Imagine There’s No President: The Rhetorical Secret and the Exposure of Valerie Plame

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Covering a wide range of public discourse from 2003 to 2010 about CIA agent Valerie Plame, this essay contributes a novel rhetorical theory of secrets. By contrast to other critiques of the Bush-era secrecy that focus on policies the administration kept concealed from the public, I suggest that rhetoric is the means by which subjects figure the secret, to be understood as knowledge in the fact that the subject cannot know. To make this argument, I draw on the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis and the rhetorical tropes of repetition, caesura, and synecdoche.

Keywords: Valerie Plame; Secret; Synecdoche; Caesura; Repetition

In early 2003, President George W. Bush delivered a controversial State of the Union address, alleging that Iraq was conspiring with Niger to purchase raw materials for nuclear weapons. In July of the same year Joe Wilson IV, who had acted as envoy to Niger for the CIA, published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* titled “What I Didn’t Find in Africa.” The editorial chastised the Bush administration for misrepresenting factual information and accused the executive of war-mongering. Little more than a week later, *Washington Post* columnist Robert Novak revealed the clandestine identity of Wilson’s spouse, CIA agent Valerie Plame. Seeing the connection between the July 4 critique and the July 15 information leak, Plame and Wilson were outraged, opening a federal investigation of the White House that culminated in the conviction of Vice Presidential Aide I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby. In
2007, Libby was found guilty on counts of obstruction of justice, perjury, and issuing false statements. He was penalized with a hefty fine, two years of probation, and a thirty-month term in a federal penitentiary, which was quickly commuted. In 2010, the Wilson–Plame story was released as a feature film called “Fair Game,” an alleged reference to republican strategist Karl Rove’s statement that Plame’s identity had been “fair game” in Joe Wilson’s flame war.

This essay takes up the Plame scandal to critique executive secrecy but rejects the conventional hypothesis that secrets are only (or even primarily) strategies of concealment. Such a view is, I contend, emblematic of a traditional view of the secret. A traditional view of the secret is one in which individuals strategically employ rhetoric to conceal their actions or dissimulate their motives. My task is instead to describe a more deeply rhetorical secret that challenges the very foundation of this traditional conception, namely that individuals have autonomy over the act of revelation. Quite to the contrary, I suggest that the secret—what subjects always already do not know—is prefigured as trope. The theoretical upshot of my argument is to resituate rhetoric as the way that subjects establish that they don’t know something, and how such not-knowing resonates across political discourse. From this perspective, rhetoric is ontological: it figures “what the presidency is” prior to an overt act of revelation.

The title of this essay illustrates the difference between the traditional and rhetorical secret. The traditional view might interpret the phrase “Imagine there’s no President” to suggest that, from 2000 to 2008, mastermind Vice President Dick Cheney secretly wielded power in the White House. Conceived as the rhetorical secret, by contrast, “Imagine there’s no President” insists that George W. Bush was prefigured as a non-existent president through tropes of repetition, caesura, and synecdoche. Rhetorically, the secret is the discursive reminder that President George W. Bush will have been missing in action.

I do not argue that secrets, particularly the secret of Valerie Plame, caused George W. Bush’s downfall. Rather, I follow the advice of David Zarefsky, who argues that rhetorical criticism is most forceful when it addresses matters of uncertainty, probability, and contingency. I part ways only with Zarefsky’s conclusion that presidential speech signifies the substance and strategy of the man behind it. I believe the very opposite: discourse concerning the presidency, academic or otherwise, is a retroactive, public, and rhetorical effect. Under the circumstances considered in this essay, the secret is subversive because, as a rhetorical effect, it continues to shape public recollections of the George W. Bush presidency.

It is also worth noting that the Plame incident was not the most pressing issue during Bush’s tenure. For most, Valerie Plame was an unremarkable figure. Even the feature film about Plame performed poorly in box office sales, grossing only $9.5 million in the United States, its total profit barely exceeding production costs. There is little evidence to suggest that the public followed her case closely. But that is precisely the point. What makes of Plame’s plight a potent critique of the presidency is her invisibility. Her repeated silencing, redaction, and disavowal are agential in
retrospect because they register the secret as the *incapacity* to represent the presidency.

In the essay that follows, I will first present the traditional ways in which secrets have been conceived as a problem of the presidency, focusing in particular on the presidency of George W. Bush. I will then offer a Lacanian-inflected, rhetorical rethinking of how subjects prefigure the secret. Finally, I will describe the transformation of the George W. Bush presidency through the lens of the Valerie Plame scandal.

**The Rhetorical Criticism of Secrets and the George W. Bush Presidency**

Secrecy is a long-recurring motif of rhetorical scholarship. Edwin Black describes the public as divided by the response to rhetorical forms of secrecy and disclosure. While “one public, convinced that concealment is bad, is disposed to embrace … values [of] disclosure, openness, sharing, being equal, being unacquisitive,” another is “convincéd that some knowledge can be dangerous.”

Joshua Gunn observes that secrets are necessary for collective civic identity: “It is not the fact that secrets are known or can be known that keeps folks from joining civic groups. … Rather, it is the notion that the secret is exhausted, that there is nothing more to sustain a public, that there is no mystery.”

Charles Morris III theorizes the addressivity of secrets with “the fourth persona,” which transmits repressed content through a textual wink, and Nathan Stormer notes of the 1955 Planned Parenthood Association Conference, the “statistical measurement of bodies and conduct” made the past a secret so as “to meet the needs of governmentality.”

Notably, rhetorical critics have also accounted for secrets as a uniquely rhetorical problem of political discourse. In 1965, Richard Hofstadter suggested that “the paranoid style” was a key strategy of militant conservative leaders in the “conflict between secrecy and democracy.”

Drawing on Hofstadter’s essay in 1981, G. Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos noted that the paranoid style was no longer a conservative phenomenon. “Mainstream speakers and audiences” had appropriated this style to critique President Richard Nixon during the infamous Watergate scandal. Conspiracies, once revealed, demonstrated that “the rhetoric of the conspirators is revealed to be nothing more than the perpetuation of fantasy. The past motives, actions, and statements of the conspirators are seen as part of a twisted, secret world.”

Echoing Goodnight and Poulakos in 1991, Anne Norton argued that the “revelation” of Nixon’s corruption was an “ironic inversion.” The scandal transformed Nixon from a master of political secrets into a secretive subject:

The President was no longer on display; he was under surveillance. He could command the gaze, but he could also be commanded to subject himself to it. He had held covert meetings, kept secrets. Those meetings, and those secrets, were revealed. The end was multiply ironic. Nixon’s attempt to extend his surveillance over the Democratic party, and then to conceal this attempt, were the occasions for his undoing. The means that he had employed to keep his subordinates under his surveillance became the means for making his secrets public.
Conceived ironically, Nixon’s secrets were dangerously double-edged. Whereas the president had once been able to conceal his political maneuvers, he was now subject to the public’s gaze. From Hofstader to Norton, the key observation of rhetorical criticism is that secrets cut back. Secrets are neither a uniquely conservative phenomenon, nor do they necessarily serve the ruling interest.

Following the George W. Bush presidency, academic discourse about executive secrets boomed. In the 2007 *Presidential Secrecy and the Law*, for instance, Robert Pallitto and William Weaver contend that Bush set a legal precedent for regular executive unilateralism, suggesting that “because much of the power given to the president is backed by new and increasing bureaucratic machinery and legal processes, it is unlikely that executive secrecy and clandestine operations will subside.” The claim is representative of a more general scholarly perspective. Shirley Anne Warshaw suggests that many dangerous legal precedents are owed to Vice President Dick Cheney’s secret policy agenda. Timothy Naftali comments that “a vast chasm separated public views of national priorities from the U.S. national security establishment’s concerns about terrorism.” Jasbir Puar argues that secret interrogation facilities articulated the war on terror with a brutal and dehumanizing homonationalism. Scholars agreed, in short, that the secretiveness of the Bush administration violated a fundamental public trust.

The secrecy boom has been taken up by rhetorical scholars in at least three ways. First, executive secrecy has been critiqued as an evidentiary weakness of official wartime discourse. Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues, for instance, that the case against Saddam Hussein was built upon circumstantial evidence, and the path to public revelation was “circuitous.” Zarefsky similarly contends that the accusations against Iraq were misleading because they refused the burden of proof. Because Iraq was “allegedly developing its weapons in secret,” Powell’s address to the United Nations encouraging multilateral military intervention hinged on circumstantial evidence: “In the parlance of Watergate, there was no ‘smoking gun.’” Critics of argument, in short, have been equipped to respond to the exigency of secrecy because it identifies how evidence was deliberately omitted from the public record. A second group of rhetorical scholars has drawn attention to the implicit obfuscation of presidential public address. Donovan Conley and William Saas argue that redaction, esoteric language, and stonewalling (or to deliberately “obstruct all possible avenues for self-exposure”) characterize the Bush administration’s “occultic style” that kept forceful interrogation policies a secret. Stephen J. Hartnett and Jennifer Merceica similarly suggest that speech acts meant to “confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation” are part of the “post-rhetorical presidency” inaugurated by George W. Bush. Because presidential secrets are masked by rhetorical strategy, they prevent democratic exchange and encourage public disinterest. Finally, other rhetorical critics have understood Bush-era secrecy as an important precedent for future political secrecy. In her careful discussion of the legal theory of the Unitary Executive, Vanessa Beasley suggests that President Ronald Reagan illustrates how “a chief executive’s expanded rhetorical skill set accompanies an expansion of his office’s powers.” Such expansion was dramatically amplified by the George W. Bush
administration, which engaged in similar efforts to balance an affable public president with the clandestine expansion of executive powers. Mary Stuckey agrees when she argues that the Reagan- and Bush-era restrictions upon archival records repress presidential scholarship for the foreseeable future. Pointing a finger at Bush’s Executive Order 13233, Stuckey claims that Bush launched an all-out assault on the practice of preserving and opening presidential documents by reducing the power of the archivists over presidential papers and increasing the power of individual presidents—and their heirs—to determine what gets opened and, more importantly, what remains closed.

As a whole, these accounts of Bush-era secrecy suggest that executive concealment promotes bad scholarship, obscures the national policy agenda, promotes mass ignorance, and sanctions the use of impoverished evidence. Whether taken as the improper use of warrants, stylistic opacity, or official acts of concealment, executive secrets pose a clear and present danger because of what they hide. The solution, therefore, is to reveal the presidential secret: to employ better reasoning, encourage transparency in presidential public address, and open legislative gateways to the presidential archive.

Like these scholars, the key exigence for my study is the Bush administration’s unusual levels of secrecy. However, in the sections that follow I offer a heterodox account of the secret in contrast to the received account of secrets-as-concealed content. As I will argue, rhetoric might be better understood as the mode by which the secret—the unknown immanent to discourse—is materialized.

Rethinking Rhetoric and the Secret

For rhetoric to refigure its relation to the secret, the secret must be understood as something other than the particular contents it conceals. As I will argue, psychoanalytic theory opens the way toward this new and rhetorical way of thinking of the secret by inviting us to attend to its formal features. I explain in the following paragraphs that psychoanalytic theorists describe the secret as one of two related modes: that of enjoyment and that of the structural dynamic. The remainder of my theoretical discussion explores the psychoanalytic concept of the structural dynamic and the crucial role that rhetorical trope plays within it. The section ends by exploring how trope figures the secret in the context of the Reagan presidency, foreshadowing the tropological analysis of the Valerie Plame affair to follow.

First, the Lacanian concept of enjoyment describes the compulsive return to a site of unresolved tension; a return, importantly, that occurs without conscious awareness that one is repeating the same behavior under different circumstances. Enjoyment, according to Christian Lundberg, is a psychoanalytic term that describes how the subject assures itself of its identity. It is also, for Lacan, an unconscious repetition or redundancy in which subjects return to past habits or routines as safe templates for present behavior. Lundberg reminds us that the term enjoyment must not be conflated with pleasure. This is because the subject’s efforts to make sense of her- or himself through repetition often come at the cost of anxiety, particularly when...
subjects repeat a learned response to trauma. Thus, the pain of enjoyment forms one rationale for the psychoanalytic cure: the past must be re-signified to relieve the subject’s quotidian stress.

According to Diane Rubenstein, presidential secrets are one form of political enjoyment because they perpetuate an anxious compulsion to search. Describing the highly publicized Iran-Contra affair, for instance, Rubenstein argues that confidential hearings, briefings, and missing intelligence reports shored up tremendous public speculation regarding President Ronald Reagan’s “hidden referential content,” or the clandestine truth that Reagan concealed. The legal proceedings, however, never recovered hard evidence that the president had foreknowledge of the incident. Public observers were thereby sanctioned to never find what they were looking for, or to always be on the hunt for the president’s truth. Thus, the political enjoyment of the secret assumed the form of a search that was obsessive, circular, and self-defeating. Rubenstein goes on to note that the enjoyable obsession with secrets also marks an important shift in American political life. Secrets replace the “pursuit of happiness” with an imperative to pursue a self-defeating enjoyment.

Second, the secret also takes the form of a structural dynamic, or a rhetorical patterning of discourse. Rubenstein, quoting Shoshana Felman, writes: “[k]nowledge … is not a substance but a ‘structural dynamic … (which) comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speakers which both say more than they know.” Whenever a subject exchanges speech with another subject, there is always an unconscious something more to her discourse than can be recognized. This “something more” is the ongoing and unfinished structure of one’s interaction, a yet to be formalized pattern of discursive exchange. This is the structural dynamic: the secret beyond content, a rhetorical structure that is both immanent and invisible in discourse.

Notably, the psychoanalytic pairing of enjoyment and the structural dynamic is different from comparable immanentist accounts of secrecy. The most prominent alternative comes from Jack Bratich, who argues that government security apparatuses have made “secrecy immanent to everyday life.” If Bratich argues that recent security and activist programs have naturalized secrecy as a culturally dominant political discourse, then psychoanalysis counters this historicism with a uniquely rhetorical formulation of immanence. Parsed in psychoanalytic terms, immanence testifies to the force of rhetoric, herein understood as a retroactive patterning of discourse. Taken together, enjoyment and the structural dynamic illustrate how the secret is more than concealed content. As I will argue, the secret is also prefigured as rhetorical trope. The following sections explain that identifying these rhetorical forms requires the naming of a structural dynamic, modeled here by Jacques Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter.”


The interrelationship between enjoyment and the structural dynamic receives its clearest formulation in Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter,” which explores
Edgar Allan Poe’s short story of the same name. The seminar underscores the key point that secrets are not just content, but also and more crucially the relations of the characters structured by it. In Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” a Queen receives a letter that implicates her in disloyalty to her King. She is blackmailed by the Minister D-, who steals the letter. The Queen subsequently enlists the help of an analyst, Auguste Dupin, who successfully retrieves her letter.

As Lacan informs us, a crucial element of the “The Purloined Letter” is the fact that it consists of two recurring scenes. The first transpires in a “royal boudoir” where the King and Queen are present. The Queen receives the compromising letter in the King’s presence, whereupon the Minister D- enters. The Minister quickly recognizes that the Queen is keeping a secret, and casually drops a decoy letter on the table. He then steals the dangerous document as the Queen watches, unable to stop him. The second scene features Poe’s analyst, Auguste Dupin. At this time, the Queen has commanded the Prefect of the Police to retrieve the letter. Although his officers employ state-of-the-art scientific techniques to find the letter, no amount of searching can uncover it. Exhausted by their failure, the Prefect consults Dupin for assistance. When Dupin enters the Minister’s home for a casual visit, he immediately sees the letter perched in plain sight, crumpled and “apparently thrust carelessly” between the legs of the Minister’s mantel. Artfully forgetting his snuffbox on the table, Dupin returns the following day, and substitutes the letter with a facsimile that bears his own signature.

Lacan instructs us to read the structural dynamic of “The Purloined Letter” as three recurring relations between characters and the Queen’s secret. The King’s oblivious gaze recurs in the Prefect’s blindness, the Queen’s concealment recurs when the Minister crumples and hides the letter, and the Minister’s theft recurs when Dupin leaves his own false copy. The three relations to the letter are blindness, concealment, and realignment. The first relation is blind to the letter (the King, and then the Prefect of the Police). From this position, characters cannot see the secret, despite being implicated in it. The second relation hides the letter so as to maintain the status quo (the Queen, and then the Minister D-). The third purloins the letter, and thereby shifts the whole set of relations to it (the Minister D-, and then Auguste Dupin).

The fact that these relations recur is crucial, on the one hand, because they indicate that the secret is a site of narrative enjoyment or a topos to which characters unconsciously return. As characters shift across the plot like chess pawns, it becomes obvious that no one is in control of the secret. Characters are instead controlled by it. Shoshana Felman concurs:

What is repeated, in other words, is not a psychological act committed as a function of the individual psychology of a character, but three functional positions in a structure which, determining three different viewpoints, embody three different relations to the act of seeing—of seeing, specifically, the purloined letter.

Characters’ identities, in other words, depend upon which limited view of the secret that they take.
On the other hand, the recurring relations of the secret also illustrate the structural dynamic. In the story, the structural dynamic of the King, Queen, and Minister is a secret because these relations remain nascent, or unrealized, until they are repeated in the second scene. To borrow Rubenstein’s phrasing, the structural dynamic is “more than [the King, the Queen, and the Minister] know”: it is the secret that demands resolution. Dupin’s repetition, however, makes this dynamic visible. By re-staging the theft in the Minister’s apartment, his act of repetition effectively and retroactively grants form and meaning to the original scene.

The key continuity between enjoyment and the structural dynamic of “The Purloined Letter” is that the secret is not in the letter. Lacan even underscores Dupin’s refusal to let readers in on what it says. What instead characterizes the secret are the finite ways it can be taken. Unseen, left in plain sight, or purloined, it matters less what is in the Queen’s envelope than the way that it draws actors into its gravitational pull.

From Epistemology to Ontology in Rhetoric

The distinction between the tradition and the rhetorical secret strongly resembles the difference between rhetoric’s epistemological and ontological functions. Political philosopher Ernesto Laclau elaborates on the epistemological position when, drawing upon Cicero, he informs us that rhetoric is most often theorized as a means of coping with an empirical problem posed by the external world:

Cicero, reflecting on the origin of rhetorical devices, imagined a primitive stage of society in which there were more things to be named than the words available in language, so that it was necessary to use words in more than one sense, deviating them from their literal, primordial meaning. For him, of course, this shortage of words represented a purely empirical lack.31

Because there are more things in the world than names for them, rhetoric is a necessary compensatory mechanism, a way of allowing a single name to service multiple things. This use of rhetoric is therefore epistemological: it employs language improperly to make unnamed, empirical things knowable. This, however, is the idea that Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” critiques; empirical secrets that can be “known” fundamentally lack positive constancy. Instead, the secret is that there is no secret: the only positive constancy to the secret is its rhetorical form. Analogously, rhetoric positions language with respect to its own absolute incompleteness. The secret is that there is no whole of language; just as “The Purloined Letter,” language has no natural closure until rhetoric intervenes.

When Laclau informs us that rhetoric might also be conceptualized ontologically, he thus offers it as a response to the epistemological view. Conceived ontologically, what is lacking from language is not empirical, but rhetorical. In other words, if language is always finding more secrets, then the secret is better described as an internal feature of language rather than of the empirical reality it seeks to uncover:

Let us imagine, however, that this lack is not empirical, that it is linked to a constitutive blockage in language which requires naming something which is
essentially unnameable as a condition of language functioning. In that case the original language would not be literal but figural, for without giving names to the unnameable there would be no language at all.32

Rhetoric, conceived ontologically, allows language to cope with its secret, or its own always-present internal limit. Moreover, if rhetoric’s function is to give “names to the unnameable,” then the secret is not an empirical object that has been omitted from language. Joan Copjec explains:

The logic which says that an element is added to the structure in order to mark what is lacking in it should not lead us to imagine this element as an isolatable excess hidden beneath the structure. The excess element is, instead, located on the same surface as the structure, that is, it is manifest in the latter’s very functioning. It is under the species of default that the excess marker of lack appears, in the internal limitation that prevents the signifier from coinciding with itself.33

Read in this admittedly very different ontological way, rhetoric denotes the “excess element” of language, not the epistemic function of naming that Cicero assumed. It names the structural dynamic, or the conflict that resides “on the same surface as [language’s] structure.” Rhetoric is nonetheless imperceptible to those who use it—or better yet, those who are used by it. Moreover, these recurring conflicts prevent language from “coinciding with itself,” from knowing itself “wholly.” Rhetoric names the way that language copes with its immanent and imperceptible secret.

Tropes of the Secret, or Parts that are the W(hole)

The move toward an ontological rhetoric thus allows us to conceptualize the secret as a division that is added to language. Indeed, Lacan’s focus on the letter in Poe’s story is both figural and literal, and he deliberately plays off the two meanings. Poe’s letter is equally a sealed envelope and the signifier, a non-signifying element of language. What is common to both “letters” is that they signify or possess meaning only after a constituting division or break. Thus, the secret itself is merely division. It is the split between Poe’s two scenes, for instance, or between the letter’s different linguistic significations.

The function of rhetoric is to give a tropological structure to this division. As Barbara Biesecker argues, “the ‘rhetorical dimension’ of the text signifies not just the play of the tropological figures operating on its surface level, but also the (non) originary finessing of a division that produces the meaning of the text as such.”34 Rhetoric is not just textual content, but also the disruption that gives rise to this content. In the context of the “Seminar,” Biesecker might offer the following insight: Like the subversive repetition that grants “The Purloined Letter” narrative coherence, rhetoric is the suture for the secret. Rhetoric is not just in the text, but also and more crucially the symbolic structure of the text that grants it the appearance of fullness. Lundberg describes this apparent fullness as “the illusion of communion between subjects and their others,” or “feigned unicity,” which he summarizes as follows: “Because there is no automatic relationship of correspondence between signifiers and the world, there are a limited number of ways that a speaking subject can both employ a signifier as a referent to the
external world and differentiate it from other signifiers.” To Biesecker’s tropological “finessing,” Lundberg thus adds a “limited number of ways” by which textual divisions might be finessed. Lundberg’s focus on the rhetorical logic of feigned unicity—as tropology—leads him to metaphor and metonymy, to which Lacan most commonly refers. According to Lundberg, metonymy is “any contingent connection between signs or a series of signs” whereas metaphor is “a function whereby certain metonymic connections become particularly significant points of investment, exerting a regulatory role on a chain of signifiers by retroactively organizing the series of metonymic connections.”

Parsed in Lundberg’s terminology, the unrealized metonymic connections between the King, Queen, and Minister become concretized as metaphor, fashioning the letter as “a central figure with substantial gravity.” What I add to this taxonomy is a rigorous account of repetition, caesura, and synecdoche, distinct rhetorical modes of managing the division of the secret. Repetition and caesura, respectively, describe an unrealized recurrence of the structural dynamic and the retroactive coherence of the secret’s gap. By contrast to Lundberg’s account, these tropes refer specifically to the ways that metonymy and metaphor manage the secret. Indeed, the central tropological contribution of this essay is a reconsideration of synecdoche, which describes how the division of the secret is added to discourse.

Traditionally, synecdoche describes representational acts whereby some part of a whole comes to stand in for it. Diane Rubenstein, for instance, explains the traditionalist understanding of synecdoche as a “figure of integration suggestive of a qualitative relation. The example ‘He was all heart’ does not designate a part of the body (literally) as much as it designates a quality (empathy, compassion).” According to Laclau, however, synecdoche is something more than a substitution of part for whole:

I have asserted that, in a hegemonic relation, one particular difference assumes the representation of a totality that exceeds it. This gives clear centrality to a particular figure within the arsenal of classical rhetoric: synecdoche (the part representing the whole). It also suggests that synecdoche is not simply one more rhetorical device, simply to be taxonomically added to other figures such as metonymy and metaphor, but has a different ontological function.

The key to Laclau’s observation is that synecdoche has a “different ontological function” than metonymy and metaphor. If, as Laclau argues elsewhere, “[r]hetoricity ... is coterminous with the very structure of objectivity,” then synecdoche is ontologically significant because it performs the capacity for change inherent to this objective structure. Like Biesecker, Laclau argues that these tropes are not merely “the play of the tropological figures operating on [the text’s] surface level,” but are, more broadly, a finessing that determines a social whole into which subjects insert themselves as parts.

**Synecdoche and the Reagan Presidency**

Just as rhetoric does not remove the unknown from language but adds the secret to it, synecdoche does not substitute part for an unknown whole, but instead makes
another w(hole) known by introducing an additional part. Again from Laclau: “a part ... functions as the very condition of the whole, as its name, leading to that contamination between particularity and totality.”41 Synecdoche, in other words, does not substitute part for whole. It is instead a part that founds the w(hole). Put in psychoanalytic terms, the ontological synecdoche is always registered as uncanny: it is an experience of social reality as simultaneously the same and not the same as it once was.42

Rubenstein notes that scholars have often used synecdoche to substitute president Ronald Reagan’s persona for an essential feature of a contemporaneous political culture. As Reagan’s most critical commentators noted, the president’s blurring of historical fact and popular fiction was synecdochal for the whole contemporaneous political culture, making his tenure an era of misrepresentation, lies, and deceit. Yet, as Rubenstein notes, synecdoche remains an insufficient trope to describe the Reagan presidency. Media outlets did, after all, believe they could represent Reagan as a whole by drawing attention to his flaws. In contemporary times, this flawed assumption remains: American political culture often appears as if it could be represented as a totality or as if we could know the contents of each of its secrets. Joan Copjec describes how news media failed to convey the whole of Reagan’s hypocrisies and contradictions:

So absorbed were the news staffs in pinning down the president’s lies and errors—his referential failures, let us call them—that they neglected to consider the intersubjective dimension of the whole affair; they forgot to take account of the strength of the American audience’s love for Reagan. ... Americans didn’t love Reagan for what he said, but simply because he was Reagan.43

According to Copjec, Reagan is a signifier, like the Purloined Letter. Like the letter, it did not matter what Reagan said or meant. What instead mattered to Americans was how Reagan embodied a uniquely American je ne sais quoi: an unnamed excess that marked an inalienable feature of American civic identity. The conventional account of synecdoche, which would hold that some part of his presidency is representative of it “as a whole,” fails because no one empirical part could represent Reagan fully. Instead, Reagan is the secret, a site of divided investments. Reagan was not, in other words, a part that represented the whole, but just the opposite. For the journalists who sought to critique him, no one part of Reagan’s duplicitous persona could be elevated to the status of the whole. Reagan was instead a w(hole) into which Americans inserted their parts. Synecdoche, understood ontologically, is the way that a part—like Reagan—materializes the impossible but insistent demand for representing the social w(hole).

My concern with synecdoche—and, by extension, rhetoric—is not with the way that individuals create discourse with language to effect change. Neither is my present concern with (like Reagan’s critical media audience) the level at which everyone knows where the secret is supposed to be. Rather, like Lacan’s take on “The Purloined Letter,” my view of rhetoric concerns the logic of the story as it plays out in
retrospect, and the secret that puts characters in their place. My argument, put succinctly, is that rhetoric negotiates the secret as a condition of its own movement.

**Imagine There’s No President**

To extend this thinking, this essay turns to the Valerie Plame scandal. What rhetoric offers us in this circumstance is the understanding that, like Reagan, there was *no* part that could represent the George W. Bush presidency as a whole. Rather, Plame consistently *added* absent parts to Bush to show that something was missing. In the following sections, I adopt the tropes of *repetition*, *caesura*, and *synecdoche* to illustrate the rhetorical production of the secret during the Bush presidency. I begin by describing *repetition*, which shows how a missing correspondence between discourse and reality recurred and, in so doing, positively demonstrated the hiddenness of the Bush administration’s public discourse. Next, I turn to the rhetorical trope of *caesura*, which traditionally refers to the way a break or gap in meter confers meaning to a text. I adopt this trope to describe the way that Plame herself became a discursive marker that was assigned a missing content, and thus became a discursive point of investment that knitted together a diverse network of public meanings. Finally, I return to the trope of *synecdoche* to describe how the inflections of George W. Bush’s speech marked a change in the discursive w(hole) of his presidency.

**The Repetition of Joe Wilson’s Missing Link**

When George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, he offered the following rationale for going to war against Iraq: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” Just a week after Bush’s speech, Colin Powell appeared before the U.N. to make the case for multilateral war, using the same evidence Bush cited in his speech. But in March, just days before the United States officially declared war, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) declared that the evidence supporting the sixteen words had been a forgery. By then it was too late. Even as IAEA was delivering its public statement, the American military was “in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq” and Americans were decidedly in favor of war. Bush claimed he had received faulty intelligence from British sources. In the months that followed, journalists critiqued the administration’s enthusiasm to go to war, but a serious investigation of the White House would not materialize until September.

When an investigation *did* materialize, it was not because crucial evidence was discovered but, rather, because there was a startling consistency to the information that was missing from the official record. For this reason I take up the trope of *repetition* which marshals *missing links*, the lack of direct correspondence between speech and reality. For there to be a secret, the link between what Bush *said* he knew and what the White House *actually* knew would have to become clear. We might ask the following question: if the falsehood of the sixteen words was in the open, or “obviously displayed,” why was it that it went unrecognized, and what was the
process by which its “true” meaning was discovered? The answer I provide is that the illocutionary force of the sixteen words was altered through the introduction of a missing link between signifier—the words themselves—and signified—how they were materialized for the public.

The missing link between Bush’s words and political reality materialized on July 6, 2003 when Joseph Wilson IV published “What I Didn’t Find in Africa” in the New York Times. Not only did Wilson declare that the sixteen words were factually inaccurate, but he also asserted that the White House had known as much all along. A former diplomat, Wilson had been hired by the CIA in 2002 to determine whether Niger was planning to sell nuclear fissile materials to Iraq. When he returned to the United States, he informed the CIA that such a sale was “highly unlikely.” Wilson’s credibility was reinforced by the fact that he had been to Iraq and Niger and knew the political climate of both intimately. Famously, after Hussein had threatened to take the American embassy in Baghdad hostage, Wilson had confronted him before news cameras with a noose draped around his neck. As “the last American diplomat to meet with Saddam Hussein,” Wilson knew of that which Iraq was capable. Demonstrating the inconsistency between Bush’s words and geopolitical reality, Wilson was the missing link. Once he entered the picture, it became clear that someone within the Bush administration had actively suppressed intelligence.

As the missing link, Wilson created a situation in which Bush’s speech had to be reconnected with political reality. One such effort came five days after Wilson’s editorial, when CIA director George Tenet described Wilson’s trip as unconnected to the intelligence in Bush’s speech and claimed responsibility for the faulty intelligence himself. On July 14, 2003, Washington Post columnist Robert Novak took the war on Wilson a step further by taking aim at the former diplomat’s credibility. Novak claimed that Wilson had only been sent to Niger because his CIA-agent wife, Valerie Plame, had recommended him.

But these responses served only to make missing links the signature feature of the scandal. Wilson doggedly maintained that the White House’s retraction of the sixteen words indicated that his report had been “overlooked, ignored, or buried.” On July 20, 2003, the New York Times described how Tenet’s admission had fallen short of full disclosure by failing to name the “mystery inserter” in the White House, the missing link who quietly had written the crucial phrase into Bush’s speech. Moreover, Novak had generated entirely new missing links by anonymously citing “two senior administration officials” who had given away confidential details about Wilson’s spouse. Representative John Conyers backed popular accusations against Karl Rove, accusing him and the White House of orchestrating “a campaign to smear and intimidate truth-telling critics.” Senator Charles Schumer publicly demanded that attorney general John Ashcroft recuse himself from the proceedings. Ashcroft’s close political ties with conservative strategist Karl Rove, who was accused of leaking Plame’s identity, would compromise a “thorough, complete and fearless” investigation.

Political secrets emerged as consistent inconsistencies, as the disconnect between objective reality and the speech used to describe it. In other words, repeated missing links took on the quality of evidence because they demonstrated that something was
not being disclosed. Lacan describes this kind of evidence as “the certainty of doubt”: we are only assured that a truth exists when regular inconsistencies in our lived reality suggest that something remains hidden from us. In his reading of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, for instance, Lacan suggests that the objective of analysis is not to discover what a dream “truly” symbolizes, but rather to attend to moments where a dream’s meaning is most indecipherable. The most productive moments of the dream are those that cannot be unraveled—in which the subject can only say “I do not know, I am unsure.” As Lacan argues, “it is here Freud lays all his stress—doubt is the support of his certainty. He goes on to explain why—this is precisely the sign, he says, that there is something to preserve. Doubt, then, is a sign of resistance.”

Doubt marks a point of excess investment in a particular dream-thought, a symbolic re-coding that protects the conscious ego. The tremendous effort to disguise and re-symbolize the sixteen words in the wake of “What I Didn’t Find in Africa” told the public nothing of what might be hidden. Instead, it signaled beyond question that something was there to protect.

**Caesura, or the Erasure of Valerie Plame**

As the FBI investigation of the White House began, this unfound excess was most evident in references to and demands for “the truth.” On October 7, 2003, Bush appeared before the White House press corps, stating: “I want to know the truth. That’s why I’ve instructed this staff of mine to cooperate fully with the investigation. Full disclosure, everything we know, the investigators will find out.” Soon after, Daniel Ellsburg, famously credited with disclosing the Pentagon Papers to the public, urged informants that it was their ethical obligation to come forward with the truth, no matter the professional cost. Between the president’s endorsement of the investigation and the public’s suspicion of Bush insiders, the truth was something that needed to be found but no one possessed.

Secrets endure in the form of the *caesura*, an empty, divided, and interruptive figure that indicates a missing excess. Valerie Plame, I suggest, functions as the *caesura*, a point of symbolic condensation for a missing public truth. Plame is an exemplary instance of this rhetorical figure at work in public discourse for three reasons. First, because *caesuras* are absences, gaps, or holes in a text. Unable to speak openly about her past, Plame’s speech functioned in this way because she consistently deflected attention to the curious absence of details within her own speech. Unable to speak openly about her past, Plame’s speech functioned in this way because she consistently deflected attention to the curious absence of details within her own speech. Unable to speak openly about her past, Plame’s speech functioned in this way because she consistently deflected attention to the curious absence of details within her own speech. Second, *caesuras* indicate a break in historical time or continuity. Plame’s absent historical record and interruptive identity constituted an unfillable place in a national historical timeline by inviting speculation into the barred portions of her past. Finally, *caesuras* knit together a social whole. Because her professional past remained off the record, Plame’s absent identity became a point of collective identification for those skeptical of the Bush administration’s interest in preserving national security.

*Caesuras* are, in the first place, marks of absence or emptiness. In Greek and Latin prose, *caesura* indicates a division of the meter between the syllables of two different words. In musical language the *caesura* momentarily stops metrical time, often
turning the piece in an entirely new direction. Caesura is, in other words, a gap that appears to have no content, but which structures the prose, notes, and meter that surround it. Plame is in this regard exemplary because her speech was plainly missing even when she was thrust into the public spotlight.

Her first public appearance was at an award ceremony for Wilson at the National Press Club in October 2003, where he received accolades for having bravely exposed the Bush administration’s lies. The also-exposed Plame, however, “would not talk to reporters and attended the event only after receiving assurance that she would not be photographed.”61 Refusing to comment, Plame’s only mention was her emotional reaction to Wilson’s speech:

Wilson was most emotional when addressing his wife’s exposure. “I’m sorry for that,” he said, looking at her and fighting back tears. “If I could give you back your anonymity … I would do it in a minute.” She sat quietly, wiping away a tear.62

Plame first spoke to the press in a January 2004 Vanity Fair exclusive titled “Double Exposure.” Staging a sequel to the Novak editorial, the article tried to personalize the outing spy. But strangely, Plame was quoted only twice: first, when she briefly welcomed her interviewers at the door of her home and, second, when describing how she evaded public attention in the wake of the scandal. “When in the wake of the leak friends have asked how Plame foiled eager interlocutors, she has told them, ‘You just turn it around. People love to talk about themselves. There’s nothing more exciting than to have someone go, “Really?”’”63 By describing a communicative transaction in which she refused to exchange information with her interlocutor, Plame effectively exchanged an absence of discursive goods, and performed the same technique of deflection that she recounts. With the exception of Plame’s two quotations, the remainder of the ten-page exposé was devoted to Wilson, who was strikingly open-handed with personal details about his courtship with Plame.

The second feature of caesuras is that they are an interruption or split in the continuity of historical time. By inviting us to imagine the “nothing” against which a social totality forms, Joan Copjec describes historical continuity as the effect of an effacement or erasure.64 Certainly, Plame’s secret identity was “left behind” in the sense that her confidentiality agreement with the CIA prevents it from being recounted. But Plame’s absent identity stood for more than just herself because it symbolized a place in collective public memory to which no one could return.

This historical function of caesura is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in Plame’s autobiography, Fair Game. The book documents her life from the time she became a covert government employee until the trial of I. Scooter Libby, who was held accountable for many of White House’s unauthorized leaks. But Plame’s writing is heavily redacted. The publicly distributed version of the book preserves the CIA’s markup of her manuscript, as roughly half of the book—words, sentences, and full pages—are covered by solid black lines. When Plame appeared on The Daily Show on October 30, 2007, host John Stewart expressed his surprise at the amount of absent content, making the following remark:
They redacted things that I think are shocking. There’s one that I had to get to, the most incredible one. I just want to read this to you. This is what [sic] you were talking about your kids. “Switching between breast and syringe feedings when they took only a few ounces at each time and capturing each detail in a notebook soon took its toll. I was exhausted …” Redacted! What … how … is that part, “I was exhausted by spying on …” I don’t understand. What could possibly be there that would be redacted?65

As Plame underscored in reply to Stewart’s question, however, much of what had been redacted in the book was already in the public domain. The book had been redacted because she had avowed her employment with the CIA. The irony was that this was something everyone knew, but which she was forbidden from acknowledging. This missing part of Plame’s past did not, in fact, remove a part of the past from the historical record. Instead, it symbolized a prohibition on her speech that broke her history into fragmented and often unreadable sections. Thus, confronting the text’s literal black bars, Stewart’s mistake was to read what was behind the bar.66 Rather, these bars themselves signified a material separation between the known and the unknown. What appears to lie “beyond the bar” is Copjec’s “unfillable place”: a symbolic point of no return in the historical record.

The third and final characteristic of the caesura is that it constitutes a social whole around an empty signifier. According to Ernesto Laclau, the empty signifier is crucial for the formation of collective popular identities. In his words:

Let us consider the extreme situation of a radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions … people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. “Order” as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder “order” is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence.67

Plame functions as one such empty signifier. In her testimony before the House Oversight and Reform Committee in 2007, Plame appeared before members of the House of Representatives, offering an official statement that described the consequences of her outing and appealed for a strict separation of powers between national intelligence agencies and our governing political institutions:

The harm that is done when a CIA cover is blown is grave. … Lives are literally at stake. Every single one of my former CIA colleagues, from my fellow covert officers to analysts to technical operations officers to even the secretaries, understand the vulnerabilities of our officers and recognize that the travesty of what happened to me could happen to them. We in the CIA always know that we might be exposed and threatened by foreign enemies. It was a terrible irony that administration officials were the ones who destroyed my cover.68

As the point suturing together “foreign agents,” “CIA colleagues,” “fellow covert officers,” “analysts,” “technical operations officers,” and “secretaries,” Plame had been a critical node in the national intelligence network. The implication was that by removing her from the network, this series of connections had dissolved into a frayed mess. But at the same time, her speech before Congress also constituted a particular
social reality, one in which her absent professional identity functioned as a key rationale for a public critique of executive secrecy and subterfuge. This new political reality was one in which the president, a strong proponent of enhanced national security and greater protections for American citizens, had paradoxically weakened the nation’s security infrastructure and impaired its ability to effectively maintain its counter-terrorist network. To function as the empty signifier for a collective investment in a critique of presidential secrecy, Plame’s history had to remain unspoken, fragmented, and absent. The collapse of her old network of colleagues, officers, and analysts instituted a new truth: a healthy skepticism of American institutions that compromised its own citizens’ security from within.

As I have argued, the caesura is both a break in historical time and a past that occupies an “empty place” to which we cannot return. But historical time also begins at the caesura, which functions as a provisional point of origin for the discursive present. Inevitably, this means that in the wake of this scandal the reconstituted social was different from the one that came before it.

**Synecdoche and the Uncanny Presidency of George W. Bush**

Over the course of the Plame affair, there was a dramatic shift in public attitudes toward the Bush White House. During the 2000 election, Bush struck much of the American public as likable and trustworthy. Someone who was such a “straight-shooter” wasn’t capable of misleading the public because he always seemed to say what he meant. After 2004, however, Bush’s creative diction was murky, obscure, and illegible. Beasley notes that although Bush began his 2004 term “with an approval rating of 50 percent … [he] saw his popularity consistently decline over the next four years.”

As I have already stated, the Plame affair did not cause this decline, but eerily coincides with it. But this decline does clearly demonstrate how the rhetorical secret leaks into Bush’s speech, limiting the ways that his utterances could be interpreted. As I will argue, Bush’s speech did not change over the course of his presidency. Instead, this change illustrates how a secret, as knowledge in the fact that something is being kept hidden, materialized around the specific, synecdochal object of George W. Bush’s speech. What did change, in other words, was the public’s investment in his speech, which came to function as a public reminder that something was missing from it.

When George W. Bush began campaigning in 1999, he spoke with “flip, saucy playfulness,” demonstrating “plenty of confidence” which was “evident in his easy swagger.” His pre-election autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, had a “simple, not very deep tone that rings true.” His anti-intellectual straight-talk even appeared to be an asset in his campaign against Al Gore. Citing Fred Greenstein, the *New York Times* suggested that voters responded better to “a normal, laid-back, colloquial style.” And upon ascending to the presidency, Bush displayed confidence in developing relationships with other foreign leaders, despite his lack of familiarity with
international politics. As the Washington Post put it, “he was confident he could ‘look them in the eye’ and win them over with plain talk.”

Admittedly, Bush’s speech was criticized even before he rose to the presidency, although the main focus of this discourse was his simple-minded and blunt approach to politics. In 2000, Christopher Hitchens explained “Why Dubya Can’t Read.” In this verbal thrashing, Hitchens picked up on creative phrasings like “tacular” (tactical/nuclear) and “terriers” (tariffs/barriers). That same year, Bush delivered a stump speech wherein he famously noted that his opponents had “misunderestimated” him. The gaff earned him a popular neologism (“Bush-isms”) that remembered his war on semantics through routinely published and widely circulated “Top 10” lists. But Bush did little to correct his critics. In fact, compared with Al Gore’s robotic monotone, Bush-isms were a demonstration of Bush’s authenticity. In his first presidential address to a joint session of Congress, Bush outlined a plan for tax cuts in a terse and scripted speech. Critics called it “a self-confident performance by a president often criticized for his inability to communicate clearly.”

Bush was a real flesh-and-blood person, and his down-to-earth, everyday delivery problems confirmed it. The first and perhaps the most noteworthy sign that something was different about the president’s speech came immediately after his iconic “Mission Accomplished” moment on May 1, 2003. Addressing homeward bound soldiers, Bush’s speech declared the end of long-standing hostilities against Iraq. With a large, star-spangled marquis reading “Mission Accomplished” adorning one of the carrier’s control towers, Bush announced that “the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free.” But on Memorial Day, approximately three weeks after Bush’s announcement, The Washington Post noted an abrupt about-face by the administration. On July 14, 2003—just eight days after Wilson’s news release—Newsweek ironist Andy Borowitz lampooned Bush, suggesting that the “sixteen words” had been an obvious misreading: “Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein did not attempt to buy uranium in Africa, as earlier alleged, but merely geraniums.” After the summer of 2003, reporters noticed an absence of bipartisan “good will” toward the president. Following his re-election victory against Senator John Kerry, Time magazine dedicated their annual “Person of the Year” issue to Bush. In the issue’s feature article, Bush’s campaign communication director Dan Bartlett described the commander-in-chief’s creative speechwriting process:

“Every time we’d have a speech and attempt to scale back the liberty section, he would get mad at us,” Bartlett says. “Sometimes the president would simply take his black Sharpie and write the word ‘freedom’ between two paragraphs to prompt himself to go into his extended argument for America’s efforts to plant the seeds of liberty in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East.”

Offering his own metaphors, Bush framed his discourse around goals his party found unreflective of their ideas or attitudes. This framing was, predictably, met with considerable opposition. By contrast to his immensely popular 2003 State of the Union address, many remarked that Bush’s stump speeches rehearsed tired wartime rhetoric. Not only had he failed to make good on the promises of his 2001 campaign,
but the war in Iraq was ongoing, domestic policy had been entirely forgotten, and there was no promised change of course. After his first second-term speech to a joint session of Congress, the New York Times reported that the audience showed serious signs of fatigue. Where listeners had been ready to hear “ambitious sounding proposals on issues like tax-free savings … the president shelved the big ticket items and instead offered himself to the public as the hero of Baghdad and the scourge of terrorism.” Critics called this speech less popular than that delivered by President Bill Clinton in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. That year, the Village Voice noted that, in spite of his cowboy image, George W. “ain’t no cowboy,” because he “shot first” and “went back on his word.” In October, the New York Times published an article titled “All Those Promises: Do They Really Matter?,” noting how “dirty bombs” and domestic terrorism had led Bush to pursue anything but the humble foreign policy he had promised in his 2004 campaign. Bush’s former folksy appeal had been replaced with an artificial, tinny soapbox.

Bush’s own discourse about his speech even began to reflect an overwhelming suspicion that he was not in control of what he was saying. In 2006, after widespread concerns that Rumsfeld had been mishandling the war emerged, Bush issued the following statement: “I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I’m the decider, and I decide what is best. And what’s best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain as the Secretary of Defense.” In 2009, Bush released his post-presidential autobiography Decision Points. Plame was not mentioned in the book. Bush did, however, describe why he had refused to pardon Libby, who had been convicted of perjury during the Plame trial:

In the closing days of the administration, Dick [Cheney] pressed his case that Scooter should be pardoned. … Ultimately, I reached the same conclusion I had in 2007: the jury verdict should be respected. In one of our final meetings, I informed Dick that I would not issue a pardon. He stared at me with an intense look. “I can’t believe you’re going to leave a soldier on the battlefield,” he said.

Paradoxically, in the end Bush could only exercise his judgment by deciding not to exercise it. His speech was repeatedly, frequently, and incessantly invested in the question of what decisions he had or had not made over the course of his role as commander-in-chief. Even the title, Decision Points, implicitly defended that he had asserted decisions while in office. Near the end of his own presidency, Bush could not even exercise his judgment without explicitly referring to the decision-making power granted to the presidential voice. He explained in words what his speech should have implicitly performed.

Inviting the Unknown

In 2002, when Bush fainted in the Oval Office after choking on a pretzel, news agencies attributed the incident to his vigorous daily exercise routine. Running seven miles each day had left him with an over-healthy heart that was more prone to such spells. But just two years later, this tune had changed. In the summer of 2004, Richard Cohen noted that “Bush’s periodic two-hour midday exercise sessions and
his disinclination to work nights or weekends” had made it seem that the president was missing in action. Cohen called Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign a “great farce” because even as the president promoted a vigilant, round-the-clock national security agenda, he only seemed to be working part-time. Instead of addressing the nation’s security problems from Washington, Bush had “brought his work home with him,” retreating to his ranch in Crawford, Texas. In 2005, the Washington Post described Bush’s record-setting five week vacation as “the longest presidential retreat in 36 years.” His frequent leaves of absence “symbolize[d] a lackadaisical approach to the world’s most important day job.” Bush had also “spent a month at the ranch shortly before the September 11 2001, attacks, when critics asserted he should have been more attentive to warning signs.” The implication was that if Bush had been home, he might have seen the hijacked planes coming. Like his speech, even Bush’s houses had been re-signified: an empty White House just went to show that he had gone missing.

To imagine that there is no president is not to imagine he or she does not exist. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of how those things we know to be incomplete receive partial explanations, even in the highest offices of government. It is, moreover, an injunction to re-imagine the rhetoricity of secrets. Traditionally equated with techniques of concealment, deception, and subterfuge, secrets are conventionally understood to distort our reality, taken to be screens of mystification. The alternative I have offered here is to consider secrets as a production of discourse, a structural dynamic that illustrates the impossibility of knowing the w(hole). Even when the screens that cover our political discourse are demystified, these acts do not awaken the public. Secrets are the real “truth,” a rhetorical production of the screen as true. The “truth” of the matter was that Bush administration officials were concealing information, and that Bush wasn’t doing his job—not because this was actually the case, but because the suggestive repetition of these ideas in public made it a political reality.

Consider, for instance, how important it was at the outset of the Plame scandal to discover the true identity of Novak’s informant. That person would, inevitably, be held responsible for compromising national security. But although he was ultimately held accountable for disclosing classified materials to the members of the press, Libby never divulged Plame’s identity to Novak. That role belonged to Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who was never reprimanded for his involvement in the scandal. When Armitage came forward in 2007, exasperated New York Times columnist David Brooks called the lack of public outrage an outright hypocrisy.

Taken together, the purloined letter, rhetoric, the missing link, the absent Plame, and Bush’s speech—all point toward the excesses of discourse; the structural dynamics we have not yet taken—indeed cannot take—into account. Secrets, in other words, are not just concealment; they are the discursive double-doors that hide the goings-on of politics. They also remind the public of its own uncertainty, directing critics to attend to what they cannot know, and adding an always missing element to discourse. Through their paradoxical logic, secrets indicate that something is missing, and that this missing-ness is not waiting to be discovered, but resides within our discourse. Secrets therefore offer us a common non-place, a gap added to
discourse that founds and re-founds it. Naming these non-places is, however, an important task: they are the condition of any discourse to come, rhetorical or otherwise.

Notes


[24] Rubenstein, This Is Not a President, 52.

[25] Rubenstein, This Is Not a President, 20–21.

[26] Rubenstein, This Is Not a President, 8.


[34] Barbara A. Biesecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Diffréance,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 22, no. 2 (1989): 112.


[38] Rubenstein, This Is Not a President, 29.


Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 143.


Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 141–42.


Capps, “Paying Homage.”


[67] Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s) (New York: Verso, 1996), 44.


