And when metonymy turns people into icons toward whom one may act, that is personalizing as well.

In short, the issue of race relations in Milwaukee became symbolized in the image of these particular fire victims, who became a set of signs around which all the other discursive texts of violence, economics, and so on revolved. Milwaukeeans participated in that metonymy by reading press reports or viewing telecasts, and then formulating actions and attitudes for their own lives in response to what they saw and read; in this way, race relations became personalized for many white Milwaukeeans in the fall of 1987.

What happens when personalization occurs through narratives of metonymy? Some paradoxes are inevitably entailed when such metonymy takes place—paradoxes with ethical implications.

The Paradox of Identification

Public problems often involve large groups of people, and to the individual person those groups can easily remain faceless. A nuclear accident in the Ukraine or a chemical accident in India is a terrible thing, but the individual American can easily remain aloof from such a problem that confronts people who are foreign and anonymous. The same is true of problems that the ordinary white person will perceive as afflicting African Americans in Milwaukee. In the absence of close personal contact with an entire demographic group, the response to stories of hardship and crime is likely to be along the lines of either (a) "what's the matter with those people," or (b) "these people are in serious trouble." Neither response, however, is likely to call up much personal involvement or action, or any real understanding of the complex issues involved (though it may motivate calls for collective action; more on this in a moment). For the average white person, formulating some sort of response to the perceived problems of African Americans is much like formulating a response to the problems of nuclear power, the destruction of the rain forest, or acid rain. Many such problems remain beyond the ken of individuals; that is, they seem too bewildering or complex for us to understand.

The complexities of drought and political oppression in Ethiopia remain beyond the understanding of most people, too. But television footage of starving Ethiopian children in the 1980s galvanized public response, motivating personal and individual action in response to a public issue. One of the most

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 228

important ways in which contemporary public discourse metonymizes complex issues is by presenting them in images with which the public can *identify*. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969b), Burke argues that identification fuels all motivation; showing the public the ways that they as individuals can connect to broad social issues is, therefore, a primary way of mobilizing motivation for individual action. When people identify, they make a link between the self and the other. That link also calls forward a political stance towards such larger issues as nuclear power, discriminatory practices in South Africa, or environmental destruction, for example.

Identification and Race

So it is with the issue of race relations. To the extent that whites can identify with the travails of African Americans, then whites will be motivated to overcome their own racism. Clearly, then, identification is also a strategy with ethical implications, insofar as it enables or discourages moral choices. As Burke reminds us, identification will occur if people see that they are like other people, that their interests are joined.

Resources for identification were present within the wider context surrounding the Milwaukee house fires in 1987. For example, much of the discussion over the racial incidents on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin at the same time offered the possibility of motivation through identification; a number of images of African Americans and of their motives that enabled white identification emerged from that discussion. An African American writer of a letter to the editor noted that the heartache of racism

> . . . comes from your child's description of the knife held to his throat by a white bully in grade school. It comes from watching your baby struggle proudly to pronounce the "big words" someone painted on the front of your house during the night: filthy epithets! It comes from watching that person you love dearer than life get passed over and put down and treated as if her skin were the only part of her that matters. And even with these realities, your child still earns a 3.0 and he still makes the football team and he still beats out the others to play first chair in the high school orchestra. (Short, Nov. 15)

It would take an alienated heart indeed not to identify with the universally relevant anguish and pride in that letter writer's powerful sentences. The racial problems in Madison were similarly metonymized in the plaint of Geneva Brown, a first-year student at the university: "To have someone physically threaten me just because I'm African American is something I've never [before] encountered" (Jones, Nov. 9a); most whites have also probably never before been threatened on the basis of their race. Racial problems are represented in

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 229

Charles Holley's statement that racism "hurts down deep, because I'm a human being" (Esposito, Nov. 9); it would, presumably, hurt whites as well. Similarly, the pain of racism is evident in this excerpt from an interview with California Congressman Norman Mineta, a Japanese American, who recalls being separated from his family during the World War II internment camps:

> "I didn't want to be separated from my parents," Mineta said, faltering. He had been recounting the story over lunch in the House members' dining room, but stopped altogether as he started to cry. Listening in, one of his young congressional aides also started to cry. The congressman composed himself. "We should have done this in the office," he said. (Cunibert, Oct. 11)

These examples from the period under study illustrate the ways in which complex issues, such as racism on college campuses or reactions against Japanese Americans in World War II, are metonymized into issues—the anguished parent, the frightened child, the shock of unexpected indignities—with which whites can identify.

But the particular issues which the victims of the two house fires stood for highlighted certain problems for identification through metonymy, which become clear as we move from context to more focused texts relating to the two disasters. Metonymizing a complex problem into a concrete symbol can give the public something with which to identify; but if the metonymy involves the strange, foreign, or frightening, it may also give the public concrete images which threaten identification. The first fire victims were presented in terms which placed them exactly on the knife's edge of this paradox of identification. Enough facts about the victims were provided to allow a middle class white audience to identify with them to an extent, yet enough difference (especially difference based in race) was still evident to forestall a complete identification.

Enabling Identification

Let us consider the texts that served as resources that *enabled* identification first. The victims of the first fire were portrayed positively and along many dimensions with which whites could identify. Morvay (Oct. 1) writes of one victim, "'Thomas was a church-going man,' his niece said." We are told that Thomas worked for the city, and a picture of a loving extended family is painted. We learn that the family spoke by telephone every evening with a grandmother in Miami. This same grandmother is quoted as piously avowing, "'I know God took my grandchildren and my daughter right on back to heaven. The Lord is too wise to make a mistake.'" And the distraught mother

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 230

of two other young victims is quoted as saying what any parent would say under such circumstances: "'Let me go see my babies . . . just let me go. I've got to see them.'" Christopulos (Oct. 1) quotes another grandmother in mourning: "'Why couldn't it have been me instead of my poor little baby? . . . When I got there, I kept praying Anthony would be all right.'" A white audience can sympathize with such grief, and with the rudeness of a funeral home representative who interrupted the interview to force a card on the bereaved woman. We can also sympathize with the heroic efforts of neighbors to rescue the children, which were foiled by the intense flames (Romell, Oct. 1).

Reports of the second fire also contained material encouraging identification by way of the children who died in the fire. All three evening news telecasts interviewed teachers and principals of the children, who gave sincere and positive praise for them; and printed news reports typically gave brief, upbeat biographies of each child (Ahlgren, Nov. 15). Channel 12 focused mainly on the impact of the children's deaths on their neighbors (The ten o'clock news, Oct. 15). One neighbor was quoted as saying, "'They need to do something for these kids, these people, or there're gonna be a whole lot more bodies to come get.'" This was the only station to report that neighbors could hear cries for help coming from the house, a horrible fact which must surely have drawn universal sympathy. Channel 4 (News 4, Oct. 15) described the human face of "people who are stunned, who want to do something"—as the white audience surely would.

The metonymizing of human misfortune into heartbreaking images of children was the best chance for identification offered by coverage of the second fire. An older brother of the victims is quoted as saying at the funeral, "Each of them was going to be somebody. They were just beginning. Not a one of them had a chance for nothing" (Mitchard, Oct. 23), displaying a kind of pride and sense of loss that people of all races could understand. Mitchard (Oct. 15) quotes a Sunday school teacher of the children who had seen them only that evening: "'The big kids were on the porch last night with the babies at 9 p.m.,' she said reasonably, 'and so they can't take them . . . you can't spare . . . you just can't. . . .'" The collapse of this woman's narrative into anguish speaks eloquently of the pain of losing children. Mitchard quotes another neighbor who showed the kind of shock with which many could identify when she said, "'It's a strange thing when children perish and you cannot cry. I would dearly love to cry, but I can't.'"

Other stories focused on the predominantly white firefighters who had dealt with both blazes, and the effects the fires had on them are forcibly presented to a white audience as the reactions they themselves might have had (Kissinger and Rummler, Oct. 15): They quote one firefighter: "All I could think of was 'not again.' It's harder this time, when it happens so close

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 231

together," and "The first thing I did was that I went out and bought four more smoke alarms," said Gleisner, who has a 9-month-old son at home. And finally, a photo essay (A time, Oct. 22) showed pictures of the funeral, of the lost children, and of weeping family members.

Forestalling Identification

But consider how fine is the knife's edge of identification, for texts that allow identification may quickly turn into texts that discourage it. Gilbert's story (Oct. 11) of the funeral for ten of the victims, held in Miami, begins on a theme inviting universal identification: "A mother and nine young cousins killed last month in Milwaukee's worst house fire were laid to rest. . . ." But the story then moves on to a description of the funeral service that marks it as appropriate for a traditional African American church service—and therefore unlike anything that most staid whites (and Milwaukee *is* heavily staid Lutheran and Catholic) observe on Sunday morning. Gilbert describes the funeral as "a searing service marked by raw grief and uncontrolled outburst" and "a roller-coaster, gospel gathering, elevated by passionate displays of faith and family togetherness." Whites are further reminded of the difference, or otherness, of these metonymized people by their nontraditional, non-Anglo names, such as Shanika, Shavonda, and Sharinda (Romell, Oct. 1).

Many reports of the second fire also provided ample symbolic resources for tilting the paradox of identification in the direction of difference. Although there was much to spark white identification with the victims of the second fire through a metonymy of tragedy and loss, such positive texts were countered and overwhelmed by the spectacle of the victims' unfortunate mother, who was giving birth to her thirteenth child at the time of the fire. This poor woman and the family's general circumstances became a metonymy for white resentment of what is perceived as African American welfare dependency, high illegitimacy rates, and other problems noted earlier. The family is depicted by Romell and Gill (Nov. 5) as "plagued by poverty"; their article chronicles a dreary history of the father of most of the children as an unemployed alcoholic and child abuser. The mother, Diane Washington, was a thirteen-year-old runaway when she first came to live with this man, and since divorcing him she had become attached to the father of the rest of the children, a man from Chicago who had been arrested on felony firearms charges. One child described the quality of life in the Washington family as "baloney and crackers. . . . It wasn't all the time, but sometimes we ran short of food, you know." The family is described as moving at least once every year because of their inability to meet the rent. The mother is said to have no intention of marrying again. Her desperate circumstances lead her to describe her life in ways with which

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 232

no middle class white person could identify. "'I live the life I want to live,'" she is quoted as saying, "'and go and come like I want to.'"

This mother in particular became a symbolic lightning rod for white frustration stemming from the context of the fires, a metonymy for allegedly self-inflicted problems that befall many poor African Americans. Ahlgren (Nov. 15) depicts Mrs. Washington as producing one child after another with reckless abandon, and declaring at one point, "'Now I guess I'll quit. I have my football team and my basketball team.'" News reports noted that the family was eligible for government aid that could have paid their gas bill, but that for some reason this help had not been requested. Payment would have allowed the gas company to resume service, thus doing away with the need for the space heater that had caused the fire. Clearly, the implication was that the mother was not even capable of obtaining the welfare to which she was entitled (Kissinger, Oct. 16; The ten o'clock news, Oct. 15).

Press reports concerning Mrs. Washington were riddled with seemingly unintended irony. The child born just before the fire was named Passion'ate Love (Mitchard, Oct. 23), and Gill and Romell (Nov. 5) quote her as saying, in all innocence, "Like my mother told me one time, I made my bed, I have to lie in it." The temptation in both cases, for any reader not inclined toward identification with her, is to say in exasperation, "Yes, that's just the trouble."

As a metonymy for poor and helpless people, Mrs. Washington clearly encouraged reactions that were the opposite of identification. As one letter complained, ". . . she loved children and wanted her own football team. I find my senses reeling! . . . The problems of poverty that embrace so many of our neighbors are certainly not helped by increasing the numbers of a family" (Richfield, Oct. 25).

Another letter similarly noted,

> Diane Washington "loves" children and so do I. But how, in all justice to the children, can she keep producing while her children are at the public's mercy? Her 16-year-old pregnant daughter, with a 9-month-old baby, is following her mother's example. When will this end? (Tessler, Oct. 25)

Resentment was also expressed in this landlord's complaint:

> There is absolutely no justification for 13 or 14 people living in a two-or-three bedroom home, using a penny for a fuse. You can rest assured that the landlord did not know they all lived there. (Thomas, Oct. 25)

Mr. Thomas's letter is clearly metonymizing general problems into the images of the fire victims, for the actions he describes match neither set of fire victims; yet he is explicitly writing about the fires.

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 233

The Persistence of Race

An important dimension of the texts of race relations is the role of race itself as a fundamental category for classifying humankind. It must be said that in most of the United States, and perhaps in Milwaukee particularly, race is a factor that will always interfere with identification on the part of some people, no matter how much material there is to foster identification. Race is a marker of a difference that will make *all* the difference, and for these people, the racial category into which a person falls will color, so to speak, any and all of their judgments about that person.

At precisely the time of the second fire, unrestrained identification occurred with another child in dire straits, young Jessica McClure of Texas, who was being rescued from a well over the course of two or three days (News at 6, Oct. 15). Although she was farther away, concern for this white child among white Milwaukeeans was undiluted. But as noted above, sympathy was not so unreserved for those involved in the two fatal fires. Thus, racial prejudice led to a judgment structured by the rhetoric of racial categories, illustrating the fact that in the United States today, *any* discourse with racial components is a discourse that will divide people.

Another interesting dimension of the texts of racial categories is that for many whites, and perhaps for African Americans as well, an individual falls into the category of *African American* for possessing any detectable amount of African American racial makeup at all, sometimes for merely associating with African Americans. In this case, the work of the texts of racial divisions is also extended to those who are white but who have very close connections with African Americans.

In the case of the Milwaukee fires, there were two instances in which the public was allowed, perhaps even encouraged, to think of individuals as African American because of their involvement with people of that racial category rather than on the basis of their own physical appearance or heritage. It turns out that Diane Washington, mother of the second victims, is identified (in only two instances) as actually being white (Romell and Gill, Nov. 5; A time, Oct. 22). And Jill Schreck, mother of some of the first fire victims, bears a name which sounds German (in this town of German heritage); she also looks Caucasian in a picture of her published in the newspaper (Survivor, Oct. 7). Yet the overwhelming sense created by press reports about the fires was that everyone involved was African American—despite the presence of whites, and despite the fact that the children in the second fire were as white as they were African American. Diane Washington's own identification with African Americans puts her on that "side of the fence"; she is able to stand in for irresponsible African Americans even though

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 234

she is white. African Americanness seems to be a difference that cannot be overcome by similarities.

The peculiar rhetorical insistence in the available texts upon the importance of the category of African Americanness is also echoed in other news stories that were linked to the fires. On the very day of the second fire, a white Milwaukee alderman was convicted of accepting a bribe from an African American attorney, a story carried immediately after coverage of the fire on all three television stations. And a newspaper article about the alderman's downfall at the hands of the African American attorney (Bargren, Oct. 15) appeared on the same page as (1) an article about African Americans who had slain an ice cream delivery man, and (2) a story about the firefighters involved in both disastrous fires. All three stories were continued together on the same inner page. In short, the introduction of African Americanness into a mix of texts such as this turns it into a category which, for many whites, will be an insurmountable barrier to identification.

In sum, the identification engendered by images of dying children might easily have been outweighed by the persistent accumulation of press reports depicting Mrs. Washington as an irresponsible bearer of children at the taxpayers' expense—as the very epitome of the hopeless and incorrigible welfare mother. In the case of the second fire, metonymy may have countered, rather than furthered, identification. Metonymy is thus a risky strategy for motivating personal involvement in public issues. If you make what is abstract, or far away, more concrete through images of a child, a fire, or a welfare mother, you either court identification with the image or you risk the confirmation of your audience's worst fears about "those *other* people."

The person attempting to metonymize complex issues into an understandable text is therefore faced with a choice about how to see "those people" and how to place ourself in relation to them. This is an ethical choice insofar as it concerns how we treat and define others. When we metonymize, we are responsible for the outcome. Identification is therefore not a passive occurrence but a chosen action, and management of the paradox of identification is an ethical choice.

The Paradox of Action: The Public and the Personal

We have been considering connections between broad public problems and personal implication in those problems. To move from the public to the personal requires a risky metonymization that may, in the end, scare the personalizing individual back to considering problems impersonally; the person

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 235

might then see problems as interesting but not personally relevant, just as we might know, for example, that election results in France will affect us in *some* way but not in a way that will motivate us to see any kind of personal involvement in the matter. Another route of movement from the public to the personal can be seen in the distinction between public initiatives or legislation and individual perceptions or action. It is one thing to think to oneself that "there ought to be a law," another thing to go out and actually do what one thinks needs to be done, or to alter one's deep-seated opinions and prejudices. You might think that the state should finance soup kitchens, for example, but simply *thinking* that is different from volunteering to work in a soup kitchen. The latter is a form of personalization.

The two fires in Milwaukee often called forth the first, nonpersonalizing kind of response in the form of demands for legislative action to address a particular problem. The city council quickly passed a law requiring landlords to maintain smoke detectors in rental property, and U.S. Senator Robert Kasten fired off a letter to the newspaper announcing legislation to help the poor heat their homes in winter (Kasten, Oct. 25). And around the same time, in response to the racial incidents on the Madison campus, a plan to grant free or reduced tuition to minorities was introduced (Deger, Nov. 12).

But the disasters also called forth texts that enabled personalization, urging specific personal action and a change in attitudes. One writer of a letter to the editor, who was from an almost entirely white suburb and bore an Eastern European name (Jankowski, Oct. 25), described her own experience as a volunteer at the second funeral; she also called for individual involvement in the long term, writing, "We as a community should experience the grief and work toward improving Inner City life so this need not happen again."

Personal Action and Loss of Vision

The paradox of action lies in the fact that the shift from public policy to individual action can sometimes be accompanied by a loss of the political vision, available at a broad and public level, that should guide individual action. To think in terms of broad sweeps of history, of the relations of large groups of people, and of economic and political trends, is to think in terms of underlying *causes* for misfortune and oppression. Institutionalized racism, for instance, is not something that can be grasped by looking just at this or that specific example, isolated instances that can almost always be rationalized on a case-by-case basis. Institutional racism is grasped by thinking at precisely the level of broad, public issues, to see how thousands of acts of oppression (by the police, by the class system, by the schools, by other institutions) cumulatively take their toll in shaping broad patterns of social relations. That is a

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 236

kind of understanding that simply cannot be grasped if I restrict my vision to a particular African-American woman, no matter how many insults and slurs she may suffer; one cannot understand her experiences as embedded in broad patterns of oppression unless one backs off to connect her experience with that of millions of others.

The paradox at the broad, public level is that political action and involvement can then take the form of simply "letting Congress do it," thus refusing individual responsibility and involvement. The paradox at the level of personal decision and action is that such involvement may proceed in ignorance of the broader forces that have caused problems to occur in the first place. And the risk of that kind of ignorance is that it can turn political action and involvement into patronization. Action directed toward those less fortunate than ourselves, if uninformed by the *causes* of those misfortunes, can turn into a kind of "alms-giving" that soothes our consciences but blinds us to our implication in those causes for misfortune. The paradox of action, then, can threaten to paralyze us, preventing the ethical choices involved in metonymizing complex issues into the personal.

The Paradox in Milwaukee

One can see this paradox occurring at the level of individual action and attitudes in Milwaukee. A representative anecdote of such a paradox is the story of a white woman who was going to buy some cigarettes with two dollars and heard of the second fire (Gill and Romell, Nov. 5). This woman went directly to the neighborhood of both fires, knocked on the door of a complete stranger, and gave the two dollars to the African American woman who answered the door as a token of her concern. One can sympathize with the motive for personal, individual action in response to this tragedy, not as an isolated instance (in which case the donation would be irrelevant) but as a metonymy of long-term racial problems. Evidently it was the metonymization of social problems into particular people living in a specific neighborhood that gave the cigarette smoker a place in which to act. But one can also read in this story (though I found no direct acknowledgement of it in the newspaper article) how patronizing the woman's action was—how little it cost her, how proud she may have felt about her "gift," and how that gift may have served to blind her to her own involvement in the broader forces that led to the fire in the first place.

Of more concern, however, is the implication of African Americans themselves in such patronization. For it turns out that the African American woman favored with the two dollars is touched by the gesture: "That $2 meant more than the smoke alarm legislation," she said (Gill and Romell,

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 237

Nov. 5). The paradox is that on the one hand, the public policy action of the smoke alarm legislation stands a good chance of saving lives, yet it invites no personal action to overcome problems; on the other hand, the personal action of giving two dollars may seem more involved, but it is also too easy and leads to an avoidance of uncomfortable questions.

A similar example reported at about the same time described a white man who sought to do something to help untrained and jobless African American teenagers. He hired a skilled African American carpenter to remodel inner-city houses while simultaneously teaching his skills to those teenagers. On the surface it seems like a worthwhile, concrete action on the part of the white man. Yet it was reported that "Wigdale [the white man] believes that young African American men don't have enough role models and recognized one in Coleman [the African American carpenter]" (Lynch, Oct. 22). Disturbing questions arise in response to such a statement: How can Wigdale know what it's like to be a "young African American man"? Who is he to judge that Coleman would make a good role model for the young men? Will Wigdale then hire those young men once they are trained? What responsibilities for African American joblessness must be borne by the construction industry in general, and how might Wigdale's actions allow him, and others, to overlook those responsibilities?

African Americans "In Need of Help"

The paradox of action at the personal level is intensified by news reports of African Americans "in need of help," particularly reports that portray such help as coming *not* from African Americans themselves or from within African American culture, but from the white community. One telecast concerning the second fire (News 4, Oct. 15) featured an older brother of the victims who turned directly to the camera and instructed the viewing audience to avoid space heaters at any cost. He claimed personal responsibility for having turned off one of the smoke alarms and absolved the white landlord from any blame in the fire. Such claims, even if true, hide the broader forces, such as unemployment and substandard housing, that led to this family's problems in the first place.

Even more pointed was an interview during this time period with a group of African American students who were attending a predominantly white school on the south side of the city, far from their homes. One student described her previous, neighborhood school as "too roguish. It's bad." Another said that teachers in predominantly white schools "are more educated," while another claimed that predominantly African American schools are "a lot of trouble" (Gilbert, Nov. 9). The message of this interview was that

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 238

African Americans are *in need* of whites, an attitude that intensifies the patronizing stance of some who would become personally involved in racial issues. Within such a context, even those arguments for self-help made by African Americans themselves become fodder for those who would focus more on the idea that help is needed. As one African American leader is quoted as saying about his own culture's statistically lower performance on tests of academic achievement, "It has nothing to do with ability. It has to do with work. We watch more television than anyone else in America" (Mulvey, Nov. 5).

The specter of African Americans "in need of help" extended beyond Milwaukee in the discourse available at the time of the fires. During this same time period, Michael Jackson's album *Bad* was released, as were numerous publicity photos depicting the startling changes that had been wrought in him by cosmetic surgery. In short, Jackson's appearance had taken, since his early days with the Jackson Five, a marked turn for the Caucasian. Guensburg (Oct. 6) reported the shocked reaction of African American teenagers in Milwaukee: "He looks like a ghost. He looks like the bogeyman," and "He's lost some of his soul." Famous African Americans such as baseball player Ozzie Smith were quoted as saying, "I don't mind a guy trying to look different, but Lord, there's got to be a limit." African American psychologist Diane Pollard noted, "I find it psychologically interesting. It's really eccentric behavior. It does send a negative message about being African American." An accompanying article described Mr. Jackson's eccentricities, including sleeping in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber and attempting to buy the bones of the "Elephant Man" (De Atley, Oct. 6).

Stories about Michael Jackson, like the story about the African American teenagers attending a white school, portray African Americans "in need of help"; such stories also suggest that African Americans get that help not from themselves or their culture, but from whites and white culture. Such an undercurrent supports a stance of condescension and patronization by whites who might become personally involved in racial issues; in turn, any action taken by these whites becomes a missionary involvement—a stooping to conquer, a "giving of alms" to those who have no other resources. Such is the stance created for those who would metonymize racial problems into images of desperate, incompetent, or eccentric African Americans who seem incapable of succeeding without white help.

Some Solutions

The problems of identification and action, and the paradoxes one encounters when attempting to personalize broad public issues, are complex. Such

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 239

problems are closely connected to the ways in which people order the world for themselves. Certainly, other people may be constructed as like or unlike me, thus aiding or hindering my identification with them. But because people are complex sources of texts, the ways we construct others as like or unlike ourselves include how we construct stances, or roles, for others and for ourselves.

Let us now consider how the paradoxes of identification and action may be minimized through a conscious awareness of how people, whites in particular, understand the general public problem of racial issues and construct a personal role for themselves within those issues. I believe that with this set of problems, as with any others, an awareness of how we use the texts of popular culture—and of *other* ways in which we might order our experience—is liberating and subversive. And as argued in Chapter 3, that is the highest calling for the critic and teacher of rhetoric: to make people aware of both how we now, and how we might in the future, understand complex problems (in this case those revolving around race relations).

Reciprocal Personalization

Racial issues tend to be reciprocal. That is to say, what one says about African Americans can and should imply actions or attitudes appropriate for whites. But that reciprocity does not always occur *explicitly, consciously, strategically*. What happens in the readings of the fires offered above is that the *fire victims* are metonymized as certain images, but those doing the metonymizing are not. Whites construct explicit positions for African Americans as victims—as helpless, violent, and irresponsible—yet they construct no explicit positions for themselves. Whites are implicitly constructed, then, as patrons or superiors, as those who can give alms or advice, like benevolent aunts and uncles. Whites construct Michael Jackson as a dancing bear, but they do not consciously see that they must reciprocally define themselves as bear baiters.

It is this willingness to metonymize others, combined with a failure to see oneself as a metonymy (a symbol of larger forces and issues), that contributes to the paradoxes of identification and action. In regard to the paradox of identification, for example, when others become metonymized images that are strange and different, the strangeness is always in relation to an idealized vision of the self that is very likely an unexamined one. To look to my own side of the equation or inequality requires me to "unpack" that vision of myself—to confront it and make decisions about whether I wish to retain it or not. The ethics of creating one stance or subject position or another are in that way brought to my attention, and I am able, then, to make a conscious ethical choice.

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 240

Metonymizing Yourself

In regard to the paradox of action, individual action is divorced from larger social issues if I refuse to see myself acting as a metonymy, a metonymy in relation to the metonymy that I construct for African Americans. For to see myself as a metonymy would require me to ask, "A metonymy of what?" With the particular issue of race relations, constructing a position for myself within a metonymy might lead me to see that I too am implicated in the social conditions that I metonymize into concrete images of African Americans. Since those are the images that will guide and motivate my action, an awareness of my implication in them could preserve a useful tension between my own individual action and my social awareness.

Such an awareness, and such a tension, might lead me to realize that I benefit from reduced competition for adequate housing, for example. I also benefit from inadequate wages paid to produce the products I buy and the stores that I shop in. I benefit from the excess profits made at the expense of workers and the poor by companies, the stocks of which support my universities and retirement funds. I benefit from a pool of cheap, even desperate labor willing to do jobs that I would not do under any circumstances. Among some of the people I identify as family and friends are people whose racism contributes directly to the oppression of people of color. I have received the benefits of a disproportionate allocation of public school resources to the schools I attended and to the almost exclusively white college preparatory courses in which I was enrolled within those schools.

None of these reflections need lead to guilt on my part, since I did not cause or initiate the system which brought them about. These reflections should, however, spark a crisis of ethical decision about the extent to which I participate in reproducing such a system. I did not invent racist oppression, but I can become aware that I lie safely cradled in its benefits to whites. To see myself as having something to do with the death of more than a dozen people crowded into a house that burned in the inner city, and to see myself as implicated in some of the reasons why Diane Washington could not pay her gas bill and had to rely on a faulty space heater, can lead to a change in my ability to identify with the people involved in the fire. And it can also change the role of my personal political action from something designed solely to help *them* into something designed to help *me* as well.

Metonymizing Others

A second strategy for minimizing the paradoxes of identification and action is to metonymize more strategically, more carefully, and with more

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 241

awareness. One of the prime ways to do so is to find images that correspond to smaller and more carefully differentiated groups. Very few of the press reports I studied during the period under analysis attempted to differentiate among African Americans either explicitly or implicitly. Heightened public awareness of the problems befalling African Americans in the inner city focused on poor, inner-city African Americans as stand-ins for a whole race, an entire demographic category. The overcrowded household in the first fire and the large and seemingly irresponsible Washington family in the second fire came to represent not just the limited category of impoverished African Americans, but African Americans in general.

When one over-metonymizes in response to the two fires, such over-metonymizing exacerbates the paradoxes of identification and action. It is difficult to identify with entire social groups. If an entire group is metonymized with a negative image, the public is left with few symbolic resources for localizing the damage—that is, for understanding that the group is actually complex and that only one aspect of it is represented by the present image. Recognizing that such an image is limited can mean that failure to identify with the image will then not be read as failure to identify with an entire group; in this case, hope for future identification with other parts of the group may be kept alive. Action directed toward specific images or situations may be less likely to be turned into patronization if people remain aware that the action is directed toward a limited goal, and that other people who are like the target of this action in some ways may *not* be in need of help, may indeed be in a position to give help as well. If my actions are no longer perceived as "helping African Americans," but instead are understood as helping a specific group of people, then I am less likely to see my actions in a grandiose light. But I am also aware, then, that there remains a large group of other African Americans, and the resources of African American culture itself, that my actions do *not* affect. And those other resources may then be seen as vaster and more meaningful than my own efforts in this one isolated case.

Resources for Careful Metonymy

Some articles available to the public at the time of the fires did provide the potential for reminding readers of such differentiation among African Americans, and consequently, of the potential for self-help and resourcefulness within the African American community. A historical article by Donald Jackson (Oct. 22) describes an African American dean at Boston University, representing a more restricted group of well-educated urban African Americans, moving into an area of Beacon Hill (a neighborhood in Boston) that was populated by African Americans in the eighteenth century. The

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 242

move is a reclamation of African American history, by African Americans. Closer to home, St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church in Milwaukee is portrayed as a strong, financially secure institution that serves the community and is a bastion of self-help and self-reliance within the inner city (Breyfogle, Oct. 22).

As construction of images moves toward smaller and more differentiated categories, metonymy moves toward synecdoche—that is to say, from reduction toward representation. Synecdoche is a trope of representation rather than reduction. The Washington family as a metonymy of all African Americans must always remain just that, a metonymy. But it may very well work as a synecdoche for poor, divorced, biracial families in the inner city, if that kind of representation is the only symbolic task to which it is put. Synecdoche gives way to metonymy when our images stand for issues or problems that, in their entirety, are too large to comprehend from any perspective. Breaking up those issues into manageable categories which can then be represented through synecdoche may be the best symbolic strategy to pursue.

Stepping Back from the Critique

Let me now step back and become critically self-conscious for a moment: What good has this criticism done? If these reflections on the paradoxes of identification and action seem sensible to you, then your ability to see how some texts work in popular culture has been expanded.

Students want relevance in their education, though they may not often have an explicit desire to be *changed* by relevant education. From the perspective of rhetorical criticism, relevance in education has to do with showing students how they are constrained culturally in the ways they experience the texts that surround them. Relevance means showing students alternative ways to remake the world into something fairer, more just, and more equitable. Ancient rhetoricians trained their students to manipulate meaning in the forums of the day. Today, meaning is managed on many fronts besides that of the public speaking platform.

Meaning is managed by the people of Milwaukee as they read their newspapers and watch their televisions. How that meaning is managed will affect, I think, whether we sit passively and allow our experience to be shaped for us, whether we rouse ourselves to give two dollars to African American strangers in the inner city, or whether we see the real possibilities for change in ourselves, in how we experience, and in the worlds we make together. The equipment for living that you as students have is not neutral machinery. It is morally and ethically loaded, and critics who study how the rhetorical dimensions of popular culture work as that equipment serve as symbolic engineers.

05-Brummett-4863.qxd 1/16/2006 5:54 PM Page 243

We might also think of how the criticism in this chapter has used the dramatistic/narrative critical perspective. You will recall that the key idea to that approach is that discourse itself will generate certain motives as a result of how language or other signs work within the discourse. In other words, the dances and moves that words go through are actually what motivate the users and receivers of the words. In this chapter we have noted that to personalize public issues requires turning those issues into discourse, or "textualizing" the issues. We have to talk or write about complex issues such as race relations in order to get a handle on them. But what happens in the talking or writing? When we squeeze real life into metonymies, what do the metonymies do to how we think about and react to the real life situation? This chapter has show how paradoxes arise, not just from "real life" experience but from the textual, discursive act of metonymizing itself.

Note

1. I have observed a special convention for references in this chapter. All of the references to telecasts or articles here are from 1987, so I have not included that year in the citations within the text. And all the articles are so short as to be no more than one or two pages; therefore, I have not included page numbers in the citations within the text. (Page citations for all print references do appear in the bibliographic listings at the end of the book.)