"I Didn't Know How Else to Get It Right": *Lives on the Boundary* as an Invitation to Public Intellectualism

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For nearly four decades, Mike Rose was one of the most successful public intellectuals in rhetoric and composition, and he routinely encouraged his colleagues to engage more intentionally with non-academic audiences. Lives on the Boundary *continues to provide a valuable model for considering how and why.*

In February 2019, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article that rehearsed an old canard about the growing distance between academics and people. According to Michael C. Desch, professor of international relations at the University of Notre Dame, the problem is that "scholars increasingly privilege rigor over relevance," and therefore alienate themselves. Desch implies a lost golden age when academics were effectively and efficiently public and mourns its loss. But the supposed gap between academics and non-academics is at best a mischaracterization gleaned from cherry-picked examples. In fact, although academics cannot *not* be public to some degree, we are nevertheless still learning to be public intellectually. Fortunately, nearly 35 years after it was published, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* remains a guiding light in that regard.

There are two things in particular that *Lives on the Boundary* calls us to recognize and grapple with. The first is about the nature of public intellectual work itself. At the end of his preface, Rose notes that *Lives on the Boundary* is "both vignette and commentary, reflection and analysis" (xii). By way of explanation for this apparently strange hybrid genre, he writes, "I didn't know how else to get it right." As promised, Rose goes on to write a book that is highly readable, markedly academic, personally anecdotal, thoroughly researched, and occasionally downright poetic. It is both public and intellectual.

Rose's passage about "getting it right" is significantly more complex than it appears on the page, and as such is a skillful performance of the argument itself. His implicit argument is this: public intellectualism is not a message from one sphere to another—from academic to public or vice versa. It is not one's concession to the other's values. Rather, it is a rendering of *public* and *intellectual* together. As Anna M. Young and Jennifer Mercieca put it in a 2021 article arguing for the value of public scholarship in academic journals, "Public scholarship is a kind of citizenship" that attempts "to address the multiple and devastating problems of our moment"

(382). It's not just about research; it's also about living better together in the world. In attempting to get public intellectualism right to the same end, Rose conjures a hybrid genre in which both public and intellectualism are necessary work because it sincerely values both.

Rose makes the point even more clearly in "Writing for the Public." In that essay, he reflects on writing *Lives on the Boundary* for public audiences and on his efforts to teach writing for public audiences at UCLA. He writes of his teaching, "I encourage a kind of bilingualism, the continued development of facility with both scholarly writing and writing for non-specialists. But there is playback, as well, from the opinion piece and magazine article onto the writing students do for their disciplines" (289). This playback is what he performs in *Lives on the Boundary* and elsewhere.

Rose's nod to bilingualism is particularly illuminating. Bilingualism has been shown to have significant effects on cognition, on higher order thinking, on memory, and on focus. In other words, bilingualism isn't two languages existing side by side in a single human container. Bilingualism represents a functional, efficient hybridity of language use. The development of one language informs and is informed by development in other languages. They necessarily bleed into one another. Rose's rendering of the public and intellectual together exemplifies the same sort of mutually informing, hybrid process. This hybrid is what he performs in *Lives on the Boundary*, and it leads to the second point of consideration.

What distinguishes *Lives on the Boundary* from other calls to bridge the academic-public gap is the method by which the call is sounded. In his *Chronicle* essay, like so many authors who have issued similar calls, Desch works primarily in the medium of shame. His not-so-subtle message is that scholars have alienated themselves and need to shape up or face dire consequences. Rose, characteristically, works in a different medium—the medium of invitation.

Lives on the Boundary is an invitation to writing teachers to inhabit the hybrid genre of public and intellectual, which simultaneously reminds us how hard learning (and re-learning) to write is. Reflecting on his own writing for public audiences, Rose summarizes his beliefs about the importance of public intellectualism and its challenges. "The fostering of a hybrid professional identity—the life lived both in specialization and in the public sphere—is something I think we as a society need to nurture. The more opinion is grounded on rich experience and deep study, the better the quality of our public discourse about the issues that matter to us" (289). Again, for Rose, the form of "getting it right" unites the public and the intellectual that we all embody. But he also calls us to acknowledge the lessons we

teach our students: learning to write is hard, and it takes time, motivation, practice, persistence, investment, and support.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this lesson. As teachers of writing, we invite students to become writers and wait patiently for them to accept the invitation. This is the pedagogy of the open hand. We honor students' needs and resist their demands, and we nurture their development in myriad ways, and we do this all through the mundane instruments of writing assignments, drafts, peer review, feedback, revision, and so on. Rose urges us, kindly but insistently, to practice publicly what we preach pedagogically.

This message seems especially urgent in the current moment, in a time of rising international authoritarianism and pressing global crises, but as Rose's book should remind us, it was always urgent. "Getting it right" is a commitment to publics and intellectualism that exceeds our immediate crises, which is one reason why *Lives on the Boundary* continues to be prescient more than three decades after it was published.

In *Prophets, Gurus, and Pundits*, rhetorician Anna Young notes that a significant challenge of public intellectualism is that "today's intellectuals often view themselves as lone discoverers . . . and distant observers . . . rather than as participants in the sociopolitical conditions of the public sphere" (2). But Rose's model of "getting it right" suggests methods for re-engaging intellectuals and publics that are desirable, practical, and socially valuable. Rose neither brings the academy to the publics nor vice versa, but merges the two, with his own experiences as the conduit. In so doing, he provides an invitation and a model for how we can "attend to both our field and the public domain...and find something generative in considering the two together" that should resonate with writing teachers and administrators (*Lives* 291).

Notes

I initially developed the ideas in this essay for a presentation at CCCC to celebrate the 30th anniversary of *Lives on the Boundary*. Mike didn't attend, but he emailed me after the fact, asked to read my paper, and wrote me a long response. It was one of the thrills of my life. One thing that stood out especially was a postscript he put in one of his emails to me: "You'll get a kick out of this," he wrote. "I hate the term 'public intellectual.' I get the point it makes, for sure, but it just rubs me the wrong way, sounds so high faultin' and self-important. I can picture my Uncle Joe, rest his soul, rolling his eyes." I picture Mike doing the same, rest his soul.

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