

High Theory, the Teaching of Writing, and the Crisis of the University

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Post-structuralism, a theory of signs for written texts, would seem an obvious resource for a field like Composition Studies that has “writing” at its center. Yet the post-structuralist turn in Composition Studies is hamstrung by the deep division between camps in the field that are committed to political critique on the one hand or to textual critique on the other. In this polarization, too often post-structuralism is posited as mere ludic play, while serious political critique is considered the domain of other bodies of research, such as social-epistemic rhetoric.

Political critique is especially important at this historical juncture for academia, where the neoliberalization of the university means a less just university. While social-epistemic rhetoric is necessary to a political critique, social-epistemic rhetoric is insufficient because it lacks a micropolitical critique—one that works at the level of specific institutions (in this case, the university). The exemplary case of social-epistemic work that is necessarily political but insufficiently micropolitical is David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University.” In this essay, he argues that composition teachers must teach first-year writing students the conventions of academic discourse as one would teach the social conventions of any culture in order to acculturate the newcomers.

This project posits queer theory as a micropolitical post-structuralism: a theory that can co-articulate post-structuralism and social-epistemic rhetoric, while paying attention to the kind of institution into which students are expected to be acculturated (academia). Queer theory, with its critique of heteronormativity, has obvious political implications. At the same time, with its post-humanist notion of the subject and of semiotics, queer theory is post-structuralist.

This dissertation proposes that composition teachers use the concept of “drag” in queer theory to “teach academic discourse in drag,” which means to teach academic discourse as a kind of identity—like gender—that students “perform” without identifying with or subscribing to the institution—neoliberalized academia—from which it emanates. I propose a “rhetoric of drag” for post-structuralist composition teachers who are critical of the neoliberal university. This professional rhetoric consolidates the diverse attempts in social-epistemic rhetoric to teach academic discourse while critiquing academia for its neoliberalization. But the metaphor of drag does more than consolidate existing statements in Composition Studies: the metaphor of “drag” politicizes the process of acculturation in a way that “inventing” does not. The metaphor of “drag” draws attention to how the discourse of any oppressive institution—be it heteronormativity or academia—is exclusionary, oppressive, and compels a creative, parodic response. By teaching academic discourse in drag, college writing teachers give students the opportunity to reconcile the need to learn the discursive conventions of academia even while resisting the institution of academia. The act of disidentification that “drag” offers has special purchase for marginalized students—first-generation students, students of color, and working-class students—who already have a resistant or oppositional relationship to academia. Teaching academic discourse in drag acknowledges this oppositional stance, a

stance that we can expect to become more prevalent the “non-traditional” student becomes the norm in our writing classrooms.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Rhetoric of Theory-Talk in Composition Studies.....	35
Chapter 2: Necessary but Insufficient: Post-structuralism and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric.....	62
Chapter 3: Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal.....	120
Conclusion.....	165
Bibliography .....	180

Introduction

- I. The Seminar Room and the Writing Classroom
- II. Why Theory? Why Composition Studies?

Parsing Composition Studies/Literary Studies

Parsing undergraduate/graduate education

Parsing Composition Studies/first-year writing

- III. What is “theory” in this study?
- IV. Which Theory?
- V. What is “post-structuralism” in this study?
- VI. What is “academia” and “the public” in this study?
- VII. Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 1: The Rhetoric of Theory-Talk in Composition Studies

Chapter 2: Necessary but Insufficient: Post-structuralism and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric

Chapter 3: Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal

| I. The Seminar Room and the Writing Classroom

The problematic of this study originated in the distance I found between my first-year writing classroom (where I teach writing) and the seminar room (where I took many of my graduate theory courses). In the seminar room, I learned the current theories of my field, which are all post-humanist in one sense or another: whether we learned about structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, or postcolonialism, the Enlightenment subject was getting it from all sides in that seminar

room. Formerly orienting concepts like “text,” “subject,” “language,” “consciousness,” and “ego” were questioned, reconstructed, and sometimes dismantled. I rejoiced in the edgy newness that theory offered, and felt liberated at not having to pretend that absolutes existed, language merely communicates, subjects are self-knowing, the self is rational, context doesn’t matter, and truth isn’t contingent.

But then down the hall I went to teach my first-year writing course, and found that, in my teaching, Enlightenment humanism was alive and well. I came to see that in my first-year writing classroom, I taught the “modernist text,” as Lester Faigley calls it in his 1992 *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. In his book, Faigley pits “modernist” against “postmodernist” writing pedagogy, where the “modernist” text is one that enshrines a “stable, coherent self,” transcendental Reason, mastery of language as a transparent instrument of communication.<sup>1</sup> As I look back now, the subtle message of my curriculum at the time was indeed to learn to write with authority and purpose so as to cultivate discursive mastery.

On first glance, the reasons for this chasm might seem obvious, and not worthy of further inquiry. “Composition Studies and literary studies are two different disciplines,” one might say, “therefore, of course each has its own theory.” One might also say, “We should expect a disjunct here, as in one case, the students are freshman, and in the other, they’re graduate students. And we don’t need graduate-level tools like theory to teach a lower-division undergraduate courses like first-year writing.” I will address each of these possible explanations for the chasm, plus several more, later in this chapter. For now, I

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<sup>1</sup> Lester Faigley, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. University of Pittsburgh, 1992. 7-8.

will address the most compelling reason that I felt, despite these initial explanations, that it was indeed mysterious why this chasm existed—that is, why there shouldn't be a more well-worn path from the post-humanist theory seminar to the post-humanist writing classroom.

The reason the chasm remained interesting (surprising, problematic, and capable of reversal) to me is because I assumed that any field with writing as its center would naturally be engaged with the most current and serious theorizations available about writing, and one such theorization is, as I will argue, post-structuralism. Post-structuralism deeply threatens the Enlightenment subject--which makes post-structuralism theoretically current to anyone teaching writing now; it also offers the deepest and most comprehensive theorization about writing--which makes it an obvious keystone for writing teachers. For these reasons, I expected to find a great deal of interest in (through the research, at conferences, and in conversation with other writing teachers) and perhaps even well-developed articulations of the post-structuralist writing classroom.

As it turns out, however, there is at least as much unexamined modernist pedagogy in the writing classroom as there are experiments in post-structuralist writing pedagogy. The question therefore threads through “Where is post-structuralism in Composition Studies?” and “How would we teach a post-structuralist first-year writing class?” to arrive at “What can we learn about larger, more highly charged, controversial binaries—namely, academia/public; theory/praxis—from this inquiry into how we might use post-structuralism to teach first-year writing?” In the next section, I will explain why this leap from the second question, which is still confined to academia, to the third one, which extends beyond the borders of academia.

## II. Why Theory? Why Composition Studies?

In this study I delve into two concentric circles of questions. The inner circle has to do with theory in Composition Studies, and the outer circle has to do with how different configurations of this relationship (the relationship between theory and Composition Studies) can shape or differently pressure the relationship between the public and academia.

The questions of the first concentric circle look like this: where is theory in Composition Studies, what does it do, and how does it shape Composition Studies as a field?

I ask for two reasons, one having to do with the field of Composition Studies itself, and the other having to do with the place of higher education in society. This takes us to the second concentric circle, where I present this problematic: in a political climate that charges higher ed with becoming less and less accessible to the public--both in the skyrocketing cost of a college degree and the kind of knowledge that has currency in the academy--theory is held up as one of the hallmarks of academia that makes higher ed elitist. In recent conversations in popular publications, with my students, and even at academic conferences, I repeatedly hear “theory” become synonymous with the abstract, useless, “high-brow,” inaccessible, and even exclusionary.

Many higher education activists with whom I have worked react to this charge by urging academics to make curriculum in higher education less theory-based and more “hands-on.” But this project insists that theory, on the contrary, should be strengthened in academia; we just need to revisit how we define “theory.” In fact, I venture that



“theory,” in its revised conceptualization, can enhance the public valuation of higher education.

In this study, the first concentric circle (the circle having to do with the relationship between theory and Composition Studies), serves as a specific articulation of the second concentric circle (the circle having to do with the relationship between the public and the academy). That is, I explore this question: how can the relationship between the public and the academy be revised through the revision of another relationship—that between Composition Studies and theory? More specifically, Composition Studies is my testing ground to problem-solve how theory can enhance the public mission of the university, such that having theory means restoring public faith (and financial investment) in higher education as a common good for all.

But Composition Studies is not just one of many microcosms I could have chosen arbitrarily in this meditation on the place of theory in higher education. This question about the where and what of theory is particularly interesting to and in Composition Studies because, as I will discuss later, Composition Studies is styled as a field that has a particular affinity with praxis and, as I have found, a particularly embattled relationship with theory. If Composition Studies is pegged as a particularly technical, praxis-oriented discipline, several obvious reasons for this emerge immediately: as the disciplinary origin of the only university-wide requirement (freshman writing), Composition Studies is strongly associated with curriculum, pedagogy, and other practical objects; in many newly articulated university-wide writing initiatives, writing itself is conceived as the *techne* of the academy (it is the instrument of thought; it is mere communication); as one of the largest employers of precarious workers (grad students from across the university,

and adjuncts) in the university, writing departments are staffed with teachers who are not necessarily involved in the research—let alone theory—of the discipline of Composition Studies. For all these reasons, we can see how Composition Studies has a strong structural affinity with praxis. Although such an immediate relationship to praxis does not necessarily mean an embattled relationship to theory, in the case of Composition Studies, it often does. Chapter 1, “The Rhetoric of Theory-Talk in Composition Studies,” demonstrates how.

Another concern of mine that drives my deconstruction of the praxis/theory, academia/public binaries to the field of Composition Studies is the new economic model of the university: some call it an example of “fast capitalism,” others “late capitalism,” others “corporatization.” I prefer the term “neoliberalization” (meaning the new “free market-ization”) of the university because I’m interested particularly in the process higher education has undergone to align itself with free market principles since the early 1970’s. In the emerging field tentatively called “Critical University Studies,” where this process is critiqued, the historical origin of the free-marketization of the university is placed somewhere between the early 1970’s oil crisis, and the trickle-down policy of the Reagan era. In terms of this process of the free-marketization of higher ed that I am studying, Composition Studies was an obvious choice as a microcosm of this process because Composition Studies’ emergence as a field through the 1970’s and 1980’s is co-terminal with this macro-economic process of neoliberalization.

More important to the way Composition Studies uniquely stages the neoliberal moment in higher ed is perhaps the way writing programs are constructed by the administration funding them. If there is any discipline that emerged from an instrumental

appropriation of curricular learning, it's Composition Studies. In a national economic climate that demands that all educational outcomes be closely tied to marketable skills, the teaching of writing is valuable as long as we teach writing as a tool to be mastered by our students (and future employees and managers), as opposed to a more complex medium that obscures as much as it reveals, and undercuts our reason, intent, and efficacy as workers in a capitalist system. Writing is instrumentalized and writing programs are, to use the Marxist term, "rationalized," or reduced to only what market value they bring.

Because of its prominent role in the larger process of rationalizing college curriculum, Composition Studies has long had the reputation of being the neoliberal university's outpost. That said, I have seen many times how individual writing programs, and cohorts of teachers and administrators within writing programs, subvert rationalization. Indeed, for as many articles as I read about the instrumentalization of writing and rationalist writing programs, I read as many articles and encounter as many writing classrooms that subvert this conceptualization of writing. The main body of Composition Studies work that resists rationalization is consolidated under what James Berlin calls "social-epistemic" rhetoric, and parts of this body of work are examined at length in this project.

Although I don't know if Composition Studies can be said to be *still* an emergent field today, its development is dynamic if only because its status is still in question. At the center of the anxiety my field has about its status, I think, is the fact that writing programs embody the following contradiction: while writing programs are increasingly recognized and well-funded within their own institutions, Composition Studies still

suffers from low disciplinary status. In a playful sequel to William Riley Parker's allegory in "Where Did English Departments Come From?" in which English is the child of the now divorced parents "Oratory" and "Philology," Winifred Horner wrote in 2001 that although Composition Studies is the "despised" child of English and "lives in the basement," Composition Studies is "much beloved by his rich uncle Administration."<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, it is no wonder that Composition Studies finds itself to be the favored discipline of "Uncle Administration," given, as I just discussed, the way the administration constructs writing as a marketable skill that is a "cash cow" to the university because it is the only universal requirement, and one that is cheaply provided by low-cost adjuncts and graduate instructors. On the other hand, as Horner wittily points out, just because the administration favors Composition Studies doesn't give it the academic status to get it out of the "basement" of the humanities.

So Composition Studies lives in this contradiction where it enjoys high institutional status (and often the great resources that come with that), all the while suffering from low status as a discipline. Like many other fields that suffer from marginalization—my Master's field of Folklore comes to mind—this has kept Composition Studies on its toes: in the literature of both folkloristics and Composition Studies, we see an agonizing and continuous self-imagining going on. Like Folklore, Composition Studies can't rest on its disciplinary laurels, and claim a long and storied disciplinary past to carry it through times of disciplinary or institutional turmoil. This otherwise draining pressure of disciplinary anxiety has the upshot of giving the field a

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<sup>2</sup> Winifred Bryan Horner, "Preface: An Allegory," *Rhetoric Review* 20 ½, no. 5 (2001): 5-9.

reason to constantly and imaginatively question and reinvent itself—something I think every field should do.

Given its nascence and dynamism as a field, if we want to study the pressure that neoliberalization exerts on the shape that emerging disciplines take, then Composition Studies is again the perfect microcosm for studying the effects of neoliberalization on the intellectual, social, cultural and historical development of a discipline.

In its use of the microcosm of Composition Studies to explore this larger question of the what, where, and how of theory in the academy, this project will posit some possible reconfigurations regarding the relationship between theory and praxis more generally. I am interested in nuancing all the different kinds of relationships “theory” and “praxis” can have, what kind of projects those new configurations can produce, and what/who these projects can serve. This is not to say that I will repeat the utopian refrain that we can “bring theory and praxis together.” To make such an argument only restabilizes these terms, and attributes to them solid content, when my object is to destabilize them by demonstrating how every context recasts what each term contains. Because I see the content of each term as contextually determined, I am more interested in how each term *signifies* in the political economy of the academy, and, working within this system of valuations, how we can re-articulate their relationship in a way that changes this political economy.

I would argue that changing the political economy of higher ed—that is, how power flows in the university—is a worthy undertaking as a an academic and as a citizen. This critique of the political economy of higher ed ultimately serves to answer the question: “What should be the role of academia in society?” The political and academic

critiques and movements that frequently take on the shape of questioning the binary of public/academic lead me to ask: how can we restore the public valuation of academic expertise—especially high theory--after the culture wars have pitted all forms of academic knowledge against public interest?

The border wars between academia and the public are alive not just in discussion among right-wing polemicists; circles of leftist activist also suspect “theory” for the ways that it signs the worst of “academic.” One might expect a culture of leftism to mean tolerance and inclusiveness of diverse agendas and approaches—from the most concrete projects, like creating an anarchist book coop, to the most abstract projects, like making one’s departmental culture more pro-labor. However, many activists give little credence to more abstract projects, or movements that openly draw on precepts from post-humanist theory. Indeed, to many of the leftist higher ed activists I have worked with, “theory” represents the elitism that is at fault with higher education. But theory need not contain a prescription for action in order to have a relationship to some sort of political program. The work we need to do as thinkers is to articulate the diverse relationships that can exist between theory and praxis, and this is the work I attempt to do in this dissertation.

In their work as activists and academics, many scholar-activists are working towards a particular vision of the university as it relates to the public good, and I consider myself a part of this movement. They envision a university that is intellectually and financially accessible to all Americans, conferring degrees that are efficacious and not debilitating in the amount of debt students take on; instrumental in developing not just individuals but communities and societies; and active in combating (hetero)sexism, racism, and classism in our culture. Importantly, such a university is not the apparatus of

the state *or* the market; rather, they envision a university that can be the transformative terrain of progressive social movements.

In this dissertation, I wish to read the disjunct between the seminar theory room and the first-year writing classroom through the larger story of the conflict between academia and the public sphere. To telescope out all the way from the minutiae of “the pedagogical praxis of the first-year writing classroom” to the macro-system of “the role of academia in the public sphere” via Composition Studies, literary theory, and Critical University Studies, stopping briefly at the juncture of theory and praxis, requires some collapsing operations for the purpose of staging this argument. The purpose of this Introduction is to hold apart for a moment each element in at least three such confluations, and examine each element for what their particularities might tell us about this disjunct. These three confluations are: Composition Studies/literary studies, Composition Studies/first-year writing, and undergraduate/graduate education. Let’s begin with the conflation of Composition Studies/literary studies.

### Parsing Composition Studies/literary studies

Might not the reason for the disjunct I see across the seminar theory room/first-year writing classroom threshold be as simple as the fact that--as misguided as one might say the divorce between them might have been--according to recent history, they are developing along different disciplinary trajectories? Composition Studies is the home discipline of first-year writing pedagogy, and literary studies is the home discipline of literary theory. As the result of either the wisdom or the folly of those who made it so, they *are* two different disciplines. As such, should we not naturally expect that each has

its own body of theory upon which it relies? That is, just because literary theory is post-humanist, why should we assume that Composition Studies is similarly post-humanist? Literary studies is not the only field with a serious theoretical legacy—including posthumanism--worth imitating. Why should we consider literary studies so worthy of being imitated by Composition Studies?

Adding tension to this argument is that Composition Studies and literary studies have a history together: they were once both housed in the discipline of English. Since Composition Studies moved away from the English department on many campuses, we should expect that each field would re-articulate its own theoretical values and orientations. So it is no wonder that Composition Studies doesn't cite the same theory that literary studies cites.

In fact, Composition Studies has one significant body of theory that many literary studies graduate students lack: Rhetoric. The lack of rhetorical study in graduate-level literary studies is perhaps the most prominent example of how each discipline—both literary studies and Composition Studies—has its own theory, even given that Composition Studies was once under literary studies' roof, historically. Rhetoric is a field with its own theory, and engagement with Rhetoric as a field is foundational to any Compositionist. Yet many English graduate instructors teach first-year writing as a composition course, not as a course in argument, as many of my fellow rhetoricians would in the Writing Studies department. And this even as I teach for a department, Writing Studies, that was once one of the last remaining free-standing Rhetoric departments in the country up until very recently.



Even if Composition Studies did inherit post-structuralism from literary studies, we shouldn't expect that the way Composition Studies will do its post-structuralism will even be recognizable to the post-structuralist trained in literary studies. Similarly, in my conversations with social scientists, I have learned how different post-structuralism looks in Geography and Political Science than it does in the humanities. Concepts such as "agency," "essence," and theoretical frameworks like "posthuman," and "post-structuralism" signify very differently across several fields. Likewise, this dissertation attempts to respect the ways that Composition Studies and literary studies are historically and intellectually different, even when they might use the same terms.

#### Parsing undergraduate/graduate education

The final, and probably most obscure, off-the-cuff objection one may have to my surprise at witnessing a disjunct between my theory seminar room and my first-year writing classroom is that naturally there is a disjunct, because one is a graduate classroom, and the other is an undergraduate classroom—and theory is for grads, not undergrads. Gerald Graff notes that in the "armed truce" reached by the polar sides of theory and tradition, one "curricular trade-off" is that "literary theory has become accepted as a useful option for graduates students and advanced undergraduates, but something to be kept at a distance from the normal run of students."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, any graduate instructor might object that it is simply a function of teaching undergraduates as a graduate student that when you move from any graduate seminar room to any undergraduate class you teach,

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1987), 248.

you will experience a disjunct because graduate education is distinct from undergraduate education, and one of the markers of that distinction is theory.

However, I have found from talking to my peers in the English graduate program that in undergraduate classrooms like Survey of American Literature I, a course for all levels of undergraduates, graduate instructors do frequently invoke the work of literary theorists in their assignment sheets, written feedback to student essays, and in the lectures and discussion groups that they lead. That is, many undergrads are taught theory; maybe not systemically, but they do encounter it in their undergraduate courses. Therefore, we cannot say that the graduate education/undergraduate education divide is solely responsible for the disjunct I see as I cross from my graduate theory course to my first-year writing course.

Indeed, the replies “Isn’t it just because of what is particular to the field/level?” do not help us explain away the disjunct between the Seminar Room and the Writing Classroom. That is why this disjunct remains intriguing to me, and warrants a project of this length.

### Parsing Composition Studies/first-year writing

One problem that has plagued Composition Studies is how the entire field is identified with, or reduced to, the first-year writing course. So serious is this problem that it is cited as one of the reasons why at one time, if only to be polemic, compositionist Sharon Crowley called for the abolition of the first-year writing course. The problem that this identification poses for the field of Composition Studies is one of delegitimization: if the

least trained and least paid among us (grad students and adjuncts) usually the ones to teach the first-year writing course, how serious a field can Composition Studies be?

In addition, the first-year writing course is frequently imagined as not a college course, but as a course that *prepares* one for college, as if the first-year writing course were somehow external to the rest of a college student's curriculum. To make matters worse, even some first-year writing teachers themselves talk about the first-year writing course as a "service course," that is, a course that serves all the other disciplines, as opposed to a course that is part of a discipline in its own right.

Granted, all these problems are related to Composition Studies' "status problem." But labeling it merely as a "status problem" might minimize the stakes involved. After all, the status a discipline is conferred has implications for the resources it is allotted. That is why "status" is not just a psychological issue, but a financial and political one for any field.

By focusing on the first-year writing class in this dissertation, I do not mean to reduce the practical objects of Composition Studies down to the first-year writing class. My reason for focusing on this particular course is that the work of the first-year writing course is to teach students academic discourse, and my contribution in this dissertation is to offer a way to teach academic discourse "in drag."

### III. What is "theory" in this study?

By using the last few pages to worry over the reasons for the disjunct between praxis and theory, I don't mean to give the impression that I harbor a naive expectation that theory is the transcendental ideal that animates our activities, or that the theory in

academia directs our practices in the ways we claim or would like to think. The disjunct between the ideal—what we *think* and *say* we do as academics—and the real—what we actually do as academic workers—is well-articulated by many important thinkers. In *Homo Academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu attacks the concept of that which is academic as transcendent by insisting that the rites of initiation into the elite ranks of academia don't serve to foster what is intellectually valid, but rather serve to reify the value already placed on academic norms. As Bourdieu famously states:

the university field is, like any other field, the locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy, that is, to determine which properties are pertinent, effective, and liable to function as capital so as to generate the specific profits guaranteed by the field.<sup>4</sup>

Also setting us straight on the “real” origins of academic practices are Edward Said and Terry Eagleton. If ever we wanted to construct “English” as coherent discipline born of purely intellectual concerns, Said and Eagleton correct such an impulse by tracing the origin of English studies to the British Empire's colonization of India.

I admit that disciplinary realities have *never* emanated from any transcendental ideal. Tony Scott's *Dangerous Writing* argues that as much as we'd like to attribute our pedagogical practices to pedagogy theory, in fact what we teach, how we teach, and who we teach in writing classrooms is shaped by the labor reality of today's college teachers and college students, who are ever more the exploited, contingent labor pool of fast-capitalism. In different ways, Bourdieu, Eagleton, Said and Scott all insist that if we want to find the rationale for our intellectual practices, we shouldn't look first to intellectual

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford UP, 1984), 11.

rationales (of which theory is often characterized as one); we should look to our institutional, historical, and labor realities.

The question “Why is what I teach in my writing class not connected to what I learn in my theory class?” may appear to be another instance of this transcendentalization of theory that discounts the intervening forces of institutional, labor, and historical realities as the reason for this disjunct. But only if theory is understood as the ideal—in this case, the pure and abstract “rationale” for teaching and research practices.

To ask this question in a way that doesn’t retrench any transcendental fantasies about theory as the “inspiration” or stable ground for disciplinary practices, it is necessary to reconfigure “theory” as not that which is a stable ground to build praxis on, but theory as another kind of praxis, another kind of work that we do. This dissertation attempts to think theory as an unstable and dynamic set of texts that provides another set of terms for us to use as we critique. I expect that this “working theory,” as such, will be as much reworked by other forms of praxis (institutional arrangements, teaching curriculum, publication realities, etc.) as it itself influences these other forms of praxis.

This project therefore resists theory as a *ground* for praxis, as if theory could ever be that clean and univocal of a force. Rather, theory is, to some extent, an activity that interacts dynamically other material realities that condition our pedagogy. As much as I can, I want to challenge the idea that theory is the ideal of any field, the suspended zone of pre-application, pre-praxis. Theory is and has always been another text that we engage, critique, challenge, and continuously rework as it mixes with other practices. With that in mind, I ask: what *would* our first-year writing classroom look like if we took on post-structuralism--as another of many forces that shape our pedagogy?

#### IV. Which Theory?

In my quest to understand the where, what, and how of theory in Composition Studies, I began to hone in on post-structuralism in particular for two reasons: how post-structuralism signifies outside the academy, and post-structuralism's intellectual potential within the academy. First, post-structuralism's signification in the academic and public imagination is, if anything, an extreme case of how theory in general signifies. Second, post-structuralism is the site of the culture wars in academia, a pulse point in the effort to delegitimize academic knowledge.

As far as high theory goes, post-structuralism is caricatured as perhaps the "highest:" the prose is difficult, and the ideas are less immediately applicable. And that is the criticism merely *within* the academy. In the public imagination, post-structuralism is so esoteric as to make the academic profession a laughing stock. This kind of theory figures publicly as a case of the Emperor's New Clothes: humanities academics only pretend to have any inkling of "bricolage" and "simulacrum" for fear that if they revealed how dubious these ideas are, no one could amicably coexist at each other's conferences. The most extreme example of this was, of course, the "Sokal affair," in which a physics professor wrote an article that he considered postmodern, leftist jibberish to see if such a work could pass muster in the humanities. When the piece was published in *Social Text* in 1996, the right felt vindicated in its war against the leftist postmodern theory culture of academia.

Another high point in these culture wars was Martha Nussbaum's "Professor of Parody" in which the same charge is made against Judith Butler and other feminist

theorists, who, according to Nussbaum, have moved too far away from the kind of theory that “is connected to proposals for social change.”<sup>5</sup> Since the 80’s when theory really arrived on the scene, many right-wing organizations have sprung up to take on the theory boom and the PC-minded, leftist postmodernism it is associated with. Most notable among these organizations are perhaps the National Association of Scholars, which formed explicitly as a response to the those who “view the university as an instrument of progressive social change,”<sup>6</sup> and the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, which was formed as a response to the allegedly leftist annual meeting of the Modern Language Association.

The development in the culture wars that I find most interesting is the charge that what is most offensive about theory is its prose style. It is a common refrain among graduate students in English that if theorists like Derrida and Butler are hard to read, it is because such theorists are simply “bad writers.” Nausbaum herself focuses a great deal on Butler’s opaque prose. I find this complaint reflected in a more tongue-and-cheek Web 2.0 tool called the “The Amazing and Incredible, Only-Slightly-Laughable, Politically Unassailable, PoMo English *Paper Title Generator*.” This website allows any user to type in the title of any work commonly read in any undergraduate survey (*Huck Finn* or *White Teeth*), and it will spit back an appropriately verbose title (“Alienating Addiction: Bourgeois Suppression in Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*,” “Oppressive Ethos and the Gender of Peripheral Nationalism in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*”). It seems that NAS, Dr. Sokal, Nausbaum, and ALSC in fact belie the same fear as the title generator: is theory just word salad, something that a somewhat clever computer algorithm could

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<sup>5</sup> Martha Nausbaum, “The Professor of Parody,” *The New Republic*, February 1999, 37.

<sup>6</sup> National Association of Scholars, “Rebuilding Campus Community: The Wrong Imperative,” NAS Statements. July 15, 2008. Web. February 15, 2011.

generate? In other words, is there something robot-like, something un-human about theory?

Moreover, is there something not just un-human but downright *inhumane* about theory? Because dense prose is not even the most serious charge against post-structuralism. In some fields, post-structuralism is a lie; it tells lies; it is unethical. One such field is Holocaust Studies, in which post-structuralism is put on trial for its penchant for questioning objectivity and truth claims, which naturally doesn't sit well in a field that must confront Holocaust deniers. The case of post-structuralist Holocaust studies is a particularly thorny one that captures all the anxiety post-structuralism can evoke. For that reason, Holocaust Studies' case against post-structuralism is worth dwelling on briefly here.

On the one hand, if there's any field that has taught us the necessity for a post-Enlightenment theory like post-structuralism, it's Holocaust Studies. Hayden White saw the Holocaust as an irreversible "break" in history that necessitated a whole new approach to history. On the other hand, the "flashpoints" of post-structuralism, like the fragmented subject and language that is only about itself, seem to run counter to the ethical, political, and social work left to critics after the Holocaust. The post-structuralist subject could be read as an exercise in anti-humanism: always and already fragmented, unreliable, lacking self-consciousness and integrity—a reading that seems, superficially at least, to clash with a re-building of the human through a critique of barbarism that much post-Holocaust writing attempted.

Worse, both the post-structuralist subject and its language suggest a dangerous historical relativism that can produce the conditions for Holocaust denial. These



arguments are common to any field (like feminist, queer, disabilities, or post-colonial studies) that thinks about political marginalization and mobilization: how do you posit a fragmented subject who is still politically powerful, and how do you communicate for political change when language is mostly about itself? Further, some of these debates may reflect a more specific charge within feminist studies that theory is a deliberate mystification used to reproduce exclusionary male privilege by silencing the political praxis underlying theoretical questions. So the status of post-structuralism in Holocaust studies is embattled: at some points we are led to believe that the Holocaust was the etiological occasion for post-structuralism, and at other points we might think that the Holocaust destroyed the possibility of all theory, and made post-structuralism in particular morally indefensible.

So the first reason I chose post-structuralism as the “theory” in my study of what theory can do in the university is because post-structuralism is continually demonized as the very embodiment of self-absorbed, liberal, elitist, hot-headed academic BS, and even, in the case of one set of critics in Holocaust studies, downright immoral and dangerous. Given the extreme degree of its public maligning, post-structuralism might serve as a valid test case to explore under what circumstances “high theory” *can* be redeemed in the public imagination. The second reason, post-structuralism’s intellectual potential, points up an acute irony that is very generative in this study: maligned as it is, post-structuralism offers incalculably rich intellectual material for thinking about the object of Composition Studies: writing.

On page three of this Introduction, I alluded briefly to the intellectual resource post-structuralism offers in my narrative that opened this chapter: in terms of what post-

structuralism can do for Composition Studies, post-structuralism is eminently suited to Composition Studies because writing is an important object in both post-structuralism and Composition Studies. For theories like post-colonialism, feminism, linguistics, cognitive-behavioral, and Marxist theory, the object of study can certainly be said to be language or signification, not necessarily writing in particular. Post-structuralism addresses *writing*.

Besides the irony of its maligned status in the public sphere even in spite of its rich intellectual potential in the academic sphere, I have other reasons for using post-structuralism in a story about theory in the academy. The case of post-structuralism in the academy, particularly in the English department, exemplifies how theory has become more of a professional object than a mode of experimentation. In admitting this, I give some credence to the many books proclaiming the “death” of theory, or at least its ossification into a professional exercise reduced to that introductory course every grad student must take, or that brief detour every academic writer must take to be professionally responsible. But ultimately I think we can bracket off this problem of the professionalization of theory, and still be able to look at what theory does intellectually apart from its instrumentalization in the academy and on the job market.

Another story post-structuralism can tell in miniature is the very dramatic story of the history between Composition Studies and literary studies. Because post-structuralism is very often thought of as “literary theory,” in some ways post-structuralism is a useful portal to tell the story of the English department/Composition Studies divorce.

While thinking about post-structuralism as a kind of literary theory that can generate some important contrastive thinking about the political conflicts between

Composition Studies and English, I take for granted that post-structuralism is perhaps not best characterized as the sole domain of literary studies. Post-structuralism belongs to all humanities disciplines, and many social sciences too; in fact, by looking to the type of post-structuralism current in Political Science, Sociology, History, and Language departments, we can broaden and complicate the kind of work post-structuralism does in the academy.

Because this dissertation stages an encounter between major storm fronts, I must do a lot of telescoping out and reduction. I hope to make these moves responsibly by at least glossing what I mean by some of the terms in this dissertation in a way that honors and sustains, rather than flattening and minimizing, the paradoxes in and unruliness of each term. The next two sections of this introduction will attempt to gloss three of the most critical of these terms: “post-structuralism,” “the public,” and “academia.”

#### V. What is “post-structuralism” in this study?

More than any other “ism,” “post-structuralism” has a major hermeneutical problem: perhaps appropriate for what this body of work demonstrates about language, the term “post-structuralism” does not singularly refer. To say that the set of concepts associated with post-structuralism is unstable and “dirtied” by political, cultural, and historical contexts is not going far enough, because these contexts are certainly constitutive of the very content of “post-structuralism.” What I want to stake out here is that while post-structuralism does refer *singularly*, it does touch off a range of meanings given a particular discursive context. (If it did refer singularly, it might be playfully said to refer to disciplinary, institutional and sometimes communal desires.) This is because “post-

structuralism” is a historical, cultural, political artifact; artifacts are not pure, but a messy and inconsistent business. Several intellectual strands, sometimes very disparate ones, are artificially netted together to advance some project in that rhetorical context. At worst, terms like post-structuralism are the result of professionalization procedures; at best, they are merely an emic instrument, a way for members within a cultural group to communicate with each other at a given moment. I think it serves us well to think of terms like “post-structuralism” not as an intellectual product that comes to us fully formed, but rather a set of terms we’ve manufactured to enable a conversation amongst ourselves. These introductory notes will follow some of the more interesting undulations of what gets netted in this instrumental term, and describe the places of convergence and divergence as this term “post-structuralism” changes in its dynamic way, as well as how these places impact how I use the term in my project.

When I set out to write about post-structuralism in Composition Studies, I thought the term was pretty stable; after all, *I* knew what it meant when I used it, and when I read it and heard it. But I decided to test this out. I conducted two studies to investigate what scholars thought of when “post-structuralism” is invoked. First, I took an informal survey of my many peers in English and in other departments including Geography, Sociology, History and Political Science. I found that within English departments, there is a lot of consistency in *one* coordinate of this term: figureheads. Everyone in the English department I asked replied, “Post-structuralism? Derrida and Barthes,” when I ask them “What is post-structuralism?” I was pleased to learn that peers from non-English departments proffered a list of other 60’s French scholars that usually included Derrida; however, their list always included Deleuze and Foucault. This is

understandable, given that Barthes is primarily a literary theorist, and so English departments have a special interest in his work; likewise, Deleuze and Foucault have much to offer scholars of social and historical formations.

Coordinates themselves got dicey in very interesting ways when I decided to investigate the nuances of how the term refers within the discipline of literary studies. To determine this, my experiment was a bit more formal: I surveyed seven influential and widely-used anthologies of literary theory to see how the term was used. They were: David Richter's *Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (1998); Selden and Widdowson's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary literary theory* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1993); Nealon and Giroux's *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences* (2003); *Literary Theory: An Anthology* Eds. Rivkin and Ryan (1998); Terry Eagleton's *Introduction to Literary Theory* (1983); *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001); and the *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (2007).

These anthologies span about fifteen years (the earliest being Eagleton's in 1983 and the latest being Blackwell's in 2007), and are organized in diverse ways—some are primarily narrative like Nealon and Giroux's, others rely heavily on distinct sections and extensive indexes for easy reference (Blackwell's having the highest number of sections, the most divvied-up pieces). Even taking into account the differences among these texts attributable to the widely varying years of their publication and the organization of their selections, the differences between them on how post-structuralism referred were at the same time extremely subtle and extremely revealing of the complexity of this term.

Intending to make this survey as schematic as possible, I had two objects in this survey: what the post-structuralism section was titled, and what writers' names were in

that section. The titles of the post-structuralism chapters appeared exactly as follows, (with the original spelling and use of capitalization) respectively: “Structuralism, Semiotics, and Deconstruction,” “post-structuralism Theories,” “Posts: Pomodernsim, post-structuralism, Post-Colonialism,” “post-structuralism, Deconstruction, and Postmodernism,” “post-structuralism,” “Deconstruction and post-structuralism,” and “post-structuralism.” We see here that the names of the chapters in all seven anthologies did contain the term “post-structuralism,” but in only three of the books did “post-structuralism” appear in solitude. In the other four, the term “post-structuralism” was accompanied by other terms such as “deconstruction,” “semiotics,” “structuralism,” or “postmodernism.”

What this juxtaposition signifies is ambiguous. It seems that we can safely say that depending on what use post-structuralism was put to at different times, post-structuralism was tied to other concepts. So at one point, we have deconstruction mattering as an ancillary to post-structuralism. Then semiotics. And at another moment it seemed that the term “structuralism” had a lot of instructive power to explain post-structuralism. But does accompaniment indicate difference or similarity with the term “post-structuralism?” That is, does the fact of the juxtaposition of these terms indicate that post-structuralism is the *equivalent* of these other terms (semiotics, structuralism, deconstruction), or something different than them, such that these terms are a necessary supplement to the idea of post-structuralism? For example, isn’t “deconstruction” just one operation of post-structuralism, the other being grammatology? If so, why list only one part of it; that is, deconstruction is always listed, never grammatology. And why list this one part of it, “deconstruction,” in a paratactic arrangement with the super-heading

(“Post-structuralism”)? That is, why not make the sub-part “deconstruction” hypotactically arranged with other sub-parts of post-structuralism, like simulacrum and bricolage? These differing schemes lead to quite fundamental questions about what post-structuralism entails, and how essential or nonessential other concepts are to it.

The second object of my study was the writers listed under each of these headings. My findings were not surprising, yet still peculiar. The only name listed in all seven of the anthologies’ post-structuralism section was Derrida. Foucault and Barthes tied for second place as the most oft-listed name: they both showed up in five of the seven anthologies (just speaking here of the post-structuralism chapter of the anthologies). Kristeva was next at four mentions across the seven examples, and at three mentions was Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, and de Man. In two of the seven anthologies, the following names made it into the post-structuralism chapter: Baudrillard, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss.

I frankly expected to see more names than just one (Derrida’s) across seven anthologies, and I expected this other name to be Barthes. I found it especially surprising that Foucault, who explicitly dissociated himself with post-structuralism, was mentioned as often as Barthes. The prevalence of Derrida himself in this survey raises the question of how identified post-structuralism is with one thinker.

The methodology of my study here raises several more problems. First is the problem of the “author function” (speaking of Foucault), which operates in the fact that in my survey, I took into account proper names, not concepts. Foucault introduces this problem in the 1969 lecture “What is an Author?” in which he questions how a writer’s surname comes to stand in for a supposedly coherent “body” of work. This problem

becomes most obvious in the case of Barthes, who is the penultimate microcosm of the movement from structuralism to post-structuralism such that if you're looking for structuralism, it depends on "which" Barthes you read.

So if there are problems with talking about post-structuralism as a group of thinkers, perhaps we can define post-structuralism rather as a body of concepts. How might we do this? For the purposes of this study, I'd like to stake that post-structuralism is an intellectual strand which in some way circles around the following notions: writing exerts its own power over a text beyond the writer's intentions; power hides itself in the same ways; binaries don't need to be contradicted, as they will unravel themselves. I have found Derrida's "Signature, Context, Event" and Barthes' *The Pleasures of the Text* to be most useful in elucidating these concepts. So when I refer to post-structuralism in the rest of this project, I am referring to this constellation of concepts.

#### VI. What is "academia" and "the public" in this study?

If "post-structuralism" doesn't singularly refer, "academia" and "the public" are similarly polyvalent. I once used the term "university" as a catch-all term for the related terms "higher education," "post-secondary education," "college," "campus," and "academia" interchangeably. I stopped using them interchangeably because doing so, I have learned, is a symptom of one of the problems that Critical University Studies seeks to redress, namely that the public marginalizes the student who is the true "norm," today, and instead relies on an exclusionary and outdated image of what college is and who the student is.



To confuse “university” for “college,” for example, masks the growing reality that more and more students who are enrolled in post-secondary education are not in “the university;” they are in a “college”--community college, to be more exact. According to a 2001 report by the Digest of Education Statistics, 47% of all students enrolled in public institutions were enrolled at community colleges. And most of what goes on in academia doesn’t take place on a common geographical turf known as “campus.” A 1996 report from the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that 73% of today’s post-secondary students are non-traditional, so most don’t live on “campus.”

“Higher education” would be an adequate term, except, as Henry Giroux points out, “higher education” implies that it is a kind of advanced, or “higher,” level of education, that it exceeds the education that is necessary to survive. But more and more, higher education is the norm: more people than ever before are attending post-secondary institutions.<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging Giroux’s poignant critique, for the purposes of brevity, I use the term “university” in this dissertation as a stand-in “post-secondary education,” but I will also use the term “academia” to mean all the intellectual, social, aesthetic and political practices that are part of the institutional culture of post-secondary education.

A much thornier term about which much more has been written is “the public.”

The problems with this term are too many to cite here. First, there is no singular public;

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<sup>7</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “Enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 9 percent between 1989 and 1999. Between 1999 and 2009, enrollment increased 38 percent, from 14.8 million to 20.4 million.” National Center for Education Statistics, “Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by control and type of institution, age, and attendance status of student: 2007.” *Digest of Educational Statistics 2009*. Table 192.

there are many “publics.” Second, “the public” is usually only defined in terms of what it is not, be that “academic,” or “private.” Unfortunately, “private” and “academic” mean very different things, and who’s not to say that there are publics within academia? The “public” often means “the state” when it is juxtaposed with “private,” when the latter is “the market.” But I don’t mean “the state” when I say “public.” Sometimes “the public” can even mean “private” in the sense that “the public” are “private citizens.” “Public” is also used as a synonym for “popular,” as in “public perception.” When people talk about the “public good,” sometimes they mean the “common good.” But “the common good” implies a homogeneity at the heart of a heterogenous population, as if all difference can be flattened to a common denominator.

I have used the term “the public” up until now in my elaboration of the second concentric circle in which this dissertation operates, but only because it is a familiar term. But I want to clarify here that I use the term “the public” in this dissertation to mean the “popular.”

That said, when I say in this introduction that I seek a university that serves “the public,” by the public I intend a very particular meaning: “the commons.” “The commons” is a term used in Marxist circles to refer to neither the state nor the market. According to a 2009 article “Creating Commons: Divided Governance, Participatory Management, and Struggles Against Enclosure in the University” by Isaac Kamola and Eli Meyerhoff, the commons are “those things held collectively and used according to the non-capitalist value practices of a given group.” “The commons” is the antonym of “enclosure,” which is practice by which “the value of an institution is determined by the market.” In this way, the commons is not the market. But it is also not the state. The

state is “hierarchically arranged and centrally controlled.” Both the state and the market “rely on narratives of property, law, and labor that short-circuit individuals’ participation in political controversies over how humans and things are organized.”<sup>8</sup> So in the binary that is state/market or public/private, “the commons” gives us a third option—one that gives power to organized collectives.

## VII. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: The Rhetoric of Theory in Composition Studies

Chapter 2: Necessary but Insufficient: Post-structuralism and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric

Chapter 3: Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal

In Chapter 1, “The Rhetoric of Theory-Talk in Composition Studies,” I examine the way we talk and think about theory in Composition Studies. In this chapter, I argue that, too often in Composition Studies research, “theory” connotes elitism, the dialectic, or play without politics. I suggest that although social epistemic work in Composition Studies is pitted against post-structuralism, with the former caricatured as dogmatic and the latter caricatured as mere ludic play, the two aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive. In Chapter 2, “Necessary but Insufficient: Post-structuralism and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric,” I review first what I consider to be the most promising work in post-structuralist Composition Studies (including work by Greg Ulmer and James Seitz), then what I consider to be the most politically radical rhetoric in Composition Studies (academic literacy work by David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell). I conclude that

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<sup>8</sup> Isaac Kamola and Eli Meyerhoff, “Creating Commons: Divided Governance, Participatory Management, and Struggles Against Enclosure in the University,” *Polygraph* 21 (2009): 5-27.

both bodies of work fall short, however, of providing the politically radical post-structuralist classroom that this project seeks.

In Chapter 3, “Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal,” I argue that queer theory enables us to do the work of both post-structuralism and social epistemic rhetoric at the same time. Queer theory critiques unjust political formations (which is the work of social epistemic criticism) but also, through drag, queer theory destabilizes chains of signifiers, questions the coherent self, and unravels binaries (which is the work of post-structuralism).

Queer theory offers one concept in particular that is especially useful to the problematic presented in this project: drag. I propose that post-structuralist composition teachers who are critical of the neoliberal university teach academic discourse “in drag:” teach students to perform the conventions of the institution without identifying with the institution. The metaphor of “drag” draws attention to how the discourse of any oppressive institution—be it heteronormativity or academia—is exclusionary, oppressive, and compels a creative, parodic response. By teaching academic discourse in drag, college writing teachers give students the opportunity to reconcile the need to learn the discursive conventions of academia even while resisting the institution of academia. This chapter argues that the act of disidentification that “drag” offers has special purchase for marginalized students—first-generation students, students of color, and working-class students—who already have a resistant or oppositional relationship to academia. Teaching academic discourse in drag acknowledges this oppositional stance, a stance that we can expect to become more prevalent the “non-traditional” student becomes the norm in our writing classrooms. I conclude that while queer theory is indispensable because it

offers a kind of post-structuralism that does social-epistemic work, it is nevertheless virtually absent as a theoretical paradigm in Composition Studies.

Chapter 2 uses concrete teaching scenarios to illustrate how post-structuralism, social-epistemic rhetoric, and queer theory manifest in course design, syllabus rhetoric (especially “course objective” language), classroom activities, and/or assignments in the first-year writing classroom. I give examples of how I translate principles from Barthes’ *Pleasures of the Text* into classroom activities like sentence vectors, and how I taught my students terms common in social-epistemic rhetoric like “discourse community” in assignments like “Eavesdropping.” By contrast, in Chapter 3, teaching scenarios appear only as examples in the course of exploration of the implications of incorporating queer theory into the field of Composition Studies.

Chapter 3, “Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal,” is the heart of the argument because it is my original contribution to the field. Having established that queer theory is an untapped resource in Composition Studies despite how it is uniquely a kind of social-epistemic post-structuralism, in this chapter I propose that the rhetoric of drag both consolidates several existing statements in social-epistemic work under one mantle, and reveals the political stakes of learning academic discourse in a way that Bartholomae’s metaphor of “inventing” does not. At the center of the queer composition classroom is the practice of teaching academic discourse, but teaching it in “drag.”

The conclusion returns to the question raised in this Introduction: what can high theory (specifically, post-structuralism) do for the public valuation of academic work? In an effort to answer this question, the Conclusion includes an experiment: a manifesto

written for leftist activists that uses a post-structuralist idea—Kristeva’s abject—as a call to action against the neoliberal university.

## Chapter 1: The Rhetoric of Theory-Talk in Composition Studies

This chapter provides meta-theory: a reflection on how theory is talked about in our field. While Chapter 2 engages the theoretical and practical statements of the work of several theorists in Composition Studies, this chapter attends to the rhetoric of theory-talk in Composition Studies. By “rhetoric” I mean the ways we talk about something that reveal the underlying beliefs animating that talk. In this chapter, I attend to the gaps, silences, and dismissals that pervade “theory-talk” in our field for what they can tell us about the signification and the status of theory in our field.

To examine the rhetoric of theory-talk in our field, I turn to a handful of artifacts. First, I look to a canonical work in our field: Steven North’s 1987 *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. North’s text is one of the first book-length retrospectives of our field, and, as such, it has been a stand-by introductory text in many graduate courses. North’s text provides a great example of how a gap in professional discourse reveals more than any explicit statement ever could: in North’s otherwise broad study of the folk-groups in Rhetoric and Composition, theory is mostly invisible. When it is operative, it dons the divisive face of privilege and elitism. The only theory that North acknowledges is dialectical inquiry.

My next set of artifacts occupies the other end of the continuum: it is a handful of texts that I consider to be the “high theory” of our field. Of the texts I consider, I spend the most time with two: Byron Hawk’s 2007 *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity* and Diane D. Davis’ 2000 *Breaking up [at] the Totality: A*

*Rhetoric of Laughter*. In contrast to North, who ignores theory, Hawk and Davis in many ways represent the vanguard of theory in our field. Not only are their research interests postmodern and post-structuralist theory, they both have an essential association with the journal in our field that does the most “high theory:” *The Journal of Advanced Composition*. In addition to publishing scores of articles about Derrida, Levinas, Lyotard and Ronnell in *JAC*, Davis has served on its editorial board since 1999. Hawk’s book won the *Journal of Advanced Composition’s* W. Ross Winterrowd Award for the best book published on composition theory in 2007. In examining Hawk’s *A Counter-History of Composition* and Davis’ *Breaking up [at] the Totality*, I find that the operative kind of post-structuralism for Hawk and Davis is essentially ludic—all play and no politics.

Through examining the rhetoric of theory-talk in our field, I conclude in this chapter that although Composition Studies may have had its “theoretical turn,” the most important theory about writing—post-structuralism—has yet to fully make its mark on Composition Studies. The problem with post-structuralism in Composition Studies is the false binary many of its key texts seem to promulgate: either be a post-structuralist and leave behind politics, or be a social-epistemic theorist and forget play. But, as I argue in this chapter, post-structuralism is both a textual and political critique. As such, because the post-structuralist theory in Composition Studies is primarily concerned with only textual critique, we could say that Composition Studies has yet to have its fully “post-structuralist turn.” The end of this chapter attempts to conduct an experiment in which we ask: what would our field look like if it was indeed animated by a political kind of



post-structuralism, a post-structuralism that posits theory as more than dialectic, and doesn't pretend to be politically disinterested?

### **Theory as Dialectic**

In Stephen North's history of the field—a contested history, for sure, but still a bulwark of graduate study in Composition Studies—written in 1987, North tells the history of Composition Studies by grouping trends in the field according to “methodological communities,” which are little “societies” within the field defined by their affinity with a certain methodology. In his schema, there are three uber-communities: the Practitioners, the Scholars, and the Researchers. Interestingly, the Scholars and the Researchers have several sub-categories (Historians, Philosophers, and Critics under the former; and Experimentalists, Clinicians, Formalists and Ethnographers under the latter) while the Practitioners have no sub-categories. We might read this as a lack of attention, an under-theorization, of the Practitioners, but the book opens with this group, and we find that the book is in fact a spirited defense of Practitioners and an impassioned denouncement of the elitism of Researchers and Scholars.

Greg Ulmer's 1985 *Applied Grammatology*, which I hold up as the high point of post-structuralism in Composition Studies, was published just two years before North's book, but I don't think that's the only reason North missed the theoretical turn underway at the time *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* went to press. Rather, an intellectual blindspot is the cause: North employs a Hegelian definition of “theory” as mere dialectical inquiry.

Before I illustrate this, a note on my methodology. Finding North's definition of "theory" or his location of "Theorists" in the book is no straight-forward task because there is no methodological community called "Theorists" in North's schema. Given this aporia of a group which was certainly in existence in Composition Studies by 1987, North's scheme compels us to look in the next-best places: Philosophers, Critics, Researchers, and Scholars. Although "theorist" and "researcher" in Composition Studies mean very different things, "Researchers" is the closest methodological community for us to look to in search of the "Theorists." While these groups drew a great deal on "theory," that theory was from the social sciences, not literary theory.

Indeed, in none of the eight sub-societies that North analyzes—not Critics, Philosophers, Scholars or Researchers--can I find a single reference to a post-structuralist, or even a literary, theorist; they're mostly social scientists. Berlin reminds us in his 1987 history of the field that the preference for theories culled from the social sciences were a common bias in Composition Studies: "writing instruction during the last century has suffered from the failure of both its supporters and its detractors to conceive of alternatives to the positivistic rhetoric that has dominated the teaching field until just recently."<sup>9</sup> In the "Critics," North got the closest to actually including *literary* theory, as he defined the realm of the Critics as "the interpretation of texts." But, as North concludes in that chapter, he's only counting hermeneutical interpretation, if only because he counts himself as a hermeneutical critic. So as of 1987, according to one of

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<sup>9</sup> James A. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 6.

the most important books on the history of the field, there was no literary theory in Composition Studies.

This social science bias theorized by Berlin and enacted by North is especially glaring in North's section on Philosophers. North concedes that Philosophers are the second largest methodological community in his study, but to North, they are not worthy of majority status. The fault of the Philosophers, argues North, is that they argue in a way that reveals that they have a stake in the outcome of the argument. The following passage reveals North's preference for the dispassionate kind of inquiry common to science, as opposed to the invested inquiry common to the humanities:

...I have occasionally wondered whether it makes sense to claim that there is a community here founded on dialectic at all. The voices so often seem more zealous than reasonable, fervent than curious, converted than, in the best sense of the word, disinterested. They are sometimes rhetorically powerful, sometimes only shrill: Do they seek clarity—or influence? Is this a dialectic—or deliberative rhetoric...?<sup>10</sup>

If the quality of our philosophy depended on sanguinely we can argue with each other, then we exclude voices that actually have something political at stake in the argument.

The problem at the heart of North's above critique is his reduction of all philosophy to dialectic philosophy, and his definition of dialectic as disinterested debate. As this passage implies, philosophy should be an endless process of reasoning from

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen M. North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987), 92.

premise to conclusion, an eternal dialectic with no conclusion. To say “nay” or “yeah” to any argument is to besmirch the duty of the Philosopher.

In the section on “Historians” we see how this criteria that theory be disinterested parlays into a criteria that theory have “integrity,” a criteria that has something to do with theory being clean of history and politics. Of the Historians, who try to influence the history of Composition Studies by writing it, North says: “To favor some interpretive bias in Historical inquiry is one thing. But to move outside the bounds of that inquiry in the name of reform, however subtly, is quite another. Down that road lies the demise of methodological integrity.”<sup>11</sup> But why would “integrity” be the goal of theory, as opposed to complexity? And on what grounds do we dismiss theory that seeks reform, let alone revolution? Literary theory could be said to spring from revolution. Some of the most influential theorists of the twentieth century—Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin, Habermas—hail from the Institute for Social Research, which had explicitly social aims when it opened in 1923. What would Paris 1968 have been without French philosophy?

So in order to have “integrity” (a dubious goal to begin with), theory must be dialectical, abstract, and totally disconnected to history. Compare, for example, North’s standard for theory to Eagleton’s gloss on Marx’s standard for theory: how do we know if a theory is valid? If history proves it true, answers Marx unequivocally. The point is, we don’t have to have North’s kind of theory to have theory; we can have a theory without dialectic; we can have a theory that doesn’t claim to be transcendent over the examples it employs. Post-structuralism is one such kind of theory.

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<sup>11</sup> North 90.

### **Theory as Privilege**

The thesis of North's book is that Researchers and Scholars need to re-attend to the knowledge that Practitioners have, and that our field is compromised by disowning Practitioner knowledge. The Practitioners, as North defines them, use lore to disseminate their knowledge. Patricia Harkin in a 1991 article, "The Post-disciplinary Politics of Lore," takes North a step further, inventively styling lore as the kind of knowledge production that theory could never be, because lore deals better with overdetermination in a way that (scientific) theory does not.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the low status of lore in the professionalization of Composition Studies, North argues, Practitioner knowledge has been unfortunately disregarded. In fact, Practitioners were demonized by Researchers and Scholars who were embarrassed by the lack of methodological sophistication required by a field that now had national attention through educational Sputnik projects during the Cold War and unprecedented resources and responsibilities during the so-called national literacy crisis of the 70's.<sup>13</sup> Practitioners, according to North, were made out to be "the simple, indigenous population of the newly discovered, mostly unexplored territory of Composition," and North is in many ways the post-colonialist who demonstrates how politically motivated their characterization as technical drones is.

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Harkin, "The Post-disciplinary Politics of Lore," in *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (New York: MLA, 1991), 124-138.

<sup>13</sup> Berlin 122.

In addition to “lore” as a kind of knowledge that North elevates in his effort to reverse the hierarchy of Researchers/Scholars over Practitioners, North also elevates “intuition” as a kind of methodology for Practitioners. On the topic of how Practitioners search for possible solutions to a problem they identify, North writes:

Practitioners reflect, they talk, they read. How do they know what they are looking for? How do they know when they’ve found it?... I don’t think they *do* know, in any exact way, what they are looking for by way of solutions. They mostly expect to know it when they see it. They may know they have found it because it “feels” right”—i.e., it makes sense in terms of their experience...

Practitioner inquiry is most often a combination of informed intuition and trial and error.<sup>14</sup>

While I find this elevation of lore and intuition to be a potentially subversive and generative move, I would argue that valuing lore and intuition should not mean a wholesale devaluation of what is thought to be its opposite--theory. In fact, by taking sides among the methodological communities, North misses an important opportunity to address what political contexts have conditioned such a contentious relationship between professional groups.

One such political context is the culture wars, which have--long before North wrote--demonized “theorists” as elitist, along with the theory that they produce. The culture wars have succeeded in making literary theory, especially post-structuralist or postmodern literary theory, the symbol for how academic expertise is indulgent, non-

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<sup>14</sup> North 45.

sensical, and as such, exclusionary. Many academics have participated in this backlash against theory and the field of Rhetoric and Composition is no exception. But as we see in the case of North, in Rhetoric and Composition, the discomfort with theory often originates in a concern for justice. As many feminist theorists have rightly pointed out, female academics have long done theory, but that work is often not labeled as such because theory is associated with the academic status and privilege of white male academics.

I agree with the justice-oriented concern of North and Harkin that who counts as a theorist and what counts as theory does often proceed along a predictable political economy where those in power in academia are awarded the moniker “theorists.” Theory, as a privileged, rarified, even over-valued term, is only bestowed upon work by those already privileged, and so we find “theory” as an exchange value that only confers more capital on the powerful, and reproduces social and political inequalities in academia.

If this is true in literary studies, it is especially true of Composition Studies. This is because Composition Studies, unlike literary studies, is identified closely if not solely with teaching, as North’s argument suggests. The problem is that teaching is often aligned solely with praxis and oppositionally with theory. In his 1997 book about teaching writing before the linguistic turn, Joe Harris hypothesizes composition as the “teaching subject:” “a loose set of practices, concerns, issues, and problems having to do

with how writing gets taught.”<sup>15</sup> If only because of the universal freshman writing requirement, when we think of “Composition Studies,” we have to think of teaching, whereas in Cultural Studies or English, research may come to mind as powerfully as teaching does.

Without contradicting this view, I would argue that what we should condemn here is not theory itself, but the political economy that mis-attributes who does theory and what counts as theory. So let us take a closer look at this political economy, starting with how teaching is valued against research. I say “against” because of a historical reality in which the stock of research has risen, while that of teaching has not; moreover, teaching is not considered research.

The exclusionary nature of these binaries is the result of managerial calculation, not disciplinary valuation. According to the 2006 “Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion,” it was university administration at research and public institutions that started the trend of increasingly (over-) valuing research in hiring, tenure, and promotion.<sup>16</sup> (If I conflate “research” and “theory” in this account, it is only to tell the story of how they are counterposed against teaching.)

To see how hiring, tenure, and promotion structure what counts as worthy in the field, we need only look to the current struggle Writing Program administrators face today trying to make their institutions recognize the work they do in running writing programs as not merely administration but research. The struggle to get our institutions

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), x.

<sup>16</sup> For an illuminating polemic on the glut of published manuscripts this policy promotes, see Frank Donoghue’s “Against Publication.”



to recognize part of our professional obligations as research, not just teaching, inspired Gary Olson's 2002 edited collection, *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*. As Olson states in the introduction, "rhetoric and composition already is an intellectual discipline, that for at least a quarter of a century the field has developed an impressive tradition of intellectual work in a remarkable assortment of subject areas, many of which do not consider the teaching of writing to be their... primary focus or objective."<sup>17</sup>

In the case of gender, we can see this binary between teaching and research that Olson is trying to re-write as reproducing systems of social inequality. Indeed, women are the majority of workers in this "teaching subject." The field of rhetoric and composition was "feminized" since about 1987; according to Theresa Enos in *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, since that watershed hiring year "all the data we... have shows that women are now the majority of tenure-track writing faculty in higher education."<sup>18</sup> What could be so bad about tenure-track jobs, one might ask? (Aren't those disappearing?<sup>19</sup>) The problem is that while women are the majority of tenured faculty, they are overwhelmingly the majority among *non*-tenured faculty, that is,

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Olson, Introduction, in *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, ed. Gary Olson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002), xii.

<sup>18</sup> Theresa Enos, *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1996), 8.

<sup>19</sup> The AAUP reports that whereas 25 years ago, 1 in 4 professors were non-tenure track, as of 2006 that figure is not officially reversed: in today's two and four-year institutions, only 1 in 4 professors is tenure-track or tenured. American Association of University Professors, "The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 1990-1991," *Academe*, 1991.

faculty who aren't paid to research: "of the 48% of faculty who are non-tenured, 70% are female."<sup>20</sup> As non-tenured faculty, of course, these faculty are not paid to research.

Although these institutional arrangements are of great concern to me, again I would offer that perhaps we have displaced our anxiety about the political economy of our field onto one of the objects (theory) that inhabits our field. The problem that we should seek to redress is not theory, but that of the political economy of our field.

In fact, theory can provide ways to address political economies because its kind of critical thinking insists on considering context. Theory is a mode of questioning that tries to grasp what grounds our critiques, be they "methods" or "assumptions." I look to literary theory here for such conceptions of theory. To Paul de Man, theory is a "controlled reflection on the formation of method."<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton offers this definition of theory: a "reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions."<sup>22</sup> Theory asks: what conditions us to produce this critique—what are the foundations upon which a given criticism rests; what makes that criticism possible, and what is made impossible by those conditions? By these definitions, theory gives us tools to uncover what forces invisibly structure our statements and institutions. In this way, theory would only seem to empower us to address the realities of social inequality in our profession.

Therefore, while I share North's anxiety over the social inequalities that structure the labor realities of Rhetoric and Composition, I think that rearranging the players (Practitioners/teachers vs. Researchers/Scholars/theorists) in this conflict, or their objects

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<sup>20</sup> Enos 20.

<sup>21</sup> Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 2.

(theory or praxis), only distracts us from understanding the forces that structure our discipline as such, and therefore condition such a conflict.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, North is not alone in making theory as an easy strawman. Theory is, in this light, a hypotheses or set of premises to be “tested” empirically; as totalizing system or “grand narrative;” as an meta-discursive abstraction, invalidated when it is dirtied by praxis; as a dry taxonomy; as something to be “applied” to give us “universal” solutions. With such definitions, it is too easy to dismiss theory as our adversary in the political conflicts in our field. For example, in her chapter “On Theory, Theorists, and Theorizing” in *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*, Lisa Ede uses “theory” inter-changeably with “research” or “theoretical critique” and even just “critique,” and I think this fuzziness in her terms is what leads her to this caution about theory in Composition Studies: “Taxonomies can help organize and clarify a confusing mass of details, for instance, but they can also oversimplify, decontextualize, and distort the very practices they are designed to study.”<sup>24</sup> Again, the gloss on “theory” here is that it is just another mode of examination, or, worse, an exercise in abstraction that misses important realities.

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<sup>23</sup> In Chapter 2, I offer one such framework that might come close to doing justice to the complex social, cultural, political, economic and historical forces that have conditioned these labor relations that North and others refer to: “neoliberalization.” Neoliberalization is the “free-marketization” of higher education. The valuation of research over teaching in academia is, for example, could be attributed to neoliberalization, in as far as market logic is at work when we base college rankings on publications by faculty and on grant money awarded for research projects.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Ede, *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location* (Carbondale, University of Southern Illinois Press, 2004), 132.

### Theory as Play without Politics

The field of rhetoric offers D. Diane Davis' scintillating, high-flying 2000 *Breaking Up [at] the Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. Davis makes post-structuralism subversive, inventive and irreverent in a way that is reminiscent of the French feminists. *Breaking Up* contends that we can do the serious work of deconstructing the Western subject through laughter. But kairotic laughter—the kind that acts as a force that takes hold of us, that convulses us against our will. As such, kairotic laughter subjugates us, but there is pleasure in that subjugation. Davis argues that we must write as if we're laughing. In her playful and rigorous account that closely reads Blanchot, Bataille, Cixous, Ronnel, Lyotard, Butler, Vitanza and Nietzsche, her key concepts are: the **excess** that subject formation aims to erase; the **hole** or gap between the de-territorialization of post-modernity and the re-territorialization of modernity, and how by holding that space open we can experience kairos; being in language is like being on **drugs**; the sign as not a fixed entity but something that “operates as a **momentary connection between two protean layers of meaning**.”<sup>25</sup> Using the most exciting ideas available in this broad range of post-structuralist thinkers, Davis' account of post-structuralism is lucid, bold, and brilliant, an extremely helpful and exhilarating gloss of post-structuralism for rhetoricians and compositionists alike.

Byron Hawk's 2007 *A Counterhistory of Composition: Toward a Methodology of Complexity* is another book I would include in the handful of books I've encountered in Composition Studies that do what I think is a kind of post-structuralism. In it, Hawk

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<sup>25</sup> Diane D. Davis, *Breaking up [at] the Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP: 2000), 88.

problematizes the recent disrepute that has fallen upon process theorists as expressivism has gotten lumped in with romanticism and vitalism. Hawk painstakingly pulls apart “romanticism” and “vitalism” in his account, making the case that if we dismiss vitalism along with the process/expressivist paradigm, we miss out on probably one of the most complex theories of invention available to us.

Hawk is not likely to characterize himself as a post-structuralist; he might make the argument that what post-structuralists do, vitalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did just as well. What I find so compelling about his project is that it aims to break up the binary of “heuretics/chance,” and posit instead that “there can be a heuristics based on aleatory procedures or methods.”<sup>26</sup> This bears resemblance to post-structuralism in its emphasis on play, and its idea that there can be a theory based on play.

The problem with Hawk and Davis lies in their notions about the politics of post-structuralism. As I said of this project in my Introduction, I am interested in what post-structuralism can do in Composition Studies *insofar as it can help us* re-imagine academia as a space for radical political critique and radical political change. Although Ulmer inspired both of them (Hawk, more directly), Hawk and Davis might represent the way that post-structuralism has ossified into apolitical rarification. There are two problems with their arguments in this regard: first, the conclusion that any political agenda in teaching shuts down possibilities for invention; and second, that any pedagogy, especially one based on post-structuralist play, is free from such an agenda.

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<sup>26</sup> Byron Hawk, *A Counterhistory of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity* (Pittsburgh UP, 2007), 2.

Social-epistemic rhetoric is usually the target in Hawk and Davis' discomfort with political pedagogy. By teaching students to learn the conventions, then enter the conversation, as social-epistemic thinker David Bartholomae does in "Inventing the University," Davis argues that we are making sure that the Unthinkable remains so, and we suppress any differences in any members of that community. "A post-humanist ethics," writes Davis, "ought not be about shutting down the flow but about opening it up, pulling back all the stops against the clarity of One Voice, One Call, one legitimate position."<sup>27</sup>

But what if community, at least in political activism, requires nothing more than, to use Davis' words about communication itself, a provisional and fleeting connection, a **"momentary connection between two protean layers of meaning?"** Why can't community "mean" the way she allows a "sign" to mean?

Similarly, Davis launches a critique against feminist pedagogy for how it participates in what Davis calls the pedagogy of "the Grand March:" the kind of pedagogy, that, in its aim to turn students into a certain kind of (feminist) subject, shuts down this flow of difference. At first, Davis says her chapter is dedicated to critiquing just "oppositional" feminisms, those that submit to the One Call, One Voice, "Grand March" and even "Final Solution" kind of politics. But as we read on, we see that there is *no* kind of politics in the classroom that doesn't do what Davis claims oppositional feminist pedagogy does, and we are left with the impression that any political agenda in the classroom is about making students step in line, and post-structuralism can't have

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<sup>27</sup> Davis 19.

that. “Feminist composition,” writes Davis, “is about re-territorializing writing and strapping it into the service of the ‘feminist’ March... but there is another way to approach composition courses. What if we put ourselves in the service of writing rather than the other way around?”<sup>28</sup> Davis elaborates on this later in the chapter: “We-writing-teachers are not after power. We are after the chance to experience the force that runs through language—what Cixous calls the ‘rhythm that laughs you.’”<sup>29</sup>

Like Davis, Hawk says he draws the line only when political pedagogy aims to make itself into Law; however, his account ends up the same way Davis’ account does. As he reveals his exact objections to radical pedagogy, we see that to Hawk, there is no possibility for any politics in the classroom, radical/feminist or otherwise. The first problem with radical pedagogy—Hawk starts with the example of Ira Shor—is that it doesn’t expect the unexpected. The exhilarating feature of Hawk’s “methodology of the aleatory” is that it is a pedagogy that leaves room for student writing that teachers could never possibly anticipate, that fall completely outside of what we imagined we might get. Radical pedagogy, says Hawk, like Berlin’s and Shor’s, expects students to produce certain kinds of texts that do certain things: that decode culture, discover their oppression, and seek liberation.

The next problem Hawk has with Berlin in particular touches on Davis’ critique that is ostensibly about oppositional pedagogies: they only make students resist and react. Examining Berlin’s method of making his undergrads first decode cultural representations in, say, ads, Hawk argues, “By stating their ideology up front, teachers

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<sup>28</sup> Davis 230-231.

<sup>29</sup> Davis 251.

invite confrontation, and confrontation tends to lead to resistance, not democracy.”<sup>30</sup>

Another reason why social-epistemic rhetoric is a threat to the aleatory is that it “assumes that teachers already understand how to intervene and that their pedagogies can transfer that knowledge.”<sup>31</sup>

There are several assumptions worth briefly repeating here. First is the claim that resistance and confrontation have no place in democracy, and therefore not in a democratic classroom. Second is the notion that one’s politics are transparent to oneself, and are immediately transmissible, as if one’s politics are as simple as a message to be transferred. Third is a more complex constellation of ideas at work in Hawk and Davis wherein the only classroom actors with political ideas to “transmit” are teachers, not students, and these ideas are formed prior to the classroom, not within the classroom, in collaboration with each other.

But when social-epistemic thinkers like Ira Shor give an assignment to composition students, they are *constraining* the range of responses they can get, but that doesn’t mean they are fixing it anymore than any other assignment would. Is there a way in which Hawk and Davis’ pedagogy of play does *not* constrain student responses, and kinds of texts students invent, along political lines? No pedagogy is without a politics. I applaud Hawk’s promotion of a pedagogy that is “more open to students’ local cultures and invents ways to map them to larger contexts particular to the students.” Within that, he argues, our job is to create a space “that produces new experiences, new positions

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<sup>30</sup> Hawk 215.

<sup>31</sup> Hawk 216.



from which to see and think.”<sup>32</sup> I would respond, however, that it’s mistaken to think that there is a view from nowhere, when every set of materials, experiences, and environments that we give our students constrains them in some way, and there is a political economy to that constraint.

So while Hawk and Davis provide us with rich post-structuralist approaches to composition, they engage in a kind of play without politics. In both cases, this aversion to a kind of post-structuralism that bears any political commitments seems to emanate from a fear that political commitments necessarily translate into political dogma. Whatever motivates the aversion to a political post-structuralism, what results in Hawk and Davis is the dichotomization of textual play and political work: when a political interest is pursued, textual play, open-ness, the aleatory, all get shut down. But I argue that post-structuralism doesn’t have to choose between politics and play.

### **Thinking an Alternative**

So what could theory look like, if it is not the privilege of the elite, the dialectic, or a post-structuralism defanged of political interest? There is an alternative, and I will try to imagine it here, imagine an alternative history for Composition Studies in which a political kind of post-structuralism is a major player in the development of Composition Studies.

The thought experiment I’m conducting here was anticipated by one conducted by Geoffrey Sirc and Lester Faigley, except with post-modernism, specifically postmodern

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<sup>32</sup> Hawk 250.

culture and art of the 60's. Faigley and Sirc muse compellingly: if Composition Studies *was* born in the sixties, it sure didn't show it. Faigley asserts that Composition Studies continued to posit the "modernist text"—one with an Enlightenment subject—even as the field was running parallel to a culture overflowing with postmodern cultural products and political movements. "The alleged beginnings of the 'disciplinary period' in composition studies in 1960's," writes Faigley, "coincides with what other cultural analysts have claimed as the onset of post-modernity, when in the United States pop art, acid rock, street theater, the civil rights movement, the Native American movement, the gay/lesbian movement, the environmental movement, the free speech movement... all arose in the same decade."<sup>33</sup> Faigley marvels at how, despite these postmodern cultural contexts, composition studies managed to stay clean of all the chaos and fragmentariness of postmodern culture.

What Faigley says about postmodern culture, Sirc argues about postmodern art: how did Composition Studies manage to steer clear of what the rest of the art world was at the time so galvanized by? In *English Composition as a Happening*, Sirc imagines what Composition Studies may have looked like had it been brought into conversation with the avante-garde—Fluxus, the situationists, Dada, punk and John Cage.<sup>34</sup> What Faigley and Sirc do with postmodernism, I propose we do with post-structuralism; what they did with art, culture, and political movements, I propose we do with theory—ask: what if the boundaries between post-structuralist theory and Composition Studies had

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<sup>33</sup> Lester Faigley, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* (Pittsburgh University Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Sirc, *English Composition as a Happening* (Utah State University Press, 2002).

been more porous—what would Composition Studies look like today? How would Composition Studies be helpfully disrupted?

Both 60's postmodernism and 60's post-structuralism were inspired by what was “new” in 60's culture. Though it may strike us as a tome of eternal philosophical genius today, at the time of the publication of *De La Grammatologie* in France in 1967 (later translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1976 as *Of Grammatology*), it was a reaction to a revolution in technological forms similar to those of the “New Media” movement in Composition Studies with the advent of the internet (and now Web 2.0). The advent of material changes in communication and print culture—specifically “cinematography” and “cybernetics”—motivated Derrida to (re-) invent grammatology. He opens the book with a sense of urgency and timeliness:

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, *Of Grammatology* has that edgy, apocalyptic tone of writing in a time of crisis, if not at the end of the world, then at the “end of the book.”

The disruption in our field that both postmodernism and post-structuralism can claim is that of our ideas about the subject. Faigley says of his own work that he “uses postmodern theory and theories of postmodernity to attempt to understand some of what has happened in composition studies since the 1960's and to address what I see as the

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1974), 6.

most vexed question in composition studies—the question of the *subject*.<sup>36</sup> Susan Miller has taken up a critique of the subject as well in *Rescuing the Subject: a Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer*.

But while I concede that the subject matter of post-structuralism and post-modernism often overlaps, the political work they do need not. Sometimes, they are even at odds as such. As Frederic Jameson teaches us, postmodernism is a cultural logic. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, is a *critique* of cultural logics--of the Enlightenment, of modernity, and, yes, of post-modernity. Given that post-structuralism necessarily includes political critique and postmodernism does not, I do not see the postmodern turn in our field as synonymous with a post-structuralist one. So let us then begin to imagine some expressly post-structuralist beginnings to Rhetoric and Composition.

The oft-cited origins of Composition Studies occupy a range, as they do in many fields. But, in disciplinary histories, three moments come up repeatedly: 1869, when Harvard President Charles W. Eliot introduced the first-ever freshman writing course;<sup>37</sup> 1949, when the very first Conference on College Composition and Communication was held in Chicago; 1963, when Albert Kitzhaber gave an influential address at the 4C's that urged participants to do research in the field; or, more cynically, 1962, when the National

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<sup>36</sup> Faigley 22 my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*, ed. John Brereton (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

Department of Defense conceived Project English as a way to fight the Cold War on the communication skills front.<sup>38</sup>

But what if Composition Studies credited—instead of a university initiative, or proceedings from early 60’s 4C’s conference—Roland Barthes, for example, as the founder of Composition Studies? What would writing as an academic field look like today if it were based on definitions of writing that were drawn from his 1975 *The Pleasures of the Text*, definitions like this:

“Writing is: the various blisses of language.”

“Text of bliss [as opposed to text of pleasure]: a text that... brings to a crisis [the reader’s] relationship with language”<sup>39</sup>

So far we’re imagining a field that took “language” and “text” as its keywords.

Another founding text we should take into account in our thought experiment is Jacques Derrida’s 1967’s *De La Grammatologie*. And what other work could be more suited to a genealogy of the study of writing than what was 1967’s new (anti-) science of writing?

Indeed, what would “Writing Studies” look like if Barthes and Derrida provided its (anti-) foundational texts?

Perhaps we would have more texts today like Raul Sanchez’ 2005 *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*. Like Sanchez, as far as literary theories that suggest themselves the most to Composition Studies, I privilege post-structuralist theory because

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<sup>38</sup> Berlin 121.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14.

it places at its center the act of writing, which is what I understand Composition Studies to be about. So let's posit that, in this newly re-imagined alternative of a Composition Studies based on post-structuralism, our object of study is writing. But what does "writing" include?

To Derrida, *everything*: it is the "totality" of what makes writing "possible."<sup>40</sup> Sanchez echoes this, but articulates it in a way that seems more pointedly critical towards social epistemic rhetoric:

A grammatological approach to writing proposes that writing itself underlies all the conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, and even rhetorical activity habitually brought to bear on writing, as well as on terms such as language and discourse. It argues that concepts in which composition theorists regularly traffic—*knowledge*, *ideology*, *culture*, and also *rhetoric* and *the subject*—are best approached not as concepts at all but as examples of, enactments of, writing.<sup>41</sup>

At first glance, this modification Sanchez would make to the way theory functions in the field doesn't seem that disruptive: whether or not we start with writing or *knowledge*, *ideology*, *culture* (the three terms he keeps italicizing, putting together in that order, and which structure the three main chapters of the book), we always end up at writing, so does it really matter which object of study we start with—writing, or one of those three?

To Sanchez, yes, absolutely, because *knowledge*, *ideology*, and *culture* are written; they are discursively produced, and when we start backwards with *knowledge*,

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<sup>40</sup> Derrida 9.

<sup>41</sup> Raul Sanchez, *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2005), 7.

*ideology, culture* to teach writing, we assume that writing is about *something else*. To Sanchez, writing is the uber-activity under which *knowledge, ideology, and culture* happen. By starting with *knowledge* (propagated by the now common notion in Composition Studies that writing produces knowledge, not just expresses it), *ideology* (the notion that acts of writing are acts of subject formation), and *culture* (teaching that reading and writing texts is cultural coding and decoding), we end up doing what Sanchez says Composition Studies has been doing wrong for years: making writing a *representational system*, a hermeneutics—a system that represents things like *knowledge, ideology, culture*.

On the one hand, if Barthes were the chair of 4C's in 1963, he would approve. Finally, Composition Studies is about *writing--texts, textuality, language*. On the other hand, we should worry about what this inside/outside disciplinarity shuts down, more specifically who it shuts out. As I wrote in the previous section, "Theory as Privilege," it's the political economy implicit in this claim that should concern us. Although having a definitive object of study in a field still plagued with legitimacy issues is appealing, one could see this purist manifesto as ultimately a boundary-patrolling move that shuts out important scholarship that uses "knowledge," "culture" or "ideology" as its primary key terms. Because of important social epistemic work it might exclude, we should be hesitant to fully embrace Sanchez' text as the foundational moment of the post-structuralist turn.

Another way in which I think Composition Studies would be changed today if our foundational texts were post-structuralist ones is that our field would take for

granted political critique as part of textual critique. Post-structuralist theory takes as its object of study the very foundations of Western metaphysics.<sup>42</sup> Derrida critiques this foundation—logocentrism—on the grounds of its *ethnocentrism*: Logocentrism, reads the first page of *Of Grammatology*, “the metaphysics of phonetic writing,” was “nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, controlling in one and the same order.”<sup>43</sup> Aldon Nielsen’s work in post-colonial studies is a contemporary example of post-structuralism’s political imperative. In *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Inter-textuality*, Aldon Nielsen uses post-structuralism to demonstrate the constructedness of race: “Our language is at once ours and other. This excessiveness of language shows to us the excessiveness of race.”<sup>44</sup>

In the next chapter, I begin to lay out a composition pedagogy that does what Nielsen does above: present post-structuralism as a simultaneously textual theory and political project. I do this because we have work yet to do to articulate a fully post-structuralist moment in Rhetoric and Composition. For, as I have argued in this chapter, one perspective on our field would indicate that Rhetoric and Composition is having its post-structuralist moment. As a field, theory is institutionalized, evidenced by the fact that post-structuralist texts have won some of the most prestigious awards in our field:

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<sup>42</sup> At the same time, I don’t confuse my contention that post-structuralism is a political theory with the idea that teaching post-structuralism in the classroom (or any politically-imbued philosophy like radical pedagogy) is enacting a revolution. As Althusser charges in “Ideology and the State,” school is one of the Intellectual State Apparatuses, so just because one teaches post-structuralism in school doesn’t mean one is taking political action (yet)—because we’re *at school*. However, no ISA comes without holes that we can’t exploit.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida 3.

<sup>44</sup> Aldon L. Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Georgia UP: 1994), 26.



Tom Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment: Rheotric, Zizek, and the Return of the Subject* won the 2008 Gary Olson award from the *Journal of Advanced Composition*; Byron Hawk's *A Counter-History of Composition* won *JAC*'s W. Ross Winterowd Award for the best book published on composition theory in 2007; and Pat Harkin and John Schilb's *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age* won the 1994 Nancy Dasher Book Award.

But a rhetorical analysis of theoretical statements in our field would suggest that we are still in danger of regarding theory as disinterested dialectic, elitist privilege, or a kind of play free from political investment. At the end of this chapter, I began to entertain the possibility that it doesn't have to be this way; an alternative is possible wherein a post-structuralist composition classroom can be both playful and politically interested, engaged, or committed, even if that politics doesn't lead to direct action. I suggest in Chapter 3 that employing a rhetoric of drag is one way to articulate a kind of political post-structuralism. But first, we turn to the question of what the post-structuralist work is and does in CS, what the politically radical work is and does, and finally how each falls short in some way of providing a politically post-structuralist writing classroom that I seek.

**Chapter 2**  
**Necessary but Insufficient:**  
**Post-structuralism and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric**

**Introduction: In Search of Politically Radical Post-structuralist Pedagogy**

This chapter poses the same question to both the post-structuralist composition classroom and to the social-epistemic composition classroom: how is the given classroom *necessary but not sufficient* in creating a post-structuralist composition classroom that is both playful and politically radical?<sup>45</sup> I argue that the post-structuralist classroom experiments discussed in Composition Studies scholarship provide rich and generative articulations of post-structuralist thought; in this way, such classroom experiments are *necessary* to any project like mine that seeks to design a politically radical post-structuralist classroom. In particular, I analyze Greg Ulmer's textshop, James Seitz' use of Barthes' fragment, and one of my own composition classroom experiments: "sentence vectors," an exercise inspired by Barthes' *Pleasures of the Text* and Derrida's idea of dissemination.

I conclude that each of these post-structuralist experiments is necessary to any consideration of post-structuralist pedagogy insofar as these exercises teach students both structuralist and post-structuralist lessons about language. Some of these lessons are structuralist insofar as they teach an anti-essentialist, posthumanist theory of language.

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<sup>45</sup> In this dissertation, a "political critique" is any critique that has some relationship to political action. "Political action" means anything on the continuum of political change from changing representations (for example, increasing social acceptance of homosexual relationships) to changing political economies (for example, making gay marriage legal).

By “anti-essentialist,” I mean that structuralism holds that signs don’t contain any essence of meaning; rather, they establish meaning from their opposition to other signs.

By “posthumanist,” I mean that structuralism holds that we as humans are not at home in language, that it is an alien machine to us; that language is more like a game we can participate in rather than a tool we created to reflect our consciousnesses.

The post-structuralist lessons that these experiments teach emanate from post-structuralism’s critique of structuralism’s foundationalism and transcendentalism. Post-structuralist charges that structuralism, despite its posthumanist pretensions, hangs on to humanism through universal logics—the idea that the sign system is universal. As post-structuralist charges, this pretension is perpetuated from an unspoken assumption in structuralism that there is some foundation grounding the system. This charge is related to post-structuralism’s critique of structuralism’s transcendentalism: that structuralism relies on a transcendent signified (post-structuralists go as far as calling it “God”) that precedes the system. Post-structuralism counters that because there are no such thing as signifiers, and no such thing as signifieds, it impossible to think of language as a system. Post-structuralism also critiques structuralism for not recognizing the suppressions and exclusions required in the binary system that structuralism insists language is.

In particular, the lessons that these post-structuralist experiments offer stemming from post-structuralism’s critique of structuralism as recapped above are: that it isn’t relations between signs that establish meaning, but absences of meaning that play upon the surface of signs. As such, if language is a system, it is a system that does not end up communicating; “signs” are places where meaning hides, not where it appears.

Therefore, certainty of meaning is never achieved; only undecidability. As opposed to

being clear and coherent, what a text can hope to do is be open to the play of signs which creates meaning, and not try to suppress difference. That is, while we can never move beyond or outside language, as Seitz says, we can move “within” it. The way to do this is to not resist but assist in the “play” that produces textuality.

But while these post-structuralist experiments provide a *necessary* articulation of the post-structuralist classroom, I find these experiments *insufficient* in obtaining the politically radical post-structuralist classroom because they leave unanswered the question of how those experiments exploit the politically radical potential of post-structuralist thought.

I then examine social-epistemic classrooms for how they are necessary but insufficient to a politically radical post-structuralist classroom. I turn to social-epistemic classrooms in particular because I would argue that the best representation of “politically radical” theory and practice in Composition Studies is social-epistemic rhetoric. Specifically, I discuss the academic literacy movement of which Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae were a part, and offer my own experiments in constructing a classroom that uses Bizzell and Bartholomae’s concept of teaching students academic “literacy” in order to help them “acculturate” into the university.

I conclude that social-epistemic pedagogy like that of Bizzell and Bartholomae is *necessary* to my project insofar as social-epistemic composition theory articulates a critique of ideology and offers an alternative politics. At the same time, social-epistemic rhetoric does not completely embody the politically radical composition classroom because while it is unique in that it has an explicit politics, its politics is not radical in one crucial way: it does not account for the micropolitical in its analyses. As I will show, a

pedagogy that accounts for the micropolitical is essential if we are to take into account the specific kind of institution—the neoliberalized university—into which we are “acculturating” our students in the writing classroom. To supplement this critique of the kind of institution into which are students are being acculturated, I turn to an emerging discipline called “Critical University Studies,” which describes the political economy of the university.

### **I. Theory, Praxis, and Postpedagogy: Beside, not Under or Before**

Before we begin, we must acknowledge the problem of “applying” post-structuralism to any practice, be it textual or pedagogical. For not only does post-structuralism resist being instrumentalized, one could say that the very thrust of post-structuralism is to critique the act of instrumentalization, application, and translation. So how can one justify “translating” post-structuralism into pedagogy? When discussing the “post-structuralist classroom,” how can we avoid thinking about this experiment as converting the classroom into a post-structuralist practice by instrumentalizing post-structuralism?

Post-structuralism critiques traditional philosophy for how logic, as Derrida argues in “Signature, Event, Context” posits language as essentially referential, where signifiers are transparent placeholders of meaning without any trace. Post-structuralism, as an alternative philosophy, posits the undecidability of language, precluding the fixing of meaning that is fundamental to composing statements in a logical syllogism. In this way, language cannot be “instrumentalized,” or made the mere tool of meaning. If there is no essential meaning to distill from a statement, how could we possibly “apply” that meaning to another context?

In the case of this inquiry, that other context is pedagogy. If we understand pedagogy as the *science* or *philosophy* of teaching, then the problematic only deepens because of how post-structuralism critiques “science” and “philosophy.” It is not unusual to think that pedagogy requires a kind of programmatic systematicity, some sort of norm that can be applied across classroom experiences. “Philosophy” fares no better in post-structuralism, for post-structuralism critiques Western philosophy for positing language as a referential instrument. Post-structuralism would critique the scientific aspirations of pedagogy because science requires repeatability and systematicity, which post-structuralism not only cannot provide but actively resists. Moreover, post-structuralism would critique pedagogy as a science or philosophy of teaching because of the subtle binary implied here, where science and philosophy are theory on the one hand and teaching is praxis on the other. How on earth, then, would post-structuralism help us construct a pedagogy when post-structuralism makes the very idea of pedagogy—as a philosophy or science of teaching—impossible?

The notion of “application” deepens the problem further. In his clarifying gloss on deconstruction, Martin McQuillan posits that deconstruction is not a method, and as such, cannot be applied. He puts the problem this way: “Deconstruction is not a method if we take ‘method’ to mean a general set of rules, practices, prescribed formulae and so on which will operate consistently every time (systematic, programmatic, hermeneutic).” Every post-structuralist reading of a text is “unique, unrepeatable” and “radically singular.”<sup>46</sup> If post-structuralism refuses its own generalization into a process one can

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<sup>46</sup> Martin McQuillan, “Introduction: Five Strategies for Deconstruction,” in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

impose across a number of contexts, how could it be applied to pedagogy? If deconstruction is radical praxis in the way that McQuillan describes it, certainly it would have little to contribute to a theory of teaching, or a theory of anything.

We might begin a critique of the question that led us to this point-- “How does post-structuralism apply to composition pedagogy?”—by turning to a neglected aspect of the richest contribution to post-structuralism: what I’m calling “composition” in this question, Derrida calls “writing” in his science of writing, or “grammatology.” To post-structuralist compositionist Greg Ulmer, for too long grammatology has been associated with deconstruction, which is an act of reading—at the expense of another process—decomposition, which is an act of writing. The purpose of Ulmer’s *Applied Grammatology* is therefore to “explore the relatively neglected ‘affirmative’ (Derrida’s term) dimension of grammatology.”<sup>47</sup> How does turning to (de)composition as what we mean by “post-structuralism” change the question I’ve posed?

Invoking the “writing” component of post-structuralism does indeed help us begin to unravel the problematic I’ve presented. Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* as well as his essay “Differance” argue that writing (as opposed to speech) is the practice in which the contradictory valences of meaning in a signifier—and the suppression of it—is revealed. Whereas speech suppresses these valences, writing throws them into relief. In this way, writing reveals how language does not function as a transparent instrument that transports meaning. Therefore, we might wonder if the “composition” (here conflated with Derrida’s “writing”) part of our query--“How does post-structuralism apply to

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<sup>47</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (John Hopkins University Press: 1984), x.

composition pedagogy?”--has the potential to unravel the problematic of this query insofar as the composition classroom--more than a communications, speech, or linguistics classroom—is already enmeshed in a practice—writing—that resists instrumentalization. By teaching “writing,” are we not already engaging a repository of resistance to “application” as mere “instrumentalization?”

Here I would suggest a spatial metaphor to articulate the two versions of “pedagogy” I am fabricating here. I suggest a paralogic relationship between theory and pedagogy: instead of putting post-structuralism *before* Composition Studies, as a model would stand in front of a pupil, or underneath Composition Studies as a foundation would support a structure, there is a way in which we can put post-structuralism *beside* composition pedagogy. This paralogical (the logic of ordering things horizontally and anarchically), as opposed to hypological (the logic of order things vertically and hierarchically), relationship is the way I would like to set up the encounter between post-structuralism and the composition classroom in this chapter, and this spatial metaphor will be elaborated more later.

One way of conceiving this paralogic relationship is to think of alternative ways to see “method.” Hawk, whom I discussed in the previous chapter as the inventor of an “aleatory methodology” (a methodology based on chance), was inspired to create such a “non-systematic heuristic” by a short essay on Coleridge by Paul Kameen in Ann Bertoff’s sadly short-lived publication, *Correspondences*. In this brief but generative piece, Kameen offers a counterpoint to McQuillan’s restrictive gloss on “method.” While attempting to think through the tension between process and post-process exponents in Composition Studies, Kameen invokes a short essay by Coleridge in which he theorizes a



kind of method that is not prescriptive, not, as McQuillan defines method, a “set of rules” to be applied “consistently every time.” Rather, as Kameen puts it, the steps on the way that method takes us “must be discovered as [the way] is traversed.” “Methodological thinking,” concludes Kameen, “is by no means, then, merely a matter of employing proper ‘techniques’ or ‘strategies’ or ‘processes.’”<sup>48</sup>

However, to be fair, McQuillan does leave room in his analysis for this other kind of method when he refers to the ambiguous translation of Derrida’s “pas de methode.” When Derrida described deconstruction as “pas de methode,” he left us with the problem, McQuillan explains, that the word “pas” in French means both “not” and “method.” “So this ambiguous phrase,” McQuillan suggests, “can be translated as either ‘not a method’ or ‘a methodological step.’”<sup>49</sup> If we leave this contradiction unresolved, as deconstruction would want us to do, then it is possible that there is at least one step to this “pas de methode,” even if no scheme between that step and another step is prescribed.

If method need not be a prescriptive process, what *can* it be? Kameen goes on to say that methodological thinking is “site-dependent—i.e. the subject or situation or set of circumstances will inscribe the limits within which thought can and should proceed.” Method, in this way, can be as radically singular as the “event” of interpretation that deconstruction is to McQuillan.

And if we can deconstruct “method” by insisting on the singularity of the site, we can do something similar with pedagogy: we can insist on the singularity of what Ulmer

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Kameen, “Coleridge: On Method,” *Correspondences* V, (Summer 1986):

3.

<sup>49</sup> McQuillan 5.

calls the “scene of pedagogy.” This is where I will pick up on my earlier spatial metaphor of a paralogic pedagogy.

Inspired by Artaud and publications by Derrida’s teaching collective called the Groupe de Recherches sur l’Enseignement Philosophique (GREPH), Ulmer posits pedagogy as a “scene,” not a science. Ulmer quotes one of the members of GREPH, Bernard Pautrat, who states: “A good scene is always worth more than a long discourse.”<sup>50</sup> Inspired by Pautrat, Ulmer writes: “We normally think of pedagogy as a communication or transmittal or transference of ideas,” whereas “an application of grammatology to teaching... involves the rethinking of the ‘space’ in which the discourse of ideas takes place.”<sup>51</sup>

Such a pedagogy might fulfill what Victor Vitanza sketches out in “Three Countertheses” as a “postpedagogy.” Vitanza also defines postpedagogy in spatial terms by referring to a lack of foundation: it is a pedagogy that “proceed[s] without foundation and without criteria.”<sup>52</sup> So as we work through in this chapter “how post-structuralism applies to composition pedagogy,” let us imagine that the post-structuralist pedagogy we come up with for the composition classroom will define pedagogy this way: a non-systematic inquiry into the space in which the discourse of ideas about writing (as the inscription of difference) takes place alongside an anti-scientific science of writing that is more praxis than theory in that it cannot be generalized, and produces only the radically singular.

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<sup>50</sup> Ulmer 173.

<sup>51</sup> Ulmer 179.

<sup>52</sup> Victor Vitanza, “Three Countertheses” in *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (New York: MLA, 1991), 165.

## II. Three Post-Structuralist Classrooms

Now let us have a look at some radically singular classroom events that I think have demonstrated a paralogic proximity to post-structuralism. These examples' specificity range from offering specific assignments, as in the case of Ulmer and myself, while Seitz's article is more suggestive than specific. Finally, I offer my own classroom text—an exercise and a course objective from a syllabus—inspired by Barthes. Below, I present each example consecutively, with only appropriate contextualization, saving my commentary on each example until after I have presented each example.

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Below I reprint an assignment from the Ulmer essay, “Textshop for Post(e)pedagogy” from the anthology *Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature* edited by G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson, published the same year that *Applied Grammatology* was published (1985). In this assignment, Ulmer asks students to do some “constrained writing” in the tradition of the Oulipo poets, a group of avante-garde French writers, including Marcel Duchamp and Italo Calvino, who produced text according to patterns that were usually mathematically determined. Some Oulipo techniques include the lipogram (a text in which one vowel, usually “e” or “o,” is forbidden) and the snowball (a poem in which each successive line is one letter longer than the previous line). For part of this assignment, Ulmer appropriates the S+7 technique of constrained writing, wherein a writer takes a text and uses it as a model, then chooses any number. Let's say it's five.

The writer then composes the derivative text by replacing every word in the original with the word that is either five entries above or five entries below that word in the dictionary.

Ulmer introduces it as an assignment which “offers a practical strategy for realizing the post-structuralist lesson that each text is its own model and hence, potentially, a generalizable form for the production of other texts.” “By way of example of how these principles might function in assignments,” Ulmer says in this article, “let me cite a work (text) sheet that I distributed as the instructions for a project:”

Principle: creativity as transformation (generative and transformational poetics); the use of individual poems as if they were generic forms. The point of the Humanities Laboratory is to take one step back from the information and skills relevant to the discipline in order to attend to the fundamental experience of creativity that motivates the production of literature in the first place. By using an extant poem (of your choice) as a generative form, the student has a short-cut to the production of a complete, finished creation. Even though the student’s participation is “mechanical,” the resultant text is an authentic invention....

Sample Text: The first stanza from “The Tyger,” William Blake.

Tyger Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

1. Transformation by antonymy (use a Thesaurus).

Rabbit! Rabbit! Freezing dull  
In the plains of the day,  
What mortal foot or ear  
Could copy thy timid disproportion?

2. Transformation by displacement (generated by looking up Blake’s word in the dictionary, then replacing it with the first word above it with the first word above it of the same type [noun, verb, etc.]. The substitution formula may involve any number, above or below the original term).

Tiffin! Tiffin! Burlesquing brigandishly  
In the foreskin of the niggling,

What immoral hanaper or eyas  
Could fragmentize they feal symmetalism?<sup>53</sup>

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In “Roland Barthes, Reading, and Roleplay: Composition's Misguided Rejection of Fragmentary Text,” James Seitz indicts writing pedagogy for treading on only half the rhetorical landscape: we ignore the fragmentary texts and privilege the coherent text. He argues that Composition Studies only seems to be calling for a variety of reading and writing practices, when in fact we are teaching students to homogenize the kinds of texts they produce. “Despite rhetoric that stresses the need for ‘liberating’ and ‘empowering’ student writers,” argues Seitz, “we teachers of writing nevertheless continue to request only the most familiar forms of the coherent essay--or, worse still, the so-called ‘modes’--and to disregard or even actively discourage the rupture and dislocation created by fragmentary texts.”<sup>54</sup> “If composition is to take its name seriously,” he warns, “then it must reevaluate the text that ‘loses its way,’ the text that splinters into heterogeneity.”<sup>55</sup>

By “coherent text,” Seitz means texts that “make sure not to depart from vaguely conventional notions of organization and clarity” which include “orderliness, transitional devices, and ‘development of ideas.’” But there is room for, and reason for, teaching sentence fragments, paratactical structures, and elliptical sequences.

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<sup>53</sup> Gregory Ulmer, “Textshop for Post(e)pedagogy,” in *Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature*, eds. G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson (Kansas UP, 1985), 58-59.

<sup>54</sup> James Seitz, “Roland Barthes, Reading, and Roleplay: Composition's Misguided Rejection of Fragmentary Text,” *College English* 53, no. 7 (November 1991): 816.

<sup>55</sup> Seitz 824.

Too often, Seitz says, when we *do* present the fragmentary text, we present it as a step in the writing process that students pass on their way to the coherent text, which is always the endgame of any paragraph or piece, assignment or writing process. We approach the fragmentary in the student essay as a failure to be corrected.

If the fragment *is* taught as an endgame, it is taught as a technique so exceptional, advanced and sophisticated that students should attempt it only after they've mastered the coherent text. But Seitz argues that such slogans as "Students need to know the rules before they can go about breaking them" "institute a faulty opposition between texts of 'clarity,' ...and texts of ambiguity." Seitz suggests that *all* writing employs fragmentary techniques at one time or another because the elliptical, ambiguous, and unspoken are part of every act of reading. Seitz clarifies that he is not advocating "that we treat failures in coherence as if they were successes, but that we renew and extend our forms of writing and reading so that fragmentation or 'lack of control' becomes a site for exploring a *characteristic* rather than simply an abuse of language."

The crucial lesson that Seitz thinks students can derive from reading fragmentary texts is that reading is rhetorical: that is, texts contain as many gaps as they do answers, and readers play a crucial role in filling those gaps. In this way, meaning is not inherent in a text but is co-constructed by the writer and reader. Reading is an act of exchange between the reader and the writer, not an act in which the reader discovers the writer's meaning.

And it is not a polite, smooth exchange. Reading is an act of struggle, of negotiation, as we try to understand the patterns of communication we must follow in order to make meaning of this text.

But Seitz goes a step further than the idea of participation to the idea of role-play. That is, reading as a rhetorical act is facilitated by the reader playing a role vis-à-vis the text in order to make meaning of it. To Seitz, fragments, unlike coherent texts, uniquely call attention to the necessity of role-play inherent in every reading process. As opposed to assuming a suspended, neutral stance in relationship to the text, the reader of a fragmentary text must constantly maneuver and reposition herself in relation to the text.

Seitz then applies this theory of reading pedagogy to a theory of writing pedagogy. Because *reading* requires this facility with such role-playing, Seitz argues, why should we not teach the *writing* of such fragmentary texts in our composition classes? After all, does not the composition of fragmentary texts require as much skill as the composition of coherent texts? Both require anticipating the negotiations the reader must make. We should therefore teach students how to read and write fragmentary texts—texts that are deliberately ambiguous because they are designed to draw attention to how reading is an act of textual exchange.

Seitz, in this way, constructs the fragmentary and ambiguous text as a rhetorical success, not a textual failure. Perhaps the biggest move he makes is to treat ludic prose conventions as essentially rhetorical. In a heretical move, Seitz styles the “late” Barthes who wrote in fragments not as an indulgent, apolitical, arcane, ludic writer, but as a savvy, socially-minded rhetorician. Seitz therefore might agree that the later Barthes of *S/Z* who wrote in fragments is an extension of, not a rejection of, his earlier work as a semiotician who posited meaning as established through convention.

Seitz theorizes that not only was Barthes essentially a rhetorician; in the criticism by Barthes that Seitz reads as forwarding reading as a rhetorical act, Barthes anticipated

compositionists like David Bartholomae who argue that teaching writing is about teaching students how to play a role. In the case of writing academic discourse, it is about teaching students *how to play the role of* a student writer.

Seitz gives an idea of what an assignment teaching the fragmentary might look like:

What might happen, for instance, if students were instructed to compose a perfectly ambiguous narrative (or essay, for that matter), one which places the onus of interpretation entirely on the reader? Such a task would demand that student writers anticipate their readers just as astutely as in a more conventional assignment. The fragmentary, in this scheme, becomes more than mere deviation; it is deviation that attempts to design its own patterns of communication.

Instead of feedback admonishing the student to rope in the text into a coherent piece of prose, Seitz imagines the kind of feedback we would give to such a piece of student prose: “‘Congratulations,’ we can humorously imagine a teacher writing to a student, ‘on your brilliant display of the abyss over which all readers hang! No part of your text has any connection to any other part--a marvelously ingenious enactment of the fragmentation which constitutes the textual exchange!’”

Seitz goes on to cite an assignment involving roleplay that he thinks would generate fragmentary prose from students:

In *Frames of Mind*, for example, [Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield] share a striking letter that F. Scott Fitzgerald sent to his daughter, Scottie, upbraiding her for being in trouble at boarding school. Students are asked to reply to Fitzgerald in the role of Scottie, whose reactive letter clearly might assume any number of postures, from dutiful acquiescence to blind rage. The constraint of roleplay thus manages paradoxically both to discipline and to loosen the range of student writers' expressiveness, for they begin, in a sense, with "nothing to lose" by way of emotional investment--after all, the roleplay is but a fiction--



yet they often find themselves projecting their own experiences and values into the role as they might not if asked to write from what we call the "true self."<sup>56</sup>

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During the semester of Fall 2009, I taught a course called The Essay. This course is for upper-division non-majors who would like to learn more about writing non-fiction for both academic and non-academic audiences. That semester, my objective was to facilitate my students' experience of the "rush of language," a popular phrase I appropriated as short-hand for a constellation of ideas in Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* that had to do with suspending the analytical value of signs so that one may experience the mystical effect of jouissance. The blisses that language has to offer are achieved through destruction of everything logocentricism holds dear: ideological structures, subjectivity, civilization and culture:

What pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss.... Especially... in the form of a pure materiality: the language, its lexicon, its metrics, its prosody.... Everything is attacked, dismantled: ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, the propriety of idioms, and even the sacred armature of syntax (subject/predicate): the text no longer has the sentence for its model; often it is a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language.

The casualty left in the wake of bliss that interests me the most in a writing course is subjectivity. So as I attempt to introduce my students to the notion of the text, and orient them to the fundamental question of how language functions in a text, one of the first things I call attention to is the subject. In the course description below, you will notice

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<sup>56</sup> Seitz 823.

that before I even raise this question, I first invoke the loss of the subject with the question: “Do you, my students, feel ‘at home’ in language?”:

#### My Teaching and Research Philosophy

The “big picture” for me in teaching any course like this is to learn about language. I use any genre to help me shed light on the following questions: is language exclusively human? Is it human at all—is it the least or most human part of us? Is language merely a sign system? Is it mystical? Do you, my students, feel “at home” in language? Is that a good or a bad thing? How does it determine what kind of citizens, lovers, daughters, workers, people we are? I am especially interested, of course, in the unique way that language functions in literature. This is called literary language, or textuality.

My hope is that, through this course, you will learn what it means to be “in language.” While writing courses up to now have taught you how to build sturdy structures, this course will teach you how to turn those structures into mystical spaces where language creates its own magic.

To put this in pseudo-scientific terms:

Goal: create essays that are original, which require risk, are written in your authentic voice, and are strikingly interesting to the reader

Objective: cultivate creativity through discipline

Method: Experimentation

Outcome: Experience the “rush of language”

Although the phrase that I mention in this last line of the course description above, the “rush of language,” can be found ubiquitously in conversations about “craft” (I first encountered it in interviews with poets), this idea that language can cue us to the unconscious, the corporeal, or some spiritual experience can be traced to the notion of “poetic discourse” that Roman Jakobson and Julia Kristeva developed. This school of poetic language prevalent in the 60’s and 70’s suggested that poetic language is unique in that through its linguistic register, the reader can get special access to the unconscious, corporeal, or mystical that the analytical function of language ordinarily suppresses.

In my design of this course, I took Barthes' cue regarding the destruction of subjectivity in *jouissance* to fashion what I thought might be the first step toward this pedagogical objective of facilitating a mystical experience with language—the “rush of language:” have my students experience a loss of subjectivity through a frustration with trying to “pin down” meaning even as they were told to practice “clarity” in our writing using the well-known pedagogical imperative of “show-don't-tell.”

In attempting to think through this idea of how signifiers don't pin down meaning, Derrida's notion of “dissemination” was most generative. Dissemination is the idea that signifiers don't locate a meaning; they disperse meaning. Based on this idea, I designed a classroom activity I call “sentence vectors.” Disguised as a simple “show-don't-tell” exercise, sentence vectors are an attempt to have my students experience how not only does a signifier not refer to a *particular* signified; a signifier refers to *no* signifieds. A signifier refers only to other signifiers. And *which* signifiers is impossible to say.

Here is how the exercise “sentence vectors” in 3027 works. I put a simple sentence on the board, for example:

**The dog walked down the street.**

I ask students to imagine that they have written this sentence in a draft, and now their job is to revise it with the advice to “show-don't-tell:” make each word more specific so as to make one's meaning more precise. I label each field to distinguish them—“A” for the subject, “B” for the verb, and “C” for the prepositional phrase. With no further instruction as to any details of the dog, the street, or the context, students write on the board below or above each component the possible variations of each, for example. For example, students might list “bony stray,” “German shepherd,” “mangy mutt,” “well-built mastiff” and “wet, sandy poodle” in the “A” field:

A	B	C
Bony stray	limped	(along) the cul-de-sac
German shepherd	strode	(down) the bustling boulevard
Mangy mutt	slinked	(down) the highway
<b>The dog</b>	<b>walked down</b>	<b>the street.</b>

We call these five variations “valences.” Then I ask a student to approach the board and randomly draw a line connecting a valence from each of the three categories, that is, any valence of the five choices from the A column, to any valence of the five choices from the B column to any valence of the five choices from the C column.

A	B	C
Bony stray	limped	(along) the cul-de-sac
German shepherd	strode	(down) the bustling boulevard
Mangy mutt	slinked	(down) the highway
<b>The dog walked down the street.</b>		
Well-built mastiff	stole (down)	a deserted country road
Wet, sandy poodle	sped (on/along)	the debris-ridden, flooded pavement

This configuration would result in the sentence:

**“The German shepherd stole down the debris-ridden, flooded pavement.”**

I have more students approach the board to draw other such lines. After many lines are drawn, I choose one line. Let’s say I choose the sentence above.

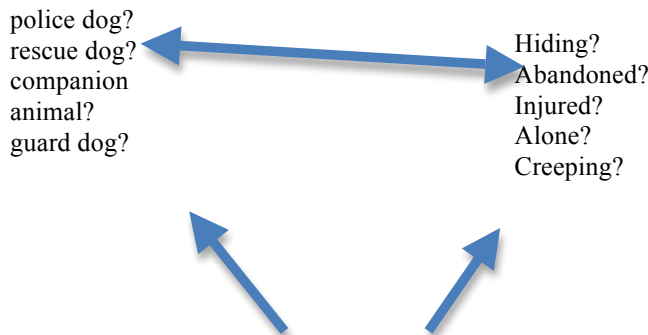
I ask students to create more valences for each of the components in our chosen sentence. For example, students might see “German shepherd” and have this conversation: “Isn’t this breed commonly a police dog? Isn’t this breed also, on the other hand, used as a rescue dog by support teams in search of survivors? In films, German shepherds are usually portrayed as a vicious guard dog. If it’s a companion animal, is it an assistance dog, as many German shepherds are?” We plot out valences of the component above or below the component, as I show below:

Is it a police dog?  
 A rescue dog?  
 A companion animal?  
 Is it a guard dog?



**“The German shepherd stole down the debris-ridden, flooded pavement.”**

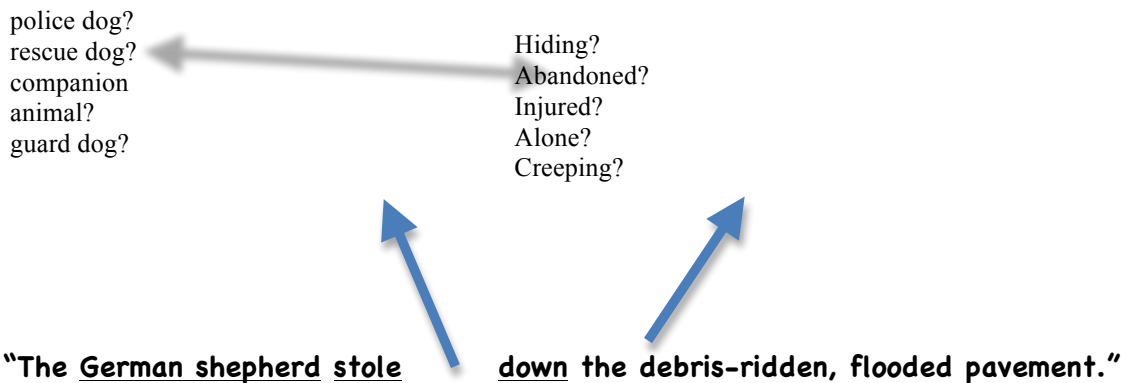
We then move on to the next component, “stole.” Students discuss the valences of the term “stole:” “So is it alone? Why ‘steal?’ If it’s a guard dog, is it creeping along to ensnare its target? Is it trying to be quiet—is it hiding? If so, is this because it is an abandoned pet? Or is it ‘stealing’ along, instead of prancing, because it is injured and moving more cautiously? We assume it’s alone here. Why is it alone? If it’s a rescue dog, has it been separated from its team, and in this way, now itself needs rescuing?” and we plot those on the board as well.



**“The German shepherd stole down the debris-ridden, flooded pavement.”**

Now that we have two lines, we can create a vector that connects a valence from each line. I use the word “vector” to mean a possible direction in which the meaning of this sentence could go. To do so, students are asked to start matching valences from each component, and, before even mapping valences for the 3<sup>rd</sup> component, let the lines drawn between the valences loop through the third component to create vectors, or possible ways that the sentence could mean.

For example, a student may choose “rescue dog” and “abandoned.” As they try to create valences for the third component, they consider in which direction the sentence is already leading them with “rescue dog” and “abandoned.” That possible direction is indicated by the gray vector, and results in the interpretation at the bottom.



‘Debris-ridden, flooded pavement’ implies the aftermath of a natural disaster. That coupled with the presence of a dog that is possibly a rescue dog might put us on the streets of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward post-Katrina. If it is a rescue dog employed by rescue teams to recover survivors, “stealing” would imply that it’s not moving confidently, but has been separated from its rescue team, and is moving with more trepidation.

But then there is a moment in the conversation when confusion occurs, when students give me an interpretation like this, from the same vector above:

“Maybe the dog is patrolling the area for looters.”

Why would a rescue dog patrol? Would not a police dog be patrolling instead? I remind the students that we’re on the “rescue dog” vector; from where did they get this idea of “police dog?”

I explain to the students the problem with the notion of “show-don’t-tell.” vectors appear to be clean and linear, but that is not how language works. Words drag with them contradictory valences all at once, no matter how specifically we want them to hone in on one valence to the exclusion of others. Once the valence “police dog” is invoked, students never forgot it, and even while we pursued a whole other vector—“The abandoned rescue dog was separated from its rescue team”—students allowed the two meanings—a police dog patrolling, and a rescue dog abandoned—coexist.

So as the activity continues, instead of asking students to keep in mind only one valence from each component at a time, I encourage them to let valences keep smacking into each other, raising contradictory meanings from the sentence. At the end of the activity, students might come up with this interpretation: “During Katrina, even the rescuers were law enforcement, and some of the law enforcement, as we know, did more creeping, hiding, and abandoning than enforcing and protecting.” The lesson of the activity is that valences cannot be kept “pure” and cleanly separated from each other. They are as dirty and intermingled with each other as floodwater. Valences get dragged along into vectors even when lines are cleanly drawn. Therefore, “precision” is impossible.

### **A. How These Classrooms are Necessarily Post-structuralist**

I find each of these three experiments by Ulmer, Seitz and myself to do good structuralist work in the classroom insofar as they enact post-humanist and anti-essentialist ideas about language and writing. In contrast to humanist theories of language that posit language as the tool humans created to reflect our consciousness and our world, and

moreover give our consciousness dominion *over* our world, Ulmer embraces the structuralist notion of language as an arbitrary system that is as alien to humans as any other system that preexists us. Therefore, the best metaphor for this relationship is the machine, not the tool; we are at its mercy and work “within” it at least as much as we manipulate it, and work “on” it.

To structuralists, textual objects aren’t invented; they are manufactured. To post-structuralists, this is especially true of the written text because writing especially, more than speech, throws into relief how plastic language is. In this way, Ulmer’s exercise suggests the post-structuralist notion that a written text reveals truths about language that speech suppresses. To create a written text, Ulmer’s exercise seems to suggest, one needs not cognition or even creativity; one needs only to apply an operation, as one would to any machine. You plug in a formula like  $S+7$ , and out pops a poem. Another useful metaphor for language that Ulmer’s textshop activity employs is the game. The textshop’s directive to employ a mathematical formula to compose a poem—that is, to essentially play a game—underscores the structuralist suggestion that language is a game as well as the post-structuralist suggestion that the best place to play the language game is in writing.

As the course description of my writing course, “The Essay,” suggests, language is not necessarily a place one should feel at home, and the goal of a writing class is therefore not to make one feel more in control of and comfortable with language. Rather, the goal is to gain insight on what it means to be “in” language. Seitz instructively glosses Barthes this way: although we may not be able to move outside of language, we

*can* move—*within* in. One of the ways a student writer can gain this structuralist insight is to practice language *as* a game.

If language is a game, Ulmer's activity responds: "Then any operation will succeed in producing meaning." If language is a game, my sentence vectors activity responds: "Then every operation will fail in pinning meaning down." Both illustrate the structuralist notion of language as a game, but in addition, the sentence vectors activity is designed to illustrate the post-structuralist insight that the outcome of the game is not only uncertain; it is never actually achieved. No matter how straight we draw our lines, meaning is ultimately undecidable.

Terry Eagleton describes the difference between structuralism and post-structuralism this way: in structuralism, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not uncertain as it is in post-structuralism.<sup>57</sup> The undecidability of meaning originates in this very problem: that of the line that Saussure used in *The Course* to mark the supposedly clear distinction between the signifier and the signified.

The problem is that there is no such thing as a signified. As Derrida illustrates in the first chapter of *Of Grammatology* where he heretically declares that structuralism is as mystical as any religion in its presumption of transcendent signifieds,<sup>58</sup> there is no such thing as a signified; rather, signifiers refer only to other signifiers, a fact that is repressed in the *Course*. In fact, signifiers refer only to an infinite string of other signifiers. To write means to open oneself up to the impossibility that you can ever win the game of eliciting a signified in the mind of your reader, no matter how well-crafted

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<sup>57</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 110-113.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 14.



your arrangement of signifiers is. Therefore, it doesn't make sense to admonish our student writers to be "precise," or to "show-don't-tell." Meaning is undecidable because signifiers don't ultimately refer to signifieds. Signifiers refer to other signifiers; they do so in ways we may not even be conscious of; and they do so infinitely.

So if meaning is not achieved through a stripping down of the potential meanings signifiers can evoke, then how then do we instruct students to make meaning in their texts? The post-structuralist classroom replaces the outcome of "meaning" with the outcome of "textuality." Textuality designates meaning that is undecidable. Students are tasked with creating a *text*—a place where meaning is undecidable—as opposed to a piece of prose created with precision and show-don't-tell.

So how then do students produce textuality? Through play. Like Ulmer's *textshop*, *sentence vectors* calls on students not to dodge the game or become paralyzed in the face its messiness, but to get in there and play it.

The *sentence vectors* exercise demonstrates that play, and more specifically the trace, is the stuff of textuality. Post-structuralism suggests that meaning is achieved through the play between the valences of one signifier and the valences of another. Derrida calls this play the "trace." In *Positions*, Derrida offers that the trace is the remnant of a process he calls *differance*. Each signifier points not to a finite node of meaning, but to a "process of infinite deferral and movement." In this process, "each element is constituted by the trace within it of the elements from which it differs."<sup>59</sup> In the example of "The German shepherd stole down the debris-ridden, flooded pavement,"

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26-27.

the valences of “German shepherd”—police dog versus rescue dog—are very different from each other in terms of what kind of meaning the sentence can yield. Yet when students chose the valence “rescue dog,” the valence of “German shepherd” as “police dog” persisted in their interpretation of the sentence. The excluded element of “police dog” haunted their interpretation despite the students’ attempt to strip “German shepherd” of that valence. In this way, the signifier “German shepherd” dragged along with it not just the valences that the writer sanctions (rescue dog) but the ones she has rejected (police dog).

It is the trace, this friction created by the clash of one valence—police dog—with another valence—rescue dog—that produces the richest meaning of the sentence: how rescue operations during Katrina were always mixed with repressive state control (the police). What we can teach students here is that it is not through the paring down of valences that we achieve this interpretation, but a proliferation of valences.

But how do students know when they are allowing signifiers to play? That is, what then is “good writing?” When students experience what I term in the syllabus “the rush of language.” As I wrote earlier, this term, “rush of language” is not so much a designation of affect as it is the experience of acknowledging one’s lack of control in the face of language. I would add here the active dimension of this experience: the rush of language is a designation of the writer’s willing engagement with the excess of meaning that a text creates, the piling on, the “rush” of signifiers that proliferate even when the writer resists it as they seek out *le mot juste*. That is, the student writer has succeeded when she embraces the proliferation of meaning, as opposed to the stripping down of meaning. A student succeeds in a post-structuralist classroom when she assists the trace,

which can happen only when she embraces the undecidability of meaning that produces textuality.

The way that Seitz's role-play exercise contributes to this elucidation of the post-structuralist writing classroom is that he offers a genre—the fragment—in which this assistance of the undecidability is foregrounded. In my own experiment with his assignment, I confirmed that this assignment in which students are invited to speak from Scottie Fitzgerald's point-of-view would indeed result in an elliptical text that makes reading rhetorical—that is, it requires the reader to co-construct meaning. Below is my attempt at his assignment:

Dear Dad:

I'm sorry you had to hear about it this way. I wanted to tell you when you visited me. But you kept talking about your new book. And you so rarely visit that I didn't want to mar our visitation with this.

Anyway, Sister Anthony didn't tell you everything. I was trying to escape when the rector found me in the woods.

In the role of Scottie, there are details that wouldn't make sense to explicitly state in this letter to her father, the addressee of the letter. The rhetorical situation of the text is that the addressee, her father, *knows* what infraction she committed in the woods, and who Sister Anthony is. Therefore, it wouldn't make rhetorical sense for the text to make these details explicit. In this way, the text is elliptical—not to the addressee (her father) but to us (the readers). We see here that in order for the text to be rhetorically attuned, it *must* be elliptical. These ellipses do indeed put the onus on the reader to make meaning of the text. First, the reader must surmise, as we do from the greeting, that this letter is written

by someone's daughter or son to his/her father. That part is easy. But when we get to the first sentence: "I'm sorry you had to hear about it this way"—we confront the aporia at the heart of the letter: what is "it?" The rest of the text never tells us. We are left to attempt to try to construct the infraction from the details that follow. *What/who* was Scottie "trying to escape" when she was found in "the forest" (doing what?) My experiment with Seitz' assignment therefore confirmed for me that a role-play assignment does indeed produce the fragmentary student text that Seitz argues we should assign to our students.

### **B. How These Classrooms are Insufficiently Post-structuralist**

By presenting language to our students in a posthumanist way, these activities by Seitz, Ulmer and myself are necessary to the project of imagining the post-structuralist classroom; however, they are insufficient to a project like mine that seeks to foreground the political work post-structuralism can do, work that is politically radical. In what follows, I argue that, as exemplified by our assignments, the post-structuralist pedagogy of Ulmer and myself does nothing to mobilize the political potential of post-structuralism, and that, as exemplified in the fragment/role-play assignment, the post-structuralist pedagogy of Seitz has a liberal, not radical, politics. The following analysis is meant to demonstrate that even though post-structuralist theory may have a politics, it is very difficult to design or find pedagogical activities that teach post-structuralism as such. In other words, one of the pitfalls of the post-structuralist classroom is how difficult it is to teach play and politics at once.

I was confronted with the problem of presenting language as a “machine that runs us, and runs through us” in a class I taught called Literacy and American Cultural Diversity. The following incident drove home the lesson that language may be a game, but it is a game with political consequences.

For their final project in this literacy class, students were given a wide range of choices: they could do any project, scholarly or creative, that reflected on either their service as a community literacy tutor, or the scholarly articles we discussed in class from the field of literacy studies. Most students chose to submit a journal they had kept all semester reflecting on their literacy tutoring work; one submitted a series of poems about this community service work; one did a “guerilla graffiti” project around campus that demonstrated some of the themes he distilled from the readings; one made a “Guide to Literacy Studies” pamphlet in the style of a Frommer’s Travel Guide, where commentary, summary, and rating out of five stars was given for each article we read.

The sample I have reprinted on the next page with the permission of its author was extracted from a final project in which this student drew a series of cartoons illustrating the various themes she saw play out in the articles we read in the class. This particular drawing was inspired by the 1989 article the class read, “Women and Literacy: A Quest for Justice” by Lalita Ramdas. This article gives a global overview of how the forces of misogyny and patriarchy collude with poverty to make the illiteracy rate among women world-wide much higher than it is among men. The article focused on women of color in particular.

On the last class day, a public forum is held in which all community engagement stake-holders (community service partners and staff from the University of Minnesota’s

Community Learning Center) are invited to sit in on oral presentations in which my students give a brief outline of their final projects. When the following drawing was projected, one such stake-holder raised this question to the student artist: “Are you

worried about how this cartoon participates in the very misogyny it's trying to critique?"



Myself and other students nodded in response to the question. After all, one of the major themes of the course was racial representations in literacy campaigns. The student appeared genuinely bewildered, however, so the interlocuter went on: “Because you know how problematic it is to eroticize a woman of color by portraying her nude and in chains, right? That there is a whole history of representation you’re participating in here, whether you intended to or not?”

The student, visibly shaken by this critique, visited me after class to de-brief. She tearfully defended herself: she had never *intended* to be sexist or racist, and she had had no idea that her cartoon could be interpreted this way. Wanting to both comfort her in our last interaction together, *and* take this final opportunity to teach her about racism and sexism in representation, I responded that racist and sexist representations pre-exist our use of them, and that we are saturated with such representations. I assured the student that she had unknowingly participated in the economy of such representations. I relied on the metaphor of language as a code of representations, a structure that is alien to us, as a way of explaining this to the student artist. The student seemed merely comforted, not enlightened.

I have remained unsatisfied with this pedagogical response because of the inadequacy of this metaphor of language as an alien structure in acknowledging the subject’s agency in participating racist and sexist discourse. This notion that language is something we can’t move above, but can only move within, did not serve me well in this situation if I wanted the student to learn what to *do* upon realizing that she participated in a pre-existing system of racist and sexist representations. It became clear that the “language as machine or game” metaphor had some limits, and would need to be



supplemented by other metaphors that suggest the ways that these games have political consequences.

The unavailability of a political critique of the “language as game” metaphor is related to the reason I find Seitz’s contribution of the fragment to be insufficient as a politically radical post-structuralist writing pedagogy: Seitz’s proposal stops at the liberal injunction to merely *include* the excluded element in the system, not extending to the radical injunction to *transform* the system. That is, Seitz’s aim is to include one more form of discursive possibility—the fragment—into the repertoire of discursive forms that we teach. “My proposal,” writes Seitz, “is not that we celebrate the scattered pieces of a student essay as an example of postmodern heroics, but that we broaden the range of texts we elicit from our students to include the fragmentary as a legitimate means to rhetorical and aesthetic effects.” This call to “broaden” signals a liberal project of mere inclusion. Untouched remains the system of evaluation that renders the fragment a less desirable discursive form.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida addresses this power dynamic in which discursive forms that pretend to be coherent, logical, and transparent are privileged at the expense of discursive forms that foreground language’s inability to be coherent, logical and transparent. In response to Derrida’s critique, Vitanza proposes not an operation of inclusion, but the operation of *dissoi logi*, in which the elements of a hierarchy are reversed—the dominant is made to be weaker, and the weaker is made to be dominant.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Victor J. Vitanza, “Three Countertheses: A Critical In(ter)vention into Composition Theories and Pedagogies,” in *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Era*, eds. J. Schilb and P. Harkin (New York: MLA, 1991), 165.

To perform the post-structuralist operation of *dissoi logi* on the fragment would not mean proposing its mere inclusion into the panoply of forms, but elevating it above the coherent text as a way of calling attention to the political economy that made fragments less desirable in the first place. Left with this politically liberal proposal, Seitz's insistence on the fragment falls short of the politically radical classroom that this project seeks.

For all the ways in which the textshop, sentence vectors, and the fragment richly contribute to a post-humanist theory of language, without the tools to make the classroom a site where the political economy of language, representation, and discourse is confronted, these post-structuralist pedagogical experiments fall short of offering the post-structuralist classroom that exploits the politically radical potential of post-structuralist theory. In search of a classroom that has at its center the political economy of language, representation, and discourse, we turn next to social-epistemic writing classrooms.

### **III. Social Epistemic Rhetoric**

#### **A. What is Social-Epistemic Rhetoric and Why Is It Necessary to the Politically Radical Classroom?**

Before I distill how I find social-epistemic classrooms to be necessary, and then how I find them to be insufficient, I first must explain why I am invoking social-epistemic classrooms as an example of what I have up until now termed the "politically radical" classroom. It is because the social-epistemic classroom is the richest representation of politically radical pedagogy that I have found in Composition Studies; however, as I will

argue here, the two terms “politically radical” and “social-epistemic” do not graft onto each other perfectly.

I borrow the term “social-epistemic” from James Berlin’s 1988 *College English* article “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.”<sup>61</sup> Berlin coins the term “social-epistemic” to describe one of the three predominant ways composition is taught today. As opposed to cognitivism, in which the rationalization of the writing process, such as in composition pedagogies like “problem-solving,” is an extension of the rationalization of capitalist production,<sup>62</sup> or expressivism, which embraces individual, not collective, resistance to political programs enforced through language,<sup>63</sup> the social-epistemic classroom approaches rhetoric as “a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation.” The positions of social-epistemic thinkers, he adds, “include an historicist orientation.”<sup>64</sup>

What’s crucial to social-epistemic rhetoric for Berlin is that, unlike other approaches, it “attempts to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing,” and it does so by positing knowledge as an “arena of ideological conflict.” The social-epistemic classroom offers political responses from the level of critique to the level of alternative practices; as Berlin puts it, social-epistemic rhetoric offers an “explicit

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<sup>61</sup> James Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” *College English* 50, no. 5 (September 1988): 477-494.

<sup>62</sup> Berlin 483.

<sup>63</sup> Berlin 486.

<sup>64</sup> Berlin 488.

critique of economic, political, and social arrangements,” as well as “an alternative based on democratic practices in the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres.”<sup>65</sup>

I focus on this strand of composition pedagogy that Berlin calls “social-epistemic” for the ways that it sees rhetoric as a “political act” with a “historicist orientation,” and for the ways that it offers political critique as well as the possibility for political alternatives. Oriented thus, such a composition classroom teaches language and writing as inherently political acts; invites students to see their world in terms of ideology, resistance, struggle, and transformation; and teaches students writing for the purposes of giving students tools to make political change.

Therefore, I take social-epistemic theory seriously and examine it closely in this chapter for what it has generously contributed to my project of creating a “politically radical” post-structuralist classroom. As I mentioned above, the ways in which I find social-epistemic classrooms necessary to my project is that in a social-epistemic classroom, language is inherently political, and writing can therefore be used to do “political work.” “Political work” here can mean anything on the continuum of political change from critique (for example, writing an academic piece for an academic audience promoting racial justice) to direct action (for example, joining a campaign to prevent the foreclosure of someone’s home in a black neighborhood).

The ways in which I find the social-epistemic classrooms insufficient to my project of finding the politically radical post-structuralist classroom is in the way that social-epistemic classrooms work only on the macropolitical level of academic discourse—an idealized world—and have not yet worked on the micropolitical level of

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<sup>65</sup> Berlin 492.

the material realities of academia. As I argue in this the rest of this chapter, one micropolitical perspective on the political economy of higher education, available in an emerging field called Critical University Studies, offers important analyses of the university as a locus of neoliberalization. What's at stake in a micropolitical analysis of the university is that such an analysis argues for a very different pedagogical response than one in which the university is an idealized center of "academic discourse."

### **A. The Social Epistemic Classroom: Theory and Examples**

The strand of social-epistemic theory that I focus on in this project is the academic discourse literacy movement that became popular in Composition Studies in the 1980's and 1990's. In contrast to pedagogies that teach writing as a discrete set of skills, a process, a habit of mind, or an expression, this rhetorical pedagogy posits that writing is an enactment of the discourse of that community, where "discourse" means a culture's way of thinking about and communicating itself. In order to write in that discursive community, the writer must learn the conventions of that community. In the case of academic writing, academia is the culture into which students seek access. If the task of writing teachers is to teach college writing, that means that the job of teachers is, as with any discourse, to acculturate students into this new culture—academia—by teaching the conventions of academic discourse.

The academic literacy movement within social-epistemic rhetoric uses what we might call an "acculturation model," wherein learning to write means learning the discourse of a particular culture. Students are asked to compare the "way one communicates in college writing" with the "way one communicates" in other discourse

communities of which students are already a part—a basketball team, activist collective, family unit, church group, or any other community—specific to the media or venues—facebook, thank-you card, e-mail, meetings, practices, services--that students use to communicate in these communities. Students choose one venue/medium of these discourse communities—for example, facebook within their church group, or a thank-you card to their aunt—and are asked to think about the conventions of that medium within that discourse community. For example, students might admit that brief and abstract meditations written in sentence fragments are common among facebook posts with their church facebook friends, while more flowery prose with more personal content written in complete sentences is common in the thank-you notes they write to their aunts. Once students understand the concept of “discourse conventions” this way, all that is left to be done is present academia as one more discourse community that students must learn the conventions of.

Academic literacy pedagogy is a great example of social-epistemic pedagogy because of the way it posits knowledge and practice not as static and acontextual, but as the result of social exchange, and as such, dynamic and responsive to the political, economic, and historic positions of the subjects in that exchange, and the context of that exchange. Academic literacy pedagogy deeply resonates for first-year writing pedagogy in particular; therefore, it has particular resonance for this project. I briefly touch on two compositionists who pioneered the academic literacy movement in America: David Bartholomae—who writes about first-year writing in particular--and Patricia Bizzel.

In 1985, David Bartholomae published the ground-breaking essay “Inventing the University.” He begins it with the claim “Every time a student sits down to write for us,

he has to invent the university for the occasion... he has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, etc... that define the discourse of our community.” Bartholomae goes on to say that the codes that students must master are invisible, so we do students a huge service in making these codes visible to students by explaining what terms like “original,” “argument,” and “clarity” mean.

This notion that students need to learn the conventions was echoed by the more political wing of the academic literacy movement embodied by works like Patricia Bizzel’s *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. She argues that breaking down these codes to students is a powerfully liberating act to students who are politically disenfranchised in the institution of academia, and by demystifying that discourse by teaching its conventions, teachers are teaching their students what Paulo Freire calls “critical consciousness:” the political literacy that enables the student to see his or her material reality in the context of a larger system of oppressive institutions.

Convinced of the acculturation imperative of the academic literacy movement, I revised the syllabi of my first-year writing course to include a “course theme” that I call “What is College?” in an effort to teach my students that if college is a culture, then you can learn the conventions of this culture by learning academic discourse. In the section of the syllabus that I’ve reprinted below, I state that our goal is indeed to learn academic discourse.

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Course Theme: What is College?

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If our goal in this course is to learn academic discourse, then naturally an appropriate topic is going to be the context of academic discourse: college life. So the question of the course is: “What *is* college?” I will challenge you to think *critically* about many

aspects of college. For some people, college is vocational school: training for the workforce. For others, it is a place to develop a philosophy of life. It can also be:

- “the 13<sup>th</sup> grade”--something middle-class culture mandates as a transition from adolescence to adulthood (that is, a very expensive half-way house)
- a networking mecca (Greek life, Young Chemists Club, etc.)—a place where you start networking for later life, find a spouse, etc.
- the debutante’s “entrée” into the world; the first years of your adult life
- a lab: a place to experiment with who you are; the place where you throw off the vestries of the old you and try on something completely different (after all, you’re meeting all new people, and so no one can call you out on it); a place to try on a new identity without repercussion
- a place to prove yourself to your family, especially if you’re a first generation student
- a place to find yourself: one stop on a fully conceptualized life journey (a place of growth and change)
- ANIMAL HOUSE
- An obligatory prison where you fulfill your parent’s notion of success for you
- time spent to get letters after your name to put on your resume (which is not the same as getting “training” for a future job)
- a place to fearlessly dive into the big questions humanity has asked since the dawn of time
- a place where you must risk “indoctrination” by Marxist dogmatic college profs in the quest to gain precious social or intellectual capital that will someday translate into monetary capital
- a place to learn about the world outside of you
- a place to learn about the world inside of you
- (if you’re Bob Dylan) a place to bide your time while you kickstart your whirlwind, generation-defining music career

You have all semester to probe what college is (and to whom), what it can be, and finally what it should be. The question of the course will structure everything we do in this course. We’ll read a lot: we’ll unearth classic texts about college; we’ll analyze statistics on higher education; we’ll study college life. We’ll write a lot: you’ll be doing plenty of posting as your daily preparation; we’ll discuss readings and writings in class; you’ll take copious notes on both your life and on the research you find; you’ll write the culminating paper of the course: a research paper on any topic related to our course theme.

This playful course description grounds our initial discussions in my first-year writing course about what college is and what the kind of writing in that culture looks like. In these conversations, I use the analogy of academic discourse being like any other



discourse students participate in during the course of their everyday lives: as children in their household, they talk/write in one way; as members of their church, they talk/write another way; as members of their sorority, they talk/write yet another way. “Now,” I tell them, “you just have to learn how we talk/write in college.”

Another metaphor I use is “playing the game:” that academic discourse has rules and roles expressed in certain cultural codes, and students acculturate themselves into the university by learning this code. As you will see in the “Lessons” below, every other lesson—all the way from writing as process to learning to research and choosing a genre—is presented as a subset of the “big” lesson of learning the conventions of academic discourse. Importantly, the first lesson of learning academic discourse, as I present it below, is learning the “conversation,” and figuring out how one might “intervene” in it.

### Lessons of the Course

When you walk away from this course, hopefully you’ll have learned the following:

- 1. Discourse.** It’s not enough to learn how to write a sentence, a paragraph, to use the right word—but how to do these things for the right *audience* and *purpose*. Especially—
- 2. Academic Discourse.** Here is where you learn to “play the game:” how to make wise choices about: what writing is appropriate for what discipline, professor, or assignment; how to write “formally;” how to cite properly. You’ll learn that academic discourse is a conversation; you’ve got to learn how to jump into it—
- 3. The Intervention.** What are different places you can occupy in a conversation? How do you know what position a writer occupies in a given conversation, and what is their posture in that role? If there are experts out there cluttering the air space, how could you possibly deign to assume you could step into that fray?
- 4. Writing as Thinking, not as Expression of Thought.** To enter any public conversation, ironically, you’ve got to look within and learn something about what YOU have to say—what you’re really interested in and what gets you going. But somehow the strangest person to each of us is ourselves, so it actually takes work to

learn what you actually are passionate about! We'll learn a writing process that will help you discover the intellectual within you, and this person will know how to enter the fray. Along the way, you'll learn to see writing as thinking, as a process of discovery, and thereby integral to learning.

**5. Note-taking and Research.** So now you have to figure out what others have already said on whatever question you want to explore. (Note: this will involve a library session). This lesson will mostly be learned in the assignment called Reading Notes (RN).

**6. Language.** If you are a painter, your material is paint. If you are a writer, your material is language. This unit is our introduction to your material.

**7. Composition.** Now that you have material, you must learn how to manipulate it into a product. You will learn the essential fundamentals of composition: selection, arrangement, juxtaposition, foreground/background, and intonation. Here you prepare for Assignment 1.

**8. Form and Structure.** We will learn how to “mess” with form and structure to change content. We'll try writing something as a love letter, a tweet, an ad, a prayer, graffiti, a limerick.... And see how content changes once we re-imagine our project in a new form or structure.

One “lesson,” however, that has proved semester after semester the most difficult to teach in first-year writing is the “conversation.” This lesson requires first-year writing students to become acculturated into the academic practice of “joining the conversation” (first learning the conversation, then “intervening”). To try to address the difficulty first-year writing students encountered grasping this idea, I developed the “eavesdropping assignment.” In the assignment sheet that I have recopied below, I tell first-year writing students that writing in college requires that students “enter the conversation” on a topic that has been underway long before the students in my class enter it. The analogy I use is that of eavesdropping on a conversation already underway at a party.

I use the term “eavesdropping” as opposed to “listening” because of the political economy that eavesdropping acknowledges. To “listen” assumes a liberal, democratic context in which all parties are participating with equal power, and as such, can

participate in the civic conversation with pride and transparency. “Eavesdropping,” on the other hand, is done from the sidelines, in the shadows, because the eavesdropper fears being discovered. As such, eavesdropping calls attention to the unequal statuses of the parties who have something at stake in the conversation. Therefore, I use the term “eavesdropping” to describe my first-year writing students’ role vis-a-vis the institution into which they seek access: in a first-year writing class, they are outsiders to academia.

As one can read in the first paragraph of the assignment below, my objective is to “demystify” the convention of “learning the conversation” before one intervenes, and this assignment focuses on the pre-intervention. One of the ways that the first-year writing assignment below begins to demystify the practice of learning then joining the conversation is in the explicit mention of where students can expect to find the conversation underway (in books and journal articles by scholars, NGO’s, think tanks, non-profits, government agencies, and expert journalists).

### Eavesdropping Assignment

We say that in order to write in college, you can’t write in a vacuum. You are entering into a conversation with people who have already written about this topic, so, before you go public with your statement, you need to see what the conversation was before you came on the scene. We call it the “academic conversation.” Where can you find it? In peer-reviewed journals and library books that are in our college library.

But for this assignment, think of it this way: imagine a party where, among the many little circles, there is a group of people who are talking excitedly about one thing. You’re at the party, but you don’t know who your circle is yet, the circle that’s talking about your topic. You’re still looking for them. So what do you do? You go to a LOT of parties, and you start eavesdropping. Imagine in this assignment that you are at a party, and you came with this burning question/idea (that will become the Topic in your prospectus). All night long, you look around for some people having a conversation about that topic. So you eavesdrop. Then report back to us—in Assignment 1.

In the prospectus, you confidently introduce us to each person in that conversation in that corner of the party and catch us up to speed on what YOU ALL have been talking about together. But this assignment takes place while you're still an outsider. You're *looking* for conversation companions.

In this Assignment, you don't need to lock yourself down to talking to that animated, tattooed bunch over by the bookshelves (I make fun of my own here). Just walk by them, and as you do, catch a whiff of their conversation. In research terms, this will mean just getting a few "keywords" from some of the articles on your topic that you come up with, maybe some subject headings and titles, to get a sense of some of the general trends.

Let's say tonight I have this burning question about education (and actually I do have this question for realz): is there something about face-to-face (i.e. not on-line) education that could NEVER be simulated by an on-line learning environment, something absolutely crucial and central to education? Let's say you have my question too. We'll have this topic for our final papers together. As you walk by the academics, you hear words like "Web 2.0 pedagogy," "virtual communities," and "21<sup>st</sup> century literacies." Even though you don't know the context of these words, you might be able to guess what the academics think about your question just from hearing the "keywords" that come up when they're talking about it. (I'll give you a hint: I think this group thinks "virtual" classrooms can have all the most important things—pedagogy, literacy, and community—that material classrooms do).

You'll probably spend equal amounts of time, though, away from the academic circle and in other circles. After all, there are other kinds of experts: folks who work at foundations, NGO's, think tanks, government, and private enterprise. And then there are people who may not have expertise but can offer important perspective, questions, or experience. Let's talk about their circles for a second.

So you walk away from the academic circle and notice some very melancholy drunks in gray suits on the other side of the room. They're the Journalists, you find out. They've been telling stories about this topic. They're not experts, but they're reporters. They're worth listening in to. They're using words like "demise" and "fad." You can guess what they think about your topic: they think on-line ed is a joke.

Someone breezes by you carrying crackers. It's the lively host. He stops to chat with some fellow yoga instructors. They're talking about what it's like at the end of yoga class when everyone is silent in meditation, and the heaviness in the room. You wonder if academic classes should be more like yoga classes. You listen in.

In my eavesdropping report like the one you'll write in response to this Assignment, I would just narrate what I heard, like I did above, as I moved from here to there. Along the way, I'd tell you how I felt and how I reacted about each conversation. You see, I want to see what draws you to this topic. What are the conversations happening around this topic that are drawing you to this topic?

I say “topic,” but you don’t even need to go singular here. You’re probably bouncing around a number of topics at this point. You needn’t write several Assignment 1’s. No, but you can profile each topic. Or perhaps you already know what your topic is going to be, but it’s not the right scope right. No problem. We’ll work on scope later. The *Prospectus* assignment will make sure you have appropriate scope.

For the/each topic (s), you’ll give us a separate house party where you went in search of conversations about that topic. In this case, you don’t need to drop in on as many conversations at each party. After all, you don’t have all night! You have to work in the morning.

You can go deeper into 2-3 conversations, or you can shallowly survey 4-5 conversations. I imagine this paper will be around four pages. Here’s what I need you to describe about each group of conversationalists that you listen in to: where you found them (library search page? *NYTimes*? Google? Bookshelf?); the names of a couple people you caught in the conversation (people writing about it); what those couple people seemed to be saying/talking about.

At least one of these conversations you eavesdrop into must be of experts. Experts *include* academics, but also other scholars. Many people who work at think tanks Policy Making and Analysis, Brown Center on Education Policy—all have free articles on their sites by experts who work for them), NGO’s, and foundations that specialize in higher education are experts. Also, if you have a huge newsroom like the *NYTimes* or *Washington Post* or *Wall Street Journal* that can afford to have one desk on a particular topic, then that journalist is usually an expert. *NYTimes* is an exception here; their *Education Times* focuses on K-12 and is edited by an economist with no special knowledge about ed. But right here in town MPR just started a Higher Education blog called *On Campus*. I can’t vouch for Alex Fredrich, who runs it, but from what I’ve seen of it, it looks useful for a local perspective.

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## **B. The Insufficiency of the Acculturation Model: Neoliberalization, Micropolitics, and Critical University Studies**

The most important contribution that social epistemic theorists like Bartholomae and Bizzell make to writing pedagogy for the first-year writing classroom is this metaphor: learning to write in the first-year writing classroom is like any process of acculturation. Social epistemic pedagogies like that of academic literacy are necessary but insufficient

to a politically radical post-structuralist classroom because they stop short of asking: in our first-year writing classrooms, into what kind of institution are we initiating students?

In answering this question, we must consider whether we're imagining the university in its ideal form, or in its material form -- that is, not just an intellectual center, but a commercial and exploitative, as well as subjugating and regulatory, institution. Because even for the politically-minded social-epistemic thinkers, academia disappointingly figures only in an idealized realm of intellectual processes, where "a group of people," as Patricia Bizzell writes, "work on a difficult and on-going project."

The strength of social-epistemic rhetoric, on the other hand, is its macropolitical perspective: social-epistemic rhetoric helps us formulate a response to the material conditions of society as a whole under late capitalism. Social-epistemic writing theorists Tom Fox, Jan Cooper, Jonathan Alexander, and Lynn Z. Bloom, for example, have helpfully pointed out how the racisms, classisms, and heterosexisms of society as a whole manifest across a spectrum of social institutions. But I am interested in how academic discourse reproduces the racisms, classisms, and heterosexisms of its *own* institution—the institution of higher education. A micropolitical perspective can give us that—a perspective from one institution or organization in particular with all its singularities, as opposed to the macropolitical perspective of institutions in general. To make "micropolitical" change is to make change upon an institution from within an institution; macropolitical change is more formal and large-scale.

In addition to being profoundly local, the micropolitical perspective has another quality, one that makes it favored by post-structuralists: micropolitics presents all political solutions as provisional, contingent, and temporary. Micropolitics respects the

radically singular reality of a particular group with particular political ends working within a particular institution at a particular time. No solution is expected to outlast the group of actors that implemented it, and no political critique is expected to apply to institutions beyond the institution that is the subject of a critique. The micropolitical perspective insists on political solutions to the neoliberal university and political critiques of the neoliberal university that are radically singular to the institution of the university.

Perhaps the richest source of micropolitical thought is Deleuze and Guattari's work. The direction that Deleuze and Guattari's attempt to meld Lacanian psychoanalysis with Marxist revolutionary politics went was toward a "politics of desire," a politics that responds to our unconsciousnesses. However, the psychoanalytic dimension of the micropolitical that calls for "revolutionary forms of desire" is not as helpful to this project as is the post-structuralist dimension of Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics.

And Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics is indeed a kind of post-structuralist politics. In *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner offer a useful gloss on the micropolitical perspective that Deleuze and Guattari offer. According to Best and Kellner, this new politics outlines "the practical consequences of the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity, totality and representation."

Best and Kellner write that Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of a new kind of politics stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the rigid political models of traditional leftist organizations. In an "attempt to rethink political strategies in light of developments in

capitalism,” Deleuze and Guattari essayed a “new politics” that requires “micropolitical forms of struggle.”<sup>66</sup>

One particularly consequential post-structuralist move that Deleuze and Guattari make is the deconstruction of the unified, ahistorical political subject and its attendant narratives about political struggle, revolutionary politics, and political parties. The traditional political subject, the “proletariat,” for example, carries in it the inscription of another traditional struggle—the proletariats vs. capitalists, for example—that suppresses the irreducible multiplicity of working class subjectivities. According to Guattari and later intellectual partner Antonio Negri, the Old Left’s insistence on coherent, ahistorical political subjects such as the proletariat have the effect of “subordinat[ing] diverse political groupings to the fictive unity and primacy of a working class.”

Deleuze and Guattari seek the destruction of “all unified and rigid segments of subject and group identity... away from hierarchical and socially imposed forms:”

For Deleuze and Guattari, the paradigm of the revolutionary is not the disciplined party man, but the schizo-subject, the one who resists the capitalist axiomatic, rejects Oedipus, unscrambles the social codes, and breaks through the walls of reterritorialization into the realm of flows, intensities, and becoming, thereby threatening the whole capitalist order.<sup>67</sup>

Alternatively, Deleuze and Guattari propose a political subjectivity that is multiplicitous, not unified. The model for this multiplicity is the “rhizome”—plentiful plant roots that inseparably criss-cross horizontally—in contrast to the vertical, singular tree root. This

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<sup>66</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Keller, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 93.

<sup>67</sup> Best and Kellner 91.



new kind of conceptualizing of political identities, called “rhizomatics,” eschews political genealogies, roots, foundations and dichotomies in favor of “pluralizing and disseminating, producing differences and multiplicities, making new connections.” In contrast to Marx’s binaries, rhizomatics “reinterprets reality as dynamic, heterogenous, and non-dichotomous.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, multiplicitous political identities aren’t the result of a lost totality or unity that will threaten the revolution; they are the substance of a new kind of revolution.

Positing political identities in this more fluid, provisional, and contingent way leads Deleuze and Guattari to an insight that is key to the question at hand of what a micropolitical perspective can offer to a critique of the acculturation model in Composition Studies: a focus on local struggles over particular institutions as opposed to a central struggle for the state or economy. “So-called ‘local’ or ‘reformist’ actions,” write Kellner and Best of Deleuze and Guattari, “can have explosive consequences that lead to the questioning of the totality of power.”<sup>69</sup> Foucault also insists on this shift to a multiplicity of micropolitical struggles over the dominance of one macropolitical struggle:

Foucault calls for a plurality of autonomous struggles waged throughout the microlevels of society, in the prisons, asylums, hospitals, and schools. For a modern concept of macropolitics where clashing forces struggle for control over a centralized source of power rooted in the economy and state, Foucault

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<sup>68</sup> Best and Kellner 99.

<sup>69</sup> Best and Kellner 94.

substitutes a postmodern concept of micropolitics where numerous local groups contest diffuse and decentred forms of power spreading throughout society.<sup>70</sup>

Importantly, this shift to the local is not just a change in size or scope; the micropolitical changes *how* we struggle, and *what* we struggle for. “Since power is decentred and plural,” write Best and Kellner, “so in turn must be forms of political struggle.”

Decentered-ness in political struggle is not just a defense against a similarly structured enemy; it is proactive because of how it resists reterritorialization by the state or the market. As Kellner and Best tell us, rhizomatics can suggest political actions by offering “lines of escape which can be further deterritorialized in political struggle.”<sup>71</sup> Instead of traditionally democratic processes like party elections, protests, and even “civil disobedience,” micropolitics calls for ad hoc organizing, even rioting and guerrilla warfare.

In addition to reimagining how we struggle, the micropolitical also reimagines solutions. As opposed to macropolitical solutions that are long-lasting and universal, micropolitical solutions are provisional, contingent, strategic, and often short-lived.

It is important to stress here that micropolitics does not belong exclusively to the realm of radically leftist struggle. Right-wing political actions have a micropolitics too. In asserting that leftist academics need to work at the micropolitical level as well as the macropolitical level, I am not suggesting that a micropolitics necessarily brings with it the politically radical ideas principles that I advocate in this project. Rather, I am asserting that any leftist political struggle needs to include a micropolitics.

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<sup>70</sup> Best and Kellner 56.

<sup>71</sup> Best and Kellner 102.

A micropolitical approach to the injustice of the university today would make a couple of distinctive moves:

- 1) focus our struggle for justice in the university on the university itself as an institution of particularity, instead of focusing our struggle on the injustice across related institutions, for example, prisons, K-12, housing, etc., expecting a kind of universal justice to trickle down to the institution in question
- 2) struggle for tactics that we don't expect to work on any other institution but the university
- 3) create ad-hoc organizations that form coalitions with other ad-hoc organizations that share one or more principles or projects, and differ on all others
- 4) create solutions that are provisional, contingent, and strategic

Given how focused a micropolitical response is on the particularity of the institution in question, a rigorous account of the institution in question is needed. In the case at hand, that means a rigorous account of higher education is needed.

A body of such rigorous critique is currently consolidating under the name "Critical University Studies." What follows is a brief history, content outline, and bibliography of key pieces, publications, and people in this still emergent field.

This field began germinating at several conferences at the University of Minnesota in which scholar-activists across the country met to discuss injustices caused by the trend of neoliberalization in higher education. Along with Amy Pason, Matt Stoddard, Morgan Adamson, Eli Meyerhoff, Isaac Kamola, and John Conley, I was a member of the seven-person collective that organized the first of these three conferences. Titled "Rethinking the University: Labor, Knowledge, Value," its energy was such that it

generated two follow-ups: “Reworking the University: Visions, Strategies, Demands” (2009) and “Beneath the University: the Commons” (2010), both of which were also at the University of Minnesota. A June 2010 piece published in *Dissent* magazine reads: “An annual conference put together by graduate students and adjuncts at the University of Minnesota has become one of the best clearinghouses for what’s going on in higher education.” Several articles in the field of Critical University Studies have come out of my organizing collective: John Conley’s “Against Heroism: On Politically-Committed Academic Labor” (*Minnesota Review*, Spring 2009); Morgan Adamson’s “The Human Capital Strategy” (*Ephemera* 2009); and Eli Meyerhoff and Isaac Kamola’s “Creating Commons: Divided Governance, Participatory Management, and the Struggle over the Enclosure of the University” (*Polygraph* 2009).

But the first time any panel “went national” with the name “Critical University Studies” was at a 2011 MLA panel in Los Angeles that included Morgan Adamson (University of Minnesota), Richard M. Ohmann (Wesleyan University), Heather Steffen (Carnegie Mellon University) and Jeffrey J. Williams (Carnegie Mellon University).

The author of that *Dissent* conference review cited above--also a panelist at the 2011 “Critical University Studies” MLA panel--introduced this field to the public in a February 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece called “Deconstructing Academe: The Birth of Critical University Studies.” In this article, Jeffrey Williams ventures that Critical University Studies, or CUS, might be the new literary theory.<sup>72</sup> “A dominant tenor of postmodern theory was to look reflexively at the way knowledge is constructed,”

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<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, “Deconstructing Academe: The Birth of Critical University Studies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 19, 2012.

writes Williams, “This new vein [Critical University Studies] looks reflexively at ‘the knowledge factory’ itself (as the sociologist Stanley Aronowitz has called it), examining the university as both a discursive and a material phenomenon, one that extends through many facets of contemporary life.” Williams gives this topical and disciplinary overview of CUS:

Over the past two decades in the United States, there has been a new wave of criticism of higher education. Much of it has condemned the rise of "academic capitalism" and the corporatization of the university; a substantial wing has focused on the deteriorating conditions of academic labor; and some of it has pointed out the problems of students and their escalating debt. A good deal of this new work comes from literary and cultural critics, although it also includes those from education, history, sociology, and labor studies.

But academics have written for years about academia, one might ask. Why would we ever need a field for it? Williams responds:

Often criticism of the university seems a scattershot enterprise. A scholar from almost any discipline might have something to say about higher education, but it's usually an occasional piece that's a sideline from normal work. In contrast, this new wave in higher education looks beyond the confines of particular specializations and takes a resolutely critical perspective.

What does he mean by “critical?” Of what does this new field consist? Williams defines the field by focusing on each of the three terms in the field’s proposed title:

"Critical" indicates the new work's oppositional stance, similar to approaches like critical legal studies, critical race studies, critical development studies,

critical food studies, and so on, that focuses on the ways in which current practices serve power or wealth and contribute to injustice or inequality rather than social hope. "Studies" picks up its cross-disciplinary character, focused on a particular issue and drawing on research from any relevant area to approach the problem. "University" outlines its field of reference, which includes the discourse of "the idea of the university" as well as the actual practices and diverse institutions of contemporary higher education.

Williams goes on to elucidate this comparison above of CUS to other "critical" fields like "Critical Race Studies" and "Critical Legal Studies" by saying that CUS "especially evokes critical legal studies because they both scrutinize central social institutions." However, writes Williams, their historical contexts differ: "Critical legal studies grew out of a critique of complacent midcentury liberalism, whereas critical university studies is a critique of neoliberalism and the conservative ascendancy." And it is this more critical edge that distinguishes CUS from comparative projects like "the standard history of education or the palliative tradition of 'the idea of the university.'" The problem with similar traditions such as these is that they project "an ideal image, and analyze how higher education is an instrument of its social structure, reinforcing class discrimination rather than alleviating it."

Notably, Williams addresses the historical nature of the field, which many see as a shortfall of CUS, something that renders it trendy and transient. On the contrary, Williams talks about the historical situatedness of the field that which makes the field rigorous and important:

Over the past few years, the conditions prompting our investigation of the university have become even more urgent, as there have been greater decreases in public support, more pressure on selling off parts of research to businesses, more casualization and speed-up of faculty labor (adjunct positions and heavier work loads), and regular increases in tuition and subsequently student work hours and debt. There is thus a pressing need not only to diagnose what's happening but also to oppose changes that go against the public interest and to propose policies that might strengthen higher education. We need a strong critical study of the university—especially now.

I agree with Williams that this field emerged as such in the 1990s with such works as Lawrence C. Soley's *Leasing the Ivory Tower: The Corporate Takeover of Academia* (South End Press, 1995), Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press, 1996), and Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie's *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), and hit a stride in the 2000s with works like David F. Noble's *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (Monthly Review Press, 2001), Jennifer Washburn's *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (Basic Books, 2005), Joe Berry's *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* (Monthly Review Press, 2005); Jeff Williams' "Debt Education: Bad for the Young, Bad for America" and "Student Debt and the Spirit of Indenture" in *Dissent* magazine (Summer 2006; Fall 2008); Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York University Press, 2008), Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class*

(Harvard University Press, 2008), and Michele A. Massé and Katie J. Hogan's *Over Ten Million Served: Gendered Service in Language and Literature Workplaces* (State University of New York Press, 2010).

I would add to Williams' schematic bibliography of Critical University Studies the following key pieces: Ellen Messer-Davidow's "Why Democracy Will Be Hard To Do" (*Social Text* 2006) and Jeffrey Nealon's "The Associate Vice Provost in the Gray Flannel Suit: Administrative Labor and the Corporate University" (*Rethinking Marxism* 2007). I would add to his schematic bibliography the category of publications. *Works and Days*, *Radical Teacher*, *The Minnesota Review*, and *Social Text* are all journals that regularly publish pieces about the neoliberalization of higher education. Many of these publications are edited by panelists from the three aforementioned University of Minnesota conferences: David Downing edits *Works and Days*; Richard Ohmann edits *Radical Teacher*; and Williams edits *The Minnesota Review*. Author of *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating Higher Learning* (Beacon Press, 2000) Stanley Aronowitz, whom Williams cites in his *Chronicle* article, edits *Social Text*.

Reading the works that Williams and I list above has alerted me to the ways in which higher education is undergoing neoliberalization, and what this looks like: tenured positions eroding down to a mere 32% of all professorships with an increasing reliance on the precarious teaching labor of low-paid grad instructors and adjuncts (AAUP) while the number of high-paid managers has tripled in the last two decades (Jeffrey Nealon); the reduction of undergrads to mere consumers of university (intellectual and material) products, including social and economic capital; the exploitation of undergrads



themselves as part-time, low-paid workers (Marc Bousquet); the rise of the for-profit university and the public disinvestment in higher education (Ellen Messer-Davidow) resulting in skyrocketing tuition and student debt (Jeff Williams).

Williams exhorts in his *Chronicle* piece that we must use CUS to “examine the university as both a discursive and a material phenomenon, one that extends through many facets of contemporary life.” My concern is: When we teach “academic discourse” in the first-year writing course, are we effacing or illuminating the *material* dimensions of the institution of academia? Or is this *material* reality of academia hidden behind the smokescreen an *idealist* academia? To begin to answer this question, we examine more critically what we mean by “discourse” when we teach it in first-year writing. When we teach “academic discourse,” are we teaching academia not just in its ideal form—as a set of intellectual processes that aid, as Bizzell puts it, “a difficult and on-going project”—but a material reality that includes all the economic and political processes in which students are implicated?

If we are to take CUS’s exhortation to consider the material dimensions on the same plane as we do the ideal dimensions, then we are indeed led to ask if “academic discourse” effaces or throws into relief the material dimensions of academic life. Put another way, we can ask: given the complex kind of late capitalist institution that academia is, what then is “academic discourse?”

It may not be the discourse that is sanctioned by the intellectual life of the college, because students live in many discourses in college life that we can no longer afford to discount as marginal to academic life. In college, students are not just burgeoning thinkers; they are marketed to as young consumers of the college experience—on

everything from t-shirts with the college name on them, to their student ID cards which bear the logo of TCF bank to the Kaplan courses that are offered to them to help them score well on their LSATs; even within classrooms, they see their education in Freire's banking model. They are also exploited as underpaid campus workers and interns, as Marc Bousquet's book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low Wage Nation* details; they are the precarious part-time labor of businesses where they work to pay for tuition; they are the subjects and objects of racist, sexist, ableist, and heterosexist practices on campus; they are the aspiring professional managerial class.

Unfortunately, my acculturation-model-inspired Eavesdropping assignment acknowledges only the ideal institution of academic discourse. What such assignments suppress is the material relationships that underlie this idealized world of discursive exchange and this intellectual project of finding then entering the conversation. Such an assignment, and the course objectives that justify it as outlined in the sample syllabus presented earlier in this section, falls short of asking the question: why? Not *how* do first-year writing students get acculturated into academia, but why? Why should we acculturate students into an institution that is increasingly unjust and inaccessible because of neoliberalization? To what end? Would we still want to teach students academic discourse if it means acculturating them into a structurally unjust and inaccessible institution?

In the next chapter, I work to represent this dilemma in a less binary way, a way that doesn't break down the choice as either/or: either we embrace how our first-year writing instruction perpetuates neoliberalization by acculturating first-year students into a neoliberalized institution, or we reject this acculturation wholesale. In the next chapter, I

suggest that we might be able to imagine teaching acculturation through academic discourse, but in such a way as to raise first-year students' awareness of the material realities of the institution into which they are being socialized, and in this way, give them the discursive tools to resist it. Our first-year writing classroom would have a kind of double-consciousness as we help first-year writing students work to change the institution even as we help them become members of it.

My assumption in the next chapter is that the first task and perhaps most substantial task in enacting this double-consciousness is finding a way to talk/think about it. That is, the first task is to find a new *rhetoric* for teaching first-year writing. The next chapter attempts to offer this new rhetoric for first-year writing pedagogy.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Teaching Academic Discourse in Drag: A Proposal**

##### **Introduction: What a “Rhetoric of Drag” Does and Does Not Do**

In its review of the rhetoric of theory-talk in the field of Composition Studies, Chapter 1 critiques the way the field of Composition Studies defangs post-structuralism of its political potential, and as such, pits post-structuralism against approaches that do more explicitly political work. Chapter 2 demonstrates how difficult it is in fact to co-articulate post-structuralism and more overtly political Composition Studies pedagogy like social-epistemic rhetoric in the writing classroom. This chapter proposes a third theoretical framework that I argue can co-articulate social-epistemic rhetoric and post-structuralism: queer theory. Queer theory is a kind of post-structuralism that has political implications: queer theory offers concepts like drag, which can give the field of Composition Studies a new rhetoric in which to think the injustices of the neoliberal university as laid out at the end of Chapter 2.

The proposal at the center of this chapter is that we teach students to be in academic discourse, but only “in drag.” The short-hand used in this chapter to express this is “to teach academic discourse in drag.” This means that we ask students to perform or imitate the conventions of academic discourse without identifying with the institution of academia.

Again, the proposal at the center of this chapter to teach academic discourse “in drag” responds to a very particular critique: that, as the end of Chapter 2 argues, the university is an increasingly unjust institution. Therefore, the premise of this chapter

upon which the whole argument rests is that there is something unjust about teaching the discourse of an unjust institution without critiquing that institution as one teaches it. This chapter is written for an audience that takes the injustices of the neoliberal university for granted, and *then* asks: what implications does this premise have for *teaching first-year writing* in the university?

Also, while this chapter does draw on abundant examples from the classroom in order to illustrate certain points, the focus of this chapter is not specific classroom praxes—assignments, syllabi, activities—as it was in Chapter 2. The offer of a new pedagogy in this chapter does not translate to an offer of new classroom texts. This is because, as I argue in the rest of this Introduction, the politically radical post-structuralist writing pedagogy that I seek in this project is achieved not through different assignments, syllabi, activities, but through a different way of talking about them in Composition Studies research. If “rhetoric” is a way of talking and thinking about something, then I call this different way of talking and thinking about something a different “rhetoric,” and I call the different rhetoric that I offer “the rhetoric of drag.”

Many of the ideas necessary to give us a rhetoric of drag are already present in Composition Studies. I reviewed some of these in the last chapter, the most significant of which is Bartholomae’s notion of “inventing,” this idea of the academic literacy movement that students need to “try on” the code in order to learn it. Many social-epistemic rhetoricians and post-structuralist thinkers in Composition Studies besides Bartholomae and Bizzel contribute to the new framework I propose here—and I will present in this chapter some more of these pieces given to us by Peter Elbow, Lillian

Bridwell-Bowles, Don Bialostosky and Sharon Crowley—however, each brings only pieces of the scheme I propose. In this way, my contribution of a “rhetoric of drag” merely consolidates all these pieces of “teaching academic discourse in drag” already offered by several composition theorists, and brings them under one mantle. In the process, some of these pieces get politicized; other pieces that are already explicitly political are given a micropolitical framework.

However, by stitching all these ideas together as I do here into a new rhetoric, the whole ends up challenging the arguments of some of its parts. “Drag” ends up doing something rhetorically that “Inventing” doesn’t: mainly, illustrate the political stakes and consequences of imitation.

### **Rhetoric as Praxis**

As I argue here, in some cases, rhetoric is a kind of praxis. That is, the way we talk about something can in itself constitute action. This claim requires the broadening of the definition of praxis to include rhetoric. For this broadening, we turn to speech act theory. Although there are several meaningful distinctions preventing us from absolutely coupling “speech”/“rhetoric” and “act”/“praxis,” speech act theory is nonetheless useful to this examination of rhetoric and praxis because of the evolution of the category of the “performative” in speech act theory.

Speech act theory proposes that speech is often a kind of act. J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* introduced the term “performative” to name statements in which the utterance enacts, not just describes action. Using the examples of invitations,

promises, proposals, and bequeathing, Austin's contribution is this crucial notion that sentences can do more than state what is true/false; sentences can *make* something true or false.

But many critics since this publication—and Austin himself in a posthumous publication--concede that the dichotomy of the performative and constative (true/false) is more of a continuum. As Eve Koslovsky Sedgwick muses about Austin's performative in *Touching Feeling*, Austin hardly gave the “performative” gave the performative a chance before he started retracting it.<sup>73</sup> What Austin ended up conceding is that every performative has varying potential to be a constative, and visa versa. Moreover, the distinction between the two is so fluid that it is not always clear which is most operative in each utterance.

If we equate performance with praxis for the purposes of this argument, then Austin's concession here could lead us to say that—to varying degrees, admittedly--*talking* about something differently is already a way of *doing* that thing differently. This recalibrated understanding of the performative has implications for this project insofar as we can see that using a different rhetoric about teaching writing is in itself, to some extent, already the enactment of teaching writing differently. That is, we need not necessarily invent new assignments, syllabi, or activities for our first-year writing classrooms in order to enact a different kind of pedagogy; we may need only a new rhetoric to describe our teaching practices to fellow researchers in Composition Studies.

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<sup>73</sup> Eve Koslovsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

I sprinkle this Introduction with the subjunctive qualifiers “might,” “perhaps,” “to some extent,” and “can be” to raise this pressing question: if rhetoric “can be” a kind of doing, *under what circumstances* is this the case, or not the case? It is insufficiently rigorous to claim that all talk is already action, and we do a disservice to academic work in allowing such a claim to be uncritically perpetuated. Academics are often demonized by the public as navel-gazing do-nothings for undertaking capstone projects like this one in which the original contribution is little more than the exhortation to “get a new metaphor.” The tired scene is played over and over again at academic conferences: the post-structuralists tell the Marxists that revolution happens on the plane of representation, and the Marxists reply, “At the end of the day, it can’t be *all* talk.” Claiming that change at the level of representation, speech, discourse, and rhetoric is tantamount to change at the level of altering relationships under capitalism will get us to similar stalemates. Rather, we must seek to articulate *the circumstances under which* rhetoric is action.

But how are we to determine such circumstances? Austin attempts to create such a criteria at the end of the aforementioned essay in which he essentially retracts the “performative” as a category that we can establish with any rigor. “Well, it seems,” Austin writes in his characteristically colloquial way, “that in its original form, our distinction between the performance and the statement is considerably weakened, and indeed breaks down.” But Austin “hurriedly” makes one last attempt at determining when a statement is a performative:

I will just make a suggestion as to how to handle this matter. We need to go very much farther back, to consider all the ways and senses in which saying anything



at all is doing this or that—because of course it is always doing a good many different things. And one thing that emerges when we do this is that, besides the question that has been very much studied in the past as to what a certain utterance meant, there is a further question distinct from this as to what was the *force*, as we may call it, of the utterance.<sup>74</sup>

As intriguing as this suggestion is, what follows sadly exhausts the extent to which Austin defines what he means by “force:” “We may be quite clear what ‘shut the door’ means, but not yet at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty, or whatnot.”<sup>75</sup> So beyond this platitude that essentially “context matters,” that is the end of any elucidation of “force” from Austin.

So what criteria *can* we use to more definitively distinguish between rhetoric that constitutes action, and rhetoric that stays at the level of talk? One possible criterion is this: rhetoric can constitute praxis when the rhetorical context for that rhetoric is one in which the praxis that is the concern of that rhetoric is already underway. That is, when the rhetoric operates in a context of praxes that are not merely rhetorical. Perhaps this is what Austin meant by “force:” an utterance can constitute a form of action when that utterance is situated in a context which enables it to have that power.

Say that a worker complains that there is no sick leave at her workplace. If she tells this to her small child at home, the utterance has no power to be a kind of action to alter the reality that is the topic of her utterance (no sick leave). But if she tells this to a

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<sup>74</sup> J.L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers*, eds. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 239.

<sup>75</sup> Austin 251.

workplace group that is trying to form a union, then what was once a complaint becomes “speaking out” for workers’ rights--because the context is a union drive. This context gives her statement “force:” the union drive, which is formed to alter realities such as the one at the heart of her complaint, is the pragmatic context that lends her utterance the power of strengthening the unionization effort. Without the context of the union drive, her statement does not have the “force” needed to be considered “praxis.”

So it is with teaching writing: that each alone--a teaching practice, or a new way of talking it—cannot itself consist of “action.” Each needs the other in order for us to claim that a new kind of teaching is taking place.

### **Micropolitical Praxes Already Underway in Composition Studies**

First, in what way does this project require that the teaching of first-year writing be “different?” The difference that this project seeks in first-year writing pedagogy is one that works at the micropolitical level of the specific kind of institution that the neoliberal university is. It is a praxis that responds to this reality: that when we acculturate students into the university in our first-year writing classroom by teaching them academic discourse, we acculturate them into an institution that is increasingly unjust. If, as we established in the Introduction, the new rhetoric I offer later in this chapter is to have any “force” approaching action, then that new rhetoric must collude with practices that are already underway. The new rhetoric I propose in this chapter, the rhetoric of drag, gives first-year writing teachers a way to *talk about* the micropolitics of academic discourse.

But if teaching practices aren't already in place to give this rhetoric force, then the rhetoric is just talk, and we cannot expect it to have much political impact.

As it turns out, however, there is a vibrant, diverse body of Composition Studies work that offers one necessary element of the premise of this chapter: while this body of work may not see the university as unjust because of neoliberalization, it does see something problematic about the institution of university. For some, the problem manifests in curriculum; for others, in academic form; and for others still, in the struggle and conflict students experience when they attempt academic discourse.

Sharon Crowley does offer a critique that works at the micropolitical when in her polemic "Composition in the University," she proposes the abolition of first-year writing altogether. Crowley offers this solution in response to what appears to be neoliberal realities of higher education: we must abolish it because, among many other reasons, this curricular mainstay only perpetuates the need for an underpaid, under-qualified body of precarious labor—graduate instructors and adjuncts—to teach it.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles and Peter Elbow diagnose the problem with the university as the conflict between the regulatory discourse required of students in college, and the authentic voice students must suppress in order to achieve this discourse. They suggest that experimenting with form is one way of emancipating academic writers from the strictures of academia that are mirrored in the strictures of academic writing.<sup>77</sup> Finally,

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<sup>76</sup> Sharon Crowley, "Composition in the University," *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays* (Pittsburgh University Press, 1998), 4-6.

<sup>77</sup> Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy," *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992) 349-68; Peter Elbow, "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues,"

Don Bialostosky proposes the framework of Bakhtin's dialogics to address the struggle and resistance students will and should have when learning academic discourse.<sup>78</sup>

Therefore, no matter how diversely social epistemic theorists formulate and respond to the micropolitical reality of teaching first-year writing in the university, what seems clear is that there is already a network of praxis in Composition Studies that is critical of the university. Some even go a step further, and offer a critique of the acculturating function of teaching academic discourse. In this way, one criteria for "force" is met were a new rhetoric to be introduced: that a network of praxes already exists that takes for granted how problematic teaching academic discourse in the first-year writing classroom is.

What these accounts lack, on the other hand, is an account of the ways in which the university is oppressive *because of its neoliberalization*. If these accounts admit that the university is oppressive, and that we perpetuate its oppression by teaching academic discourse, such accounts use a more ahistorical framework of how institutions make docile bodies. They do not critique how neoliberal institutions create material realities that are increasingly unjust economically and politically in the age of late capitalism. Elbow, for example, deems academia oppressive because of how the conventions of academic discourse stifle expression.

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*College English* 53 (1991): 135-55; Joseph Petraglia's collection *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> Don H. Bialostosky, "Liberal Education, Writing, and the Dialogic Self" in *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (New York: MLA, 1991), 16-17.

Granted, in the case of Crowley, on the other hand, neoliberalization is accounted for; she admits neoliberalization is the cause of precarious labor in the teaching of first-year writing. However, no solution is offered for a way to think about writing pedagogy differently (beyond abolishing first-year writing altogether). In this way, these accounts are successful in *either* giving up on first-year writing for the ways in which academic discourse subjugates students, *or* offering emancipatory praxes that don't take into account the micropolitics of the university.

But how can we do both at once—how can we find a way to teach students the academic discourse they need to build academic literacy, but in a way that acknowledges how academic discourse perpetuates a materially unjust institution by edifying its conventions through the teaching of academic discourse in first-year writing? As Freire would put it with his term “critical consciousness,” how can we teach literacy in a way that underscores how literacy can change power structures, as opposed to just perpetuate them? Moreover, can teaching students critical consciousness pave the way to help students resist the injustices of the neoliberal university, not just call attention to them?

### **Queer Theory**

In what follows, I turn to queer theory for the way it embodies a post-structuralism that has clear political stakes. These political stakes complicate the acculturation model of social-epistemic theory already underway in Composition Studies. The following account requires, of course, some collapsing and conflation of terms to facilitate a comparison between how students write and how gender is performed. One set of terms

that is necessary to equate in order to do this is “gender performance” and “writing in academic discourse.” At times, it will require collapsing “gender” and “discourse.”

However, it is important to acknowledge what is lost in translation when the collapse goes as far as the conflation of heteronormativity and academic discourse. Namely, what is lost in a translation of “drag” from QT onto Composition Studies is how queerness engages a whole constellation of identity issues with political consequences in a way that academic discourse does not. That is, while both critical pedagogues like Peter McLaren and Ira Schor--as well as Critical University Studies theorists like Marc Bousquet and Jeff Williams--point out how academia is part of a system of political and economic injustice, this oppression has important differences from those of queer people, perhaps just the most important of which is how heteronormativity constructs the body, while academic discourse does not.

Another important element that draws a sharp distinction in the political stakes between heteronormativity and academic discourse is the law. The punishment for defying heteronormativity is dire and inscribed in the law. Its consequences can be as drastic and legally binding as losing one’s job, one’s rights, and one’s freedom from incarceration. The benefit in subscribing to heteronormativity, on the other hand, is mere survival. Meanwhile, the benefit of following the conventions of academic discourse is social and economic capital; the punishment for refusing to learn academic discourse is merely—in the case that there *are* any punitive considerations—the deprivation of the social and economic capital conferred by a higher education degree. Nor are the benefits and the punishment for challenging academic discourse written in the law as it is for

citizens. We see here that for citizens, defying gender norms is much more risky than it is beneficial to follow them; there is much to lose but little to gain. The opposite is true in the case of academic discourse: there is much to gain but little to lose—compared to what one can lose (one’s life and livelihood) if one challenges heteronormativity. These distinctions are important to keep in mind as we compare “gender” and “discourse” to illustrate how both are performances, how both involve artifice, and how both entail violence.

This section proposes that we teach students to be in academic discourse “in drag.” The short-hand for this is “to teach academic discourse in drag.” This means that we ask students to perform or imitate the conventions of academic discourse without identifying with the institution of academia.

This section asks: what if, in Composition Studies research, we re-casted the struggle to teach students how to write in academic discourse as teaching students to perform drag? This chapter argues that it would help articulate the structuralist and post-structuralist notion that discourse is unnatural; it is not a form of self-expression. It would help more clearly articulate that academic discourse/drag is a performance built on artifice for the purposes of parodying the conventions of an unjust system (academia; heteronormativity). Even so, both drag and teaching students to write academic discourse as a kind of drag gives us hope that the system can be undermined, and a new system (of sexual difference; the university) is possible. This is because both drag and teaching students to write academic discourse “in drag” exposes the artifice of the oppressive system even as it repeats its conventions. If we had access to the rhetoric of drag in

professional circles, we could have a shorthand to communicate some complicated truths about our work: that although the institution of academia is problematic, students must learn its conventions; that students will never be at home in that discourse; that learning that discourse promises both the political consequences of “violence” for students even while it confers social capital; and that therefore students should work to change the institution at the heart of that discourse, even as they learn that discourse.

Bartholomae’s “inventing” does some parts of “drag” already. Namely, it acknowledges that discourse is like a code students must learn, and that students are outsiders to that code. Drag recasts this code as “performance.” What “inventing” doesn’t do that “drag” does is emphasize that performing dominant discourse comes with serious political implication and consequences; that academic discourse is not something students need to identify with in order to perform it-- it is enough to “act as if;” finally, while inventing is basically imitation, drag involves much more than imitation.

### **Academic Discourse and Gender: It’s an Act**

Feminist theory posits that gender is learned, not natural; gender is a cultural reality, not a biological reality. Judith Butler in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” exhorts us to “consider gender... as .... an ‘act.’”<sup>79</sup> In *Gender Trouble* Butler writes, “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated.”<sup>80</sup> Similarly, the academic literacy

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<sup>79</sup> “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 272-73.

<sup>80</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Jersey: Routledge, 2006), 56.



movement already posits that learning to write in academic discourse is not a matter of accessing some untapped part of the self; it's a matter learning to repeat an act, an act that is not natural or immediately accessible.

As Bartholomae argues, the university is not a place inside each of us, or a tangible place we can go; it is a discourse that is “recreated” every time a student writes. Bartholomae opens the essay with this description of “inventing:” “[the student] has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language... He must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff.”<sup>81</sup> To illustrate some of the points in this process of learning to imitate, Bartholomae continues:

What our students need to learn is to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces set phrases, rituals, and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that determine the ‘what might be said’ and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community.<sup>82</sup>

In this way, both queer theory and the academic literacy movement subscribe to the structuralist notion that language and discourse is alien to humans; we must learn it, and learning it is much like learning to play a game or operate a machine, as opposed to finding one's voice. For the way that queer theory talks about gender as something you do, not somebody you are, queer theory is just another way of articulating how discourse is something we do.

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<sup>81</sup> David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University,” in *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*, ed. Mike Rose (New York: Guilford, 1985), 135.

<sup>82</sup> Bartholomae 146.

### **Gender: It's Not Natural**

Queer theory's concept, based on the same concept in feminist theory, that gender is not natural illustrates another way in which queer theory can re-articulate Bartholomae's concept of "inventing." However, this concept in queer theory that no gender/discourse is natural/primary does stand in contradiction to notions of "the natural" that other theorists besides Bartholomae espouse as part of the acculturation model of discourse.

Dominant literacy theories, unlike queer theory, posit some literacies as more familiar and natural than other literacies. Literacy theorist James Paul Gee, for example, maps the different discourses that students enter as concentric circles: the first circle is the student's "primary discourse"—where the student feels at home--and the second is his/her "acquired discourse."<sup>83</sup>

Queer theory, on the other hand, refuses that any gender performance is natural or primary. In this way, queer theory "denaturalizes" both gender and sex difference. Gender already *is* a kind of drag; one needn't be a drag king or queen to be in drag--identifying as "male" or "female" is already being in drag. Carole-Anne Tyler synthesizes the ways that feminist theory posits gender as an act of mimicry:

To be a mimic, according to Irigaray, is to "assume the feminine role deliberately ... so as to make it 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible..." To play the feminine is to 'speak' it ironically, to italicize

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<sup>83</sup> James Paul Gee, "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What Is Literacy?" in *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, eds. Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll and Mike Rose (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 21-52.

it, in Nancy Miller's words; to hyperbolize it, in Mary Ann Doane's words; or to parody it, as Mary Russo and Linda Kauffman describe it. In mimicry, as in camp, one 'does' ideology in order to undo it, producing knowledge about it: that gender and the heterosexual orientation presumed to anchor it are unnatural and even oppressive.<sup>84</sup>

If gender seems natural, originary, or primary, it is because gender has been naturalized. But gender is produced through imitation. Queer theory subscribes to the structuralist notion that all gender performances are alien to us, and we will never be "at home" in gender, the same way that structuralism holds that we will never be "at home" in language.

Drag theorists take this insight from feminist theory to produce a postmodern critique, one that points up how there is no "origin" in a series of repetitions. If drag is an imitation of gender, and gender is already an imitation, then drag is an imitation of an imitation. As early as Esther Newton in 1972, drag theorists point to how drag is not a copy of an original. It is a copy of a copy, because there is no such thing as a natural gender. Butler elaborates on this point: "As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' ... it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler, "The Politics of Gay Drag," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 53.

<sup>85</sup> Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* 137.

This notion that gender is “a copy of a copy” is one of the features of queer theory that makes queer theory post-structuralist. Saussure makes the anti-essentialist claim that signs do not in themselves contain any essence of meaning; it is the relations *between* signs that give signs meaning. Derrida critiques Saussure’s formulation of relationality by arguing that there is a hidden “origin” at work structuring Saussure’s system of relations, an origin that Saussure represses in the *Course*. One way Derrida talks about this hidden origin is the transcendent signified.<sup>86</sup> As I elucidated in Chapter 2, post-structuralism theorizes that the problem with structuralism is that there is no such thing as a signified; rather, signifiers refer not to signifieds, but only to other signifiers. In queer theory’s terms, signifiers are copies of copies—not copies of signifieds.

Using the rhetoric of drag to describe how all discourse, like gender, is alien to us, would on the one hand, facilitate the academic literacy movement’s discussion already underway about how discourses are not natural and must be learned; on the other hand, the rhetoric of drag would critique the strands of the acculturation model of discourse that posit some discourses as more natural than others. If we want to have a way of talking about how to teach students that *all* discourses are created through social conventions, then the rhetoric of drag would facilitate that in a way that Gee’s concentric circles models does not.

Here I will attempt to illustrate how the rhetoric of drag would helpfully facilitate professional conversations about teaching the discourse of an institution that writing teachers are critical of. At the beginning of a first-year writing course, I will ask students

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<sup>86</sup> Derrida introduces the term “transcendental signified” on page 50 of the Spivak translation of *Of Grammatology*.

what kind of an institution they are writing themselves into. The course syllabus reprinted in Chapter 2 starts this conversation when it asks: “What *is* college?”... for some people, college is vocational school... for others, it is a place to develop a philosophy of life. It can also be... [a rite of passage]... a networking mecca.....” To help students develop a response to this question, we read histories of the university, and critiques of it (which are aplenty in the popular press nowadays). This unit of the course historicizes the institution of the university, and in so doing, denaturalizes it. The rhetoric of drag, with its concept of denaturalization, would give me a language to talk about this stage of the course to fellow Composition Studies researchers in a way that would not depend on referring to any more primary or natural identity.

### **Gender: An Act with Political Consequences**

Up until now, queer theory has merely served as a new way to articulate social-epistemic attempts like Bartholomae’s to teach discourse as a performance. It is here that we begin to see how queer theory can do work that Bartholomae’s “inventing” does not.

Queer theory, as opposed to attempts like Bartholomae’s in the academic literacy movement, throws into relief the political stakes of the process of acculturation in a way that the academic literacy movement does not. Queer theory insists that the adoption of gender norms—adopted as one would a new language or discourse—in itself inscribes a political order in which the non-normative is punished. In the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler refers to the “normative violence” inherent in performing the act of gender: “I grew up,” she writes, “understanding something of the violence of gender

norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body. . . gay cousins forced to leave their homes. . . my own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16.” The “clear political stakes” of queer theory are spelled out here: political economies are rearranged when someone loses a home or goes to jail for heteronormativity. What is striking about her formulation is that the violence is not attributed to the *transgression* of gender norms, but to the norms themselves.<sup>87</sup> In this way, normative systems like gender in queer theory have tremendous implications for power relations.

The notion of violence points up the political stakes of what would otherwise sound as harmless as learning a new language, like French or the HTML code. While there is a growing contingent of work in literacy studies that sees literacy as a kind of violence,<sup>88</sup> the academic literacy movement de-emphasizes the violence of learning a new discourse so as to emphasize the empowerment achieved through literacy.

Bartholomae does indeed acknowledge that all students are at first outsiders to the “code” that is academic discourse. But that outsider status has no political implications for Bartholomae. He writes:

I think that all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’—that is, the privilege both of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak. . . the student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any. And since students assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community—

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<sup>87</sup> Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* Preface xix.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Stuckey’s *The Violence of Literacy*.

within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and commonplaces—learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery.<sup>89</sup>

Here, Bartholomae speaks of “assuming privilege” with no explication of what is politically at stake for those who do and do not take this call. By putting this call to imitate in the framework of gender norms, however, the political stakes and consequences of learning a discourse immediately come into view.

Performing gender points up the power of the hegemony of gender in a way that performing academic discourse does not point up the power of the hegemony of academia. Queer theory foregrounds the political economy of literacy by insisting on the privileged status of one system—heteronormativity. The academic literacy movement lacks the concepts necessary to make this political critique of the academy. Social-epistemic rhetoric theorists contend that if students resist learning academic discourse, it is not because academia enjoys a privileged status it does not deserve; it’s because students are resistant to learning any alien discourse. In this way, queer theory has available to it concepts that can help us understand the “violence” of performing—a gender, or a discourse--in a way that academic literacy movement does not.

Bartholomae’s notion of “inventing” in particular does not consider how performing academia is a political act. If “academia” is an unjust institution, performing academia through inventing the university means perpetuating an unjust institution. In this way, the metaphor of “inventing” does not have the conceptual room to consider how

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<sup>89</sup> Bartholomae 143.

the performance of academic discourse, like the performance of gender, has political implications. The rhetoric of performing gender, on the other hand, does offer this conceptual space to consider the ways in which performance has political consequences.

But it is not just the political consequences for *everyone* who would perform gender/discourse that queer theory in particular addresses more poignantly than “inventing” does; it is also the political consequences for marginalized people in particular. This capacity to underscore the unjust political economy of dominant gender norms (in the case of subscribing to heteronormativity), and dominant discourses (in the case of learning academic discourse) is what makes the rhetoric of drag especially responsive to the concerns of marginalized students in the academy. As many literacy and composition researchers have written, students of color as well as first-generation, working class, and/or immigrant students often respond to the alienation they experience in institutions by developing an oppositional or resistant stance to their education. Drag gives voice to what they already know or suspect about academia—that it is another institution that is part of an oppressive matrix that they have to learn to navigate, not learn to trust. I have found that using a version of the rhetoric of drag to talk to marginalized students encourages them to engage, as opposed to just discouraging them further.

One far-reaching, high stakes and ongoing debate that runs parallel to this one in academia that can shed light on oppositional stances is the Black English vs. standard English debate at the intersection of literacy studies and Composition theory. Barring that “registers” of language are different than discourses, the voices in this debate still



have many insights to offer, specifically that all dominant discourses are performed with ambivalence, and that as such, marginalized students must cultivate a double-consciousness when performing dominant discourses.

The most famous statement in literacy studies on this matter of how to teach a dominant discourse without perpetuating its dominance is Lisa Delpit oft-anthologized and reprinted short essay “The Politics of Literate Discourse.” Delpit’s responds to this dilemma: whether or not teaching Black English perpetuates racist oppression. Delpit begins by stating that whether or not it is so, that does not mean not teaching what she calls “literate discourse” is an option. She recounts “many such stories” in which mostly well-meaning, liberal, white teachers report coming up against “mostly poor, working-class students” who “‘refused to be liberated’” by a pedagogues that would refuse teaching standard American English because it perpetuated racism.<sup>90</sup> Of course, Delpit argues, we must teach standard English to Black students, even if it’s not their “primary” discourse, because Black students need to be able to write in the register of standard English in order to succeed. No, the answer is not to refuse to teach standard English. In the case of academic discourse, the answer is the same: to refuse to teach academic discourse does not make the university a more just place.

To Delpit, it’s *how* we teach the dominant discourse that determines whether or not we perpetuate its dominance by teaching it: “Only after acknowledging the inequity of the system can the teacher’s stance then be ‘Let me show you how to cheat!’ And of course, to cheat is to learn the discourse which would otherwise be used to exclude them

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<sup>90</sup> Lisa Delpit, “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse,” in *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 1995), 64.

from participating in and transforming the mainstream.”<sup>91</sup> We must “engage in what Henry Louise Gates calls ‘changing the joke by slipping the yoke,’ that is, [use] European philosophical and critical standards to challenge the tenets of European belief systems.”<sup>92</sup> Delpit thus takes a definitive stance on Audre Lorde’s famous question: can we use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house?

Delpit demonstrates that it is possible to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. She writes “today’s teachers can help economically disenfranchised students and students of color both to master the dominant discourses and transform them.” How is this possible? Delpit refers to an instance where bell hooks writes about how she learned from black poets, who were repeating the conventions of European white writers, that the act of repetition could be transformative:

[bell hooks] learned from these women that she was capable of not only participating in the mainstream, but redirecting its currents: ‘Their work was truly education for critical consciousness... They were the teachers who conceptualized oppositional world views... They offered to us a legacy of liberatory pedagogy that demanded active resistance and rebellion against sexism and racism.’<sup>93</sup>

If we are to believe Lisa Delpit and bell hooks, we would draw two conclusions: first, that discourses like academic discourse can be taught in a way that does not reproduce the inequalities of academia, but rather “transforms” academia. Second, that in order to do that, we must teach academic discourse in a way that exposes “the inequity of the

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<sup>91</sup> Delpit 66.

<sup>92</sup> Delpit 64.

<sup>93</sup> Delpit 64.

system.” Bartholomae’s “inventing” metaphor does not have the conceptual room to acknowledge the political complexity of using the master’s tools—academic discourse—to transform the master’s house—academia.

Another academic from the Black English debate who sheds light on the question of how teaching academic discourse in drag might speak to marginalized students is Barbara Mellix. Mellix acknowledges the political complexity of performing a dominant discourse. In her piece “Outside In,” she chronicles, from her childhood to adulthood, her ever-changing relationship with academic discourse.

Her relationship was in constant flux not because learning a new language is difficult, but because learning the language of the oppressor is so politically charged. For Mellix, performing literate discourse is a very difficult decision to make—not because, as Lillian Bridwell-Bowles and Bartholomae would say, “academic discourse” is an unstable construct, and as such an ever-changing one—but because this decision had serious political consequences. In college, she writes, was when she first understood black folks’ “ambivalence toward English, our scorn of it, our need to master it, to own and be owned by it.”<sup>94</sup> She goes on to describe a life-long, ever-changing relationship that ends not with her acculturation into academic discourse, but in her learning to play with conventions. I quote this passage at length for how it encapsulates this whole process in one breath:

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<sup>94</sup> Barbara Mellix, “Outside In,” in *Negotiating Academic Literacies: Teaching and Learning Across Languages and Cultures*, eds. Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack (New York: Routledge, 1998), 63-64.

Now that I know that to seek knowledge, freedom, and autonomy means always to be in the concentrated process of becoming—always to be venturing into new territory, feeling one's way at first, then getting one's balance, negotiating, accommodating, discovering one's self in ways that previously defined 'others'—I sometimes get tired. And I ask myself why I keep on participating in this highbrow form of violence, this slamming against perplexity. But there is no real futility in the question, no hint of that part of the old me who outside standard English, hugging to herself a disabling mistrust of a language she thought could not represent a person who feels the consequence of her education, the weight of her possibilities as a teacher and writer and human being, a voice in society... Although as a beginning student writer I had a fairly good grasp of ordinary spoken English and was proficient at what Labov calls 'code-switching' ..., when I came face to face with the demands of academic writing, I grew increasingly self-conscious, constantly aware of my status as a black speaker of one of the many black English vernaculars—a traditional outsider. For the first time, I experienced my sense of double-ness as something menacing, a built-in enemy. Whenever I turned inward for salvation, the balm so available during my childhood, I found instead this new fragmentation which spoke to me in many voices. It was the voice of my desire to prosper but at the same time it spoke of what I had relinquished and could not regain: a safe way of being, a state of powerlessness which exempted me from responsibility for who I was and might be. And it accused me of betrayal, of turning away from my blackness. To

recover balance, I had to take on the language of the academy, the language of ‘others.’ And to do that I had to learn to imagine myself a part of the culture of that language and therefore someone free to manage that language, to take liberties with it.<sup>95</sup>

There are many interesting features of this story that coincide more with “drag” than “inventing.” First, Mellix’s ambivalence toward dominant discourse emanated not from the difficulty of learning that discourse, but from the political implications that learning it has for her as a woman of color: to learn it was at some points to “betray” herself; at the same time, to not learn it was “disabling.” Drag gives us a framework to talk about such political consequences. The concept of drag illuminates how gender norms both betray us, but at the same time, to refuse to learn them will socially disable us. “Inventing” gives us no language to talk about this dilemma, and the deep ambivalence it rightfully inspires.

Second, learning literate discourse was an on-going process not because, as Bartholomae’s “inventing” would suggest, learning a new language requires teachers to do something they often don’t—acknowledge and then teach the conventions of discourse; rather, learning literate discourse for Mellix was an on-going process because at each point, she had to weigh what doing so and not doing so meant at that particular time in her life.

Third, and most interestingly, the way that Mellix finally did learn to “take on” the language of literate discourse was not imitate it, as Bartholomae argues, but to “take

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<sup>95</sup> Mellix 69-70.

liberties with it.” She goes on to describe how she learned to play with writing by experimenting with different kinds of drafting and revision. In a sense, Mellix took on literate discourse only when she learned to play with it, not when she learned to imitate it. Drag, as a creative kind of parody, most closely expresses this way in which we learn to imitate through play. This imitation through creativity is hardly a part of Bartholomae’s “inventing.”

Like Delpit, who argues that we must teach the “inequity of the system” alongside teaching the conventions of that same system, Pat Bruch and Tom Reynolds argue that the choice is not between refusing to teach knowledge, or teaching knowledge; rather, what determines whether or not pedagogy is transformative is how we configure the relationship between power and knowledge in our classrooms. “The dominant, common-sense approach to education,” they write, “views schooling as a gateway that provides each individual access to a better life. In this view, ‘knowledge’ grants individuals power in a straightforward way.”<sup>96</sup> In this piece, Reynolds and Bruch present multicultural education as one kind of education that “complicates the traditional understanding of the knowledge-power relationship.” Multiculturalism critiques this view for its “partiality,” where partiality means both “incomplete” and “biased.” What I think Mellix’s account testifies to is how the dominant way of seeing education as delivery of the code is partial

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<sup>96</sup> Patrick L. Bruch and Thomas J. Reynolds, “Multicultural Writing Instruction at the General College: A Dialogical Approach,” in *The General College Vision: Integrating Intellectual Growth, Multicultural Perspectives, and Student Development*, eds. Jeanne L. Higbeem, Dana B. Lundell, David R. Arendale (Minneapolis: General College and the Center for Research on Development Education and Urban Literacy, 2005), .

in the sense that it does not acknowledge how learning the code is a politically charged act that inspires deep ambivalence.

What Delpit, Mellix, Bruch, and Reynolds all raise is the overlooked dimension of how learning the dominant discourse involves political choices and consequences. Bartholomae's "imitation" does not encapsulate all the ways that the politics of "inventing" a discourse can inspire ambivalence, and ultimately requires creative play, in the writer.

To some extent, it is possible to say that all first-year writers—not just politically marginalized ones—feel this alienation, and respond to it with an oppositional stance. Whether we are talking about just marginalized students, or all first-year writers, drag gives resistant students the option to *not* identify with academia or college life, even as they learn to imitate the conventions of its discourse. The way I talk about this to students is to "act as if, not identify."

To illustrate this pedagogical injunction to "act as if and not identify" that drag enables, I turn to an evolution in my syllabus language. During my first few years of teaching, my "Philosophy of Teaching" as written on the syllabus in my first-year writing class enjoined the student to "start thinking of yourself as academic," and in so doing, asked students to start reflecting on the kind of intellectual projects that interested them so they could start to define themselves as academics. Wondering if this injunction *caused* more alienation and resistance than it *described*, I changed the language so that students are asked to "start acting as if you're an academic." The Philosophy of Teaching

continues by saying that learning to act like an academic is enough; one needn't go as far as identifying as one.

If I stopped there, what this latter version of syllabus language would amount to is participation in the academic literacy movement, where the goal is to “demystify” the conventions of a culture. But this initial injunction to “act as if” is followed by a semester that has at its center a critique of academia. We begin with David Leonhardt’s piece on how a high school is necessary but insufficient to securing employment after graduation, and continue this cost/benefit inquiry with an examination of student debt, using Jeff Williams’ aforementioned piece “Student Debut and the Spirit of Indenture.” We continue with a critique of popular notions of “millennials,” using pieces like Mark Bauerlein’s incendiary introduction to his 2008 diatribe *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*.

We continue with an examination of curriculum, comparing excerpts from John Henry Newman’s 1858 *The Idea of a University* with Daniel Pink’s 2006 *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*.” We turn to the expanding ranks of administrators with Jeffrey Nealon’s polemic “The Associate Vice Provost in the Gray Flannel Suit: Administrative Labor and the Corporate University.” We conclude with an inquiry into how the state and the market (de)funds higher education with the Ellen Messer-Davidow’s aforementioned article “Why Democracy Will Be Hard to Do,” which chronicles the declining federal and state funding of higher education since 1973, and the chapter on R-1 universities from Stanley Aronowitz’s 2001 *The Knowledge Factory*:



*Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning*. Interspersed with these readings, I present to students manifestos and websites authored by activist groups that have been responding to the problems raised in the readings, including Jerry Farber's 1967 *The Student As Nigger*, the 1962 Port Huron statement by the Students for a Democratic Society, the 2009 "Communique from an Absent Future" by California activist collective Research and Destroy, and the March 4<sup>th</sup> "National Day of Action to Defend Education" started in 2010.

In addition to pieces written in academic or protest discourses, we also investigate literary and popular discourses for how they represent and critique higher education. Students enjoy excerpts from Jane Smiley's *Moo*, a satiric send-up of the politics of an unnamed "Midwestern" university, in addition to excerpts from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, for its portrayal of the impoverished, miserable student. We watch clips from films like *Old School*, *Animal House*, *Accepted*, and *Kicking and Screaming*, which are portray college life. Students are also asked to bring in any songs that they encounter that seem to be about college, and we play these songs in class when they do.

In the discussion of these articles, students start to get a sense of what makes academia an unjust place for students and workers: the university has high tuition, low graduation rates, and yet it's necessary but insufficient to get a job. The university gives students only nominal shared governance, yet this paternalistic attitude doesn't extend to protecting students from parasitic creditors and fraudulent consumer practices that base their profits on unseasoned consumers like college students. And it's not a zero-sum game between student and workers: the people who work in the university—professors,

instructors, administrators, clerical, technical, and medical workers—don't benefit from the exploitation of students. Generally, academic workers are enjoying less job security and benefits while working longer hours for less pay.

As we discuss all these ways in which the university is not just an ideal realm where inquiry happens but also a material realm that is increasingly unjust, students always educate me about higher education more than I educate them. After all, students can speak the most to the tuition bill they just paid, their living conditions that are not always conducive to the concentration required of academic work, their mind-numbing work study job, how much money they're borrowing to pay for school, their economic hopes for the future after graduation, and what their parents had to do to make college possible. Through it all, we both are led to ask not *how* does one become an academic, but why?

While students are intimately engaged with the topic of the course, we almost never draw the same conclusions about what the university is, and what, if anything, to do about it; but this does not make teaching academic discourse in drag any less necessary. For example, the arguments students make in their final papers are: the freshman fifteen is a problem/is a myth; the student epidemic of sleep deprivation is a priority; and how difficult it is to choose a major. A few end up writing about the issues explicitly addressed in our readings—student debt and high tuition, for example, are usually in this category—but even those papers do not share the same Marxist assumptions that most of our readings do. The only thing I have found that we do agree on is there is something wrong with college. That is all that is required to teach academic

discourse in drag, however, since a critical stance toward *any* aspect of the university is what makes “acting as if, not identifying” with the university necessary to students.

In these discussions that transpire over the course of the semester, I re-inject my initial injunction to *act as if* one is an academic, not to identify oneself as an academic. My hope is that the juxtaposition of this semester-long exposé of the problems of the university and the repeated injunction to “act as if” crystallizes in the student’s mind in the following possibility: that one need not identify with an institution that is revealed to be as problematic; one need only to “act as if” one is part of it. The rhetoric of drag with its imperative that one needn’t identify with heteronormativity in order to perform a gender identity would be instrumental in facilitating conversations about similar pedagogical moves to the one that I described above.

### **Heteronormativity Excludes the Same Way Academia Does**

Queer theory goes a step beyond structuralism by making a post-structuralist insistence on the excluded element of systems of sexual difference. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” and “Against Proper Objects,” Butler critiques feminist theory’s positing of the stable subject of “woman” on the basis that such a move represses and excludes sexual differences. In this way, queer theory throws into relief how privileging one thing means the exclusion of another. Derrida’s “Differance” also points up how fundamental the operation of exclusion is to systems like language, and in the case of queer theory, gender. To Derrida, the problem with structuralism is that it suppresses the *differance*—the play of signifiers—inherent in language. Likewise, queer theory

demonstrates that the very notion of “woman” necessitates the suppression of sexual difference that falls outside of the binary of “woman/man.” If we limit the ways we talk about learning academic discourse to the metaphors given to us by the academic literacy movement such as Bartholomae’s “inventing,” then we have no way of talking about the exclusions inherent in privileging the academy and its discourse over other institutions and their discourses.

For example, in a class discussion of the Eavesdropping Assignment discussed in Chapter 2, one student raised his hand and asked a question, and that question seemed to call for a rhetoric of drag. I was explaining what counts as “expertise” in academia so that students could start to find expert sources on their topics. The prompt for the final paper of this first-year writing class is: “Write an abundantly researched, 8-12 page paper on an aspect of college that you find intriguing or problematic, complete with one-page bibliography. You must use 7 sources in the paper, 5 of which must be scholarly.”

When I began teaching composition, I used the “scholarly versus popular” distinction that most university libraries advocate. I have since complicated this binary schema into a map of sources that are credible to different degrees and in different ways. I call this map the “Planet of Credibility.” Part of it is reprinted on the next page. On it, other sources of expertise besides scholars are acknowledged: foundations, think tanks, government, non-profits, industry, and journalism. The “island” of academia is described as “the center of the credibility planet, but a small island.”

I developed this map in response to what I read in Composition Studies, folklore theory, and feminist theory, as well as what I heard from adult learners in classes like the

one I taught at Metropolitan State University, where most students are “non-traditional:”<sup>97</sup> that there are many more legitimate and valid ways of knowing in academia than that which is strictly described as “scholarly,” and these other ways of being an expert should be acknowledged.



<sup>97</sup> A definition of a “non-traditional student” is presented later in this chapter.

Keith, one of the many non-traditional students in my first-year writing class at Metropolitan State University, had chosen the topic of discrimination against tattooed students as the subject for his final paper. Specifically, Keith was interested in how discrimination against tattooed people in the larger culture is reflected or refracted in academic culture. During our class discussion, he asked: “What about tattoo artists? Do they count as experts in my paper?” Expecting that my map had anticipated questions like this one in particular, I proudly pointed to the Planet and began: “Why yes, they’re...in on the ‘Industry’ continent, I think...” In our discussion that followed, we came up against several problems with this reply: first, even though a tattoo artist works in the industry, s/he wouldn’t necessarily be deemed an “industry expert” on that basis.

Second, the folk knowledge of an industry practitioner like a tattoo artist wouldn’t necessarily be published anywhere; the student would need to capture this expertise by creating platform for it, creating in essence “primary research,” for example by interviewing the tattoo artist. Other students, many of them nurses, small business owners, veterans, and IT personnel at their workplaces, listened closely as they considered how they would turn their own workplace knowledge into “expertise” for the final paper.

After some discussion, students began to express doubt about this “solution.” Students’ critique of this solution seemed to amount to a concern that this solution only further marginalized non-published expertise as a “problem” for researchers. I corroborated their doubts by pointing to how little information the map gives about the

continent of “Industry,” and its bottom-most location on the globe. I contextualized my observation by commenting that, as business or technical writing is not my field, I knew the least about industry as a source of expertise.

I supplemented this explanation with a structural reason behind such a blindspot: academia’s historically cozy if embarrassed relationship with industry. Students were already familiar with this relationship, as we had recently read Aronowitz’s *The Knowledge Factory*, which traces the military-industrial-complex’s control of academic research centers since the 60’s, and Christopher Newfield’s 2004 *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980*, which illustrates that the market had a hold of academic research well before the age of late capitalism. Like many in the humanities, and especially as a Marxist, I attempt to fight “industry’s” hold on academic research, rather than normalize it by encouraging my students to regularly rely on it as expert knowledge.

But to what extent is the tattoo artist that Keith wanted to interview synecdoche for the industrial sector? That is, to what extent can we expect that the expert knowledge that the tattoo artist would proffer to the interviewer, Keith, be representative of the expertise that “trade publications” would proffer? As a folklorist, I acknowledge the gulf between practitioner knowledges and institutional knowledges, and, as a labor organizer, believe that workers know much more about their own industries than management does. This led me to conclude this strain of the class conversation by conceding that avoiding industrial research should not preclude using worker knowledge.

Teasing out these complications as such only deepened our suspicion of the supposedly equal status conferred on all kinds of expertise as illustrated in the Planet of Credibility map. Although the map is an improvement over the binary scholarly/popular model, it still perpetuates the privileging of some discourses over others. As much as the “global” perspective of this taxonomy of sources aspired to present all the discourses as equal, much like globalization itself, certain continents were subtly afforded less prestige than others, and sometimes not with consistent reasoning.

Like many others in the class, I suggested to Keith that he “include” the tattooed artist’s knowledge “alongside” other more patently legit knowledges, for example alongside academic scholarship about tattoos (of which there is plenty in Cultural Studies, anthropology, and sociology). Keith responded, “Sure, ok. But the thing is that those articles disagree with [name of the tattoo artist], or they talk about completely different things than she does.”

Keith illustrates with this comment that there *is* a conflict between discourses, making the solution of mere inclusion alongside other discourses not an acceptable solution. Keith was going to have to address how the tattoo artist’s knowledge and that of published scholarship on tattoos differed, and in that case, he had to face that the latter would hold more sway in an academic paper. At that point, I reverted to the rhetoric of the academic literacy movement, and admonished Keith and others that they would have to “play the game:” he would have to privilege one discourse over another in his paper.

This acculturation rhetoric of “learning to play the game” would have served its purpose—if Keith did not identify himself as a proudly tattooed man, if Keith weren’t a



fellow higher education activist that didn't share my critiques of the university, and if we weren't in a classroom full of non-traditional students that were already savvy to the economic realities of the job market. Keith and others were not satisfied with merely "playing the game;" it helped to know that they didn't need to identify with the game. The rhetoric of drag gives me a way to reply to students who already have this oppositional relationship to academia that they did not have to identify with a system that they already observed to be problematic, if not oppressive. In the face of an exclusionary system, it is enough to "act as if" one has subscribed to it.

### **The State of Queer Theory in Composition Studies**

Despite the rich potential of queer theory to give us a new rhetoric to describe teaching academic discourse in the neoliberalized university, no such discussion of it as such exists in Composition Studies. The queer theory of Composition Studies is still very much centered around identity politics, limiting itself to questions surrounding queer teachers, queer students, and sometimes queer texts in rhetoric/composition. The queer theory of Composition Studies has not as of yet begun to theorize how queer aesthetics or ethics can change our very notions of what academic discourse is, and what the academy is. In Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace's 2009 4C's overview of queer theory's intervention in the field of Composition Studies, the "queer turn" of Composition Studies is still talked about in terms of identity and agency. The best that Alexander and Wallace offer is that queer theory can "extend beyond" heteronormativity to apply to other systems of oppression:

As queer compositionists, we believe that the power of queerness extends beyond exposing and challenging heteronormativity and that substantive attention to queer people and perspectives has the potential to help composition theorists, teachers, and students to come to a new understanding of identity as well as a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world.<sup>98</sup>

Meanwhile, in English studies more generally, the queer turn looks more promising, or at least we would be led to believe according to William J. Spurlin's introduction to a 2002 special issue of *College English* called Lesbian and Gay Studies/Queer Pedagogies.

Spurlin is a sexuality and gender theorist with a background in comparative literature, and in his piece, "Theorizing Queer Pedagogy in English Studies after the 1990s," expresses hope for queer theory's migration into other fields where identity is not at the center of its problematics. Spurlin writes:

In the contemporary world, queer theory mediates in culture between normative ideologies and material practices, between intellectual inquiry and social activism, between text and context, between teaching and learning. Queer theory functions as a mode of analysis and as a strategy of opposition that circulates in culture.<sup>99</sup>

This idea that queer theory can provide a "mode of analysis" as well as a "strategy of opposition" in areas of "culture" that are presumably broader than just ones where

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<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace, "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship," *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 1 (2009): 301-320.

<sup>99</sup> William J. Spurlin, "Theorizing Queer Pedagogy in English Studies after the 1990s," *College English* 65, no. 1 (Sept. 2002), Special Issue: Lesbian and Gay Studies/Queer Pedagogies: 9-16.

identity marks bodies is very promising. However, the articles that follow do not make good on this promise.

This is especially true of the contribution from Composition Studies by Karen Kopelson, which attempts to recast “identity politics” as a post-structuralist moment in queer theory, not one stuck in binary ways of seeing sexual difference, as many queer theorists charge.<sup>100</sup> While Kopelson’s article contributes a brilliantly nuanced complication in the long rift between lesbian/gay studies and queer theory for how the latter ignores queer bodies and abandons queer political struggles, Kopelson’s article does not share Spurlin’s perspective that the value of queer theory is at least partly its ability to be generative in matters across the whole cultural field.

One reason that queer theorists might be reluctant to realize Spurlin’s vision is the worry in queer theory about how the move away from identity politics in queer theory might mean queer theory’s abandonment of political struggle. I participate in this worry insofar as I am concerned that in any act of translation—in the case of this project, that of “drag” from queer theory to Composition Studies—one text tends to get dumbed down in order that the other term may be elucidated and complicated. This dynamic creates a hierarchy of value between the terms. On the other hand, perhaps this risk will be deemed acceptable if what we gain is the recognition of queer theory as a repository for ideas that can benefit all of “culture,” as Spurlin puts it, and, in this case, all intellectual inquiry.

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<sup>100</sup> Karen Kopelson, “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: Reconstructed Identity Politics for a Performative Pedagogy,” *College English* 65, no. 1 (Sept. 2002), Special Issue: Lesbian and Gay Studies/Queer Pedagogies: 17-35.

## **Cynicism, Mere Parody, or Critique for Radical Action?**

### **or: the “College Sucks” Problem**

“I learned that the university is a terrible place.”

-- anonymous student response to the end-of-semester evaluation question,

“What did you learn in this course?”

After my first semester of using the “What is College” theme, I read the end-of-semester evaluations. In response to the question, “What did you learn in this course,” many claimed that they learned about “the writing process;” some claimed, as per usual, that they learned how not to procrastinate; one, to my delight, claimed s/he learned how to “stick it to the man.” But one evaluation claimed that s/he learned that “the university is a terrible place.”

After a semester wherein these students, who are mostly brand new to this institution, are hammered with statistic after statistic about crushing student debt, skyrocketing tuition, unemployment rates for college graduates, and the exponentially increasing number of undergraduates who work part-time to pay for tuition as well as the exponentially increasing number of hours they work during the semester, perhaps we should expect that some students learn only that “college sucks.” Indeed, one available interpretation of the course is that the problems of the university are intractable, and you learn this even before you get a chance to enjoy college life at all.

On the other hand, the comment that “college is a terrible place” has a perhaps more powerful rhetorical function that reveals quite the opposite: not students’ dismay in reaction to the picture of the university that emerged from the course, but students’ refusal of this emerging picture, and/or resentment towards me for painting the university this way. That is, we could interpret the undercurrent of this comment to be: “See what you forced me to conclude? Is that what you want? Because I resent that” or “I know you, teacher, *wanted* me to conclude that college is a terrible place. But I refuse that.” Whether we read this comment as an expression of cynicism in the face of critique, a resistance to the critique, or an expression of resentment towards the bearer of bad news, it seems clear that one available set of reactions to the course

Many colleagues have expressed a similar trepidation with this course content. One professor, who was currently learning Greek so that she could teach abroad every year, expressed this concern: if her Greek language instructor taught Greek ‘in drag’ as I teach my students academic discourse—that is, with content that emphasizes everything that’s wrong with Greek culture--she would resent that teacher for commandeering what is supposed to be a positive or at least neutral experience. Why should first-year writers not feel the same way towards the writing instructor who teaches with Critical University Studies?

Let us examine some of the assumptions underlying such a concern. First is the assumption that language instruction has any obligation to portray a culture in a monolithically positive light. Second, if it does, that this portrayal has a positive effect on students’ experience in the course. The second consideration is related to the third:

that students in all positions in the political economy evaluate political critique in the same way. That is, my first-generation students tend to “get” the institutional critique more immediately than my non-traditional students do because they already experience academia to some extent as outsiders.

This leads to the fourth assumption of this common concern about critical course content: that most first-year students, because they are new to the institution, are naïve about the problems with the institution, or about the problems with any institution. In fact, most students today are “non-traditional,” and it is expected that statistics will trend even more in this direction. In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that as many as 73% of students today are “non-traditional,” where “a non-traditional student” is one who meets one or more of the following seven criteria: entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school; having dependents; being a single parent; being employed full time; being financially independent; attending school part-time; not having a high school diploma.<sup>101</sup> As I discussed in the previous section, non-traditional students—savvy to the material realities of higher education, parenting, and/or the job market—radicalize me as much as my course content radicalizes them.

That said, teaching academic discourse in drag is as much intended for the minority of “traditional” students as it is for the majority of non-traditional students in our first-year writing classroom. If we understand “traditional” students to mean eighteen-year olds, these first-year writers are developmentally at a place from which

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<sup>101</sup> National Center for Education Statistics 2009, “Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by control and type of institution, age, and attendance status of student: 2007.” *Digest of Educational Statistics 2009*. Table 192.

they can understand resisting authority, and rebellion. Therefore, the status of the student as traditional or non-traditional does not preclude the student's engagement with even the most dispiriting news about the university.

Let us concede for a moment that these responses successfully assuage our fear that the cynical response "The university is a terrible place" will not be a common one to the first-year writing course that teaches academic discourse in drag. But even in that case, the question remains: when can we say that the student who performs academic discourse without identifying with it—that is, writes academic discourse in drag--savvy stance of the non-traditional student, or the rebellious stance of the traditional student, is more inclined collective will to make the university a more just, accessible, and equitable institution?

This question lays bare the problem of how to evaluate any act of drag—in the field of discourse or gender—for its political work. Tyler speaks to this concern when she points out that heterosexual parade and masquerade is *not* camp and drag.<sup>102</sup> In response to this concern, Butler writes:

Parody is by itself not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic

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<sup>102</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler, "The Politics of Gay Drag," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

displacement, indeed parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered.<sup>103</sup>

As Austin posited, the context in which the performative occurs determines its “force.” Critical pedagogues also teach that no one course can radicalize a student or teacher; such courses must arise in the context of other experience in school that offer opportunities for radical thought and action. The students in my “What is College” course that have gone on to join the struggle to make the university more just are ones who were simultaneously and later exposed to such opportunities. Some of my students organized for the Experimental College; others joined the Students for a Democratic Society; others started organizations of their own. So it seems that the question “When is it political though?” is answered by another question: “What is the context?”

Crucial to this context is rhetoric. A rhetoric of drag in education might help build such a context.

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<sup>103</sup> Butler *Gender Trouble* 139.



## Conclusion

The ideals of academia are as noble and worth perpetuating as they ever were. Among the many attractions of a “life of the mind” is our discourse. Unlike other discourses that make arguments like those of cable television, political pundits, commerce, industry and even news journalism, academic discourse upholds logic, evidence, collegiality and peer review; academic discourse eschews logical fallacies, unsubstantiated claims, ruthless competition, and nepotism. Of all the institutions refracted through capitalism, I would still prefer academia to the corporate, non-profit, or informal sectors of the economy because of these cultural ideals.

But we can no longer afford to defend academic practices based on ideals alone; we must critique how these ideals are contextualized by the material realities of the university. As Tony Scott argues in his 2009 *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, composition theory’s social-epistemic rhetoric must make more connections between the material realities of our field and the way we theorize the teaching of writing. The current state of composition research, he argues, resembles Marx’s fetish: in composition research, the relationship between workers (in the teaching of writing) and what the workers produce (how we teach) is completely abstract.<sup>104</sup> This may seem odd, he concedes, given how obsessed compositionists are with the material conditions of our field, as evidenced by the research of our field.<sup>105</sup> But

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<sup>104</sup> Tony Scott, *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition* (Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2009): 12.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, which deconstructs many stereotypes about labor practices in Composition Studies, including the “sad woman in the basement.”

all this hand-wringing has not resulted in any sustained effort to rigorously theorize the relationship between these material realities, and our teaching practices/the statements we make in our field's journals. Scott writes:

There is now a widespread consciousness of the overuse and exploitation of contingent labor in composition, but little research connects the managerial logics that shape the systems of labor that flourish in writing programs to the assumptions that shape teaching and writing in the classes of those programs. We discuss, with a high level of sophistication and nuance, ideology as it plays out in student texts and in writing classrooms, but we don't integrate factors like the working lives and histories of students or the public, consciously constructed and market-targeted images of sponsoring educational institutions. Rather than rigorously seeking to understand how what we do is shaped by how we do it, the field's normal science continually sutures the split between disciplinary ambitions and projections and the material realities of writing education. It continually finds means of turning away from the contradictions that become apparent when the immediate and the material are juxtaposed with the structural and cultural.<sup>106</sup>

What might it look like to radically integrate, in the way Scott enjoins us, what our field knows about our material realities, and what it continues to practice? Scott gives this example: in the literature of our field, we bemoan composition's low disciplinary status. Why then do we continue to staff our program with "people who have little or no background in the field?" Scott asks.

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<sup>106</sup> Scott 19.

This intention of this dissertation is to heed Scott's question: how have the micropolitics of CS shaped the major statements of Composition theory? My work here responds to his question with another question: what kind of Composition theory would respond to the micropolitics of the university? I mean "respond" in both the linguistic and political sense: what kind of Composition theory would not just account for the micropolitics of the university, but imagine a new university?

We ignore the material context of academic discourse at our peril; much is at stake. But is it a "crisis?"

Gerald Graff argued in his 2009 Chicago MLA address that if research warning of the "crisis" in higher education has been shrilly publicized for the last 30 years, when exactly should we expect it all to crumble to the ground? That is, how can a situation be a "crisis" if the situation is seemingly ahistorical?

Among academics, this skepticism about whether or not the university is "in crisis" is so widespread so as to hamper any political will to make change in academia. Worse than its soporific effect on would-be organizers, this skepticism is founded on the faulty assumption that a crisis must be historically brief, have immediate consequences, and promise only one of two endings: catastrophe or aversion of catastrophe. But the nature of crises in capitalism does not fit this profile. Many crises—disease, poverty, war—are long-lived, have effects that change over the long-term, and effects that are ultimately ambiguous.

No matter how we define "crisis," what is important is the rhetorical power of the term. A crisis calls people to act. But what action should be taken?

At the end of “Why Democracy Will Be Hard to Do,” Ellen Messer-Davidow raises a similar concern: how can leftist academics enter the public debate on higher education where right-wing commentary has dominated? She puts the problem this way:

Whatever the nation’s future turns out to be, one thing is certain: it will not be shaped by the usual scholarly critiques of injustice. No matter how scrupulously researched and rigorously argued, critiques fashioned for communities of scholars will not persuade, or even reach, nonacademic audiences. So what can progressive, liberal, and reform-minded academics do?<sup>107</sup>

In response to a question like “What action should be taken?” Messer-Davidow is as concrete as we could hope. She proposes a four-pronged approach, suggesting that action must be taken on a number of fronts.

The first three of these four solutions will sound familiar to organizers working for change on any front. They are: “engage as citizens;” get our own industry lobbyists; and train up undergrads to become policy makers through more university-NGO partnerships. The fourth is more interesting: “design research for deployment in public and policy-making arenas.” Messer-Davidow explains: “If scholars want to participate in shaping ‘common sense,’ we will have to reach ordinary people through the languages, formats, and venues they can access.”<sup>108</sup> But is this merely yet another call for the writing of “public intellectualism?” No, it is more specific: this is public intellectualism for the purposes of shaping the common sense that will in turn influence policy.

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<sup>107</sup> Ellen Messer-Davidow, “Why Democracy Will Be Hard to Do,” *Social Text* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 25.

<sup>108</sup> Messer-Davidow 27.

What if the “common sense” we’d like to shape is this: that the publicly maligned “high theory” of academia is valuable, so valuable that it has the power to make waves in a field that is most associated with praxis, also a field that is foundational to academic culture as well as industry? I speak here of creating for the public an account of how post-structuralism shows up in the field of Composition Studies. I contend that if the public was regaled with such accounts as often as it was regaled with stories of how professors are elitist and college isn’t worth it, the “common sense” around the value of higher education and its goods—for example, high theory—would alter. And this common sense could affect public policy.

In this dissertation, the rhetoric of drag was invoked as one way that academics can talk *to each other* in ways that co-articulate the micropolitics of the university with the high theory of post-structuralism. But what can we infer from this about how academics talk *to non-academics* about how the high theory of our institution usefully sheds light on the material conditions of our institution?

The rest of this conclusion attempts to take up Messer-Davidow’s call to create a new kind of “critique” for a “mixed” audience: an audience of both academics and non-academics. As per her suggestion, I imagine a public venue and audience for this experiment: a manifesto published on the internet designed to sway public opinion, and announced through press releases to larger publications like *The Chronicle*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The New York Times Education Supplement*, as well as activist groups from around the country that work for economic justice.

The following piece attempts to demonstrate that post-structuralism is valuable as a way to re-see a very particular problem in academia at the micropolitical level: the high drop-out rate in college, especially in the first year. As a first-year writing teacher, I witness high drop-out rates on the ground level, and posit here that the drop-out serves as synecdoche for what is lost in the entire system of a neoliberalized higher education system.

In this short piece, I turn Sharon Crowley's polemic to abolish first-year writing on its head: I exhort us to bring back the abolished *in* first-year writing. That is, I exhort us to invoke the drop-out. The post-structuralism I invoke in the piece is Kristeva's notion of the "abject" as elucidated in her *Powers of Horror*. I use the abject to shed light on a metaphor I develop in the piece, the metaphor of the college drop-out as "ghost."

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"Pedagogy of the Drop-out" or "The student who isn't here:" A Manifesto

Who occupies the seats in our classrooms? This answer is very different from what it was even as recently as the 1990's.<sup>109</sup> Shockingly, of the almost 18 million undergrads enrolled in higher education today, 43% are attending a two-year institution; 37% are enrolled part-time; 32% are working full-time; 25% are over the age of 30, and only 15% live on campus.<sup>110</sup> Thanks to a 2009 study by the National Center for

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<sup>109</sup> Jeff Selingo, "The Rise and Fall of the Graduation Rate," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 2, 2012.

<sup>110</sup> National Center for Education Statistics 2009, "Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by control and type of institution, age, and attendance status of student: 2007." *Digest of Educational Statistics 2009*. Table 192.

Educational Research that provided these data, much public conversation since the 2009 study has taken up this new profile; these statistics have been cited and picked apart since their release in every major newspaper across the country. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center also reports some interesting data, including that a full 1/3 of students now transfer from the college where they started.<sup>111</sup>

While the public acknowledgement of a new reality is encouraging, even more encouraging is the response from education research: educators are asking, “How do I teach to today’s student?” Considering the new student profile as we re-consider our pedagogy shows that today’s educator is rhetorically savvy.

But I propose here that, as we revise our pedagogies, we ask the opposite question: “Who is *not* in our classrooms?” This is perhaps the question behind the original question. This piece is about the student who is not there. Here, I will not address students who were *never* there. That is, students who never attended college. I speak of those who enroll but don’t graduate. In a May 18, 2010 *New York Times* article, Chief Economics Editor David Leonhardt counters economists who would argue that too many students are going to college; few have what it takes academically to succeed, and few need a college degree anyway. Against this view, Leonhardt raises the fact that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 30% of the students who graduate from high school every year, do not enroll in college. To Leonhardt, this figure is high enough to

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<sup>111</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, “The Progress of Education Reform: Transfer and Articulation” 10 no. 5 (2009).

weed out everyone who can't academically succeed in college, or shouldn't financially attempt to go to college.

Along the way to this point, Leonhardt lets us in on a mathematical mystery: of the students who graduate from high school every year, 30% don't enroll in college and 30% graduate from college.

You might notice that 40% is missing here. What does the 40% mean?

Leonhardt offers that these are the students that enroll in college, but don't graduate.

This piece is about a subset of those 40%, a subset of the empowered middle class students who enroll but don't graduate, those that thought they could make it work for a time: they reduced their hours at work to make time to attend college; got childcare; and took out loans to pay for tuition. They attended the first class. Perhaps it was my class. I see these students because I teach the only university requirement: first-year writing.

This piece is about those who walked into my class the first day, brimming with the hope that it despite the debts they were taking on and the sacrifices they were making, it would work out. That subset of the 40% I want to address I call the "drop-out." And in this piece I try to brand that term really specifically to mean not those who enroll and stay for *a few months*. By "drop-out" I mean those who are enrolled for *a few days*. Those that never reply to my e-mail asking them why they skipped our first conference. Those that never put their reasons into writing. The line that runs from me to *that* student goes cold. The drop-out is silent.



So the term “drop-out” here means the student who drops out of my class, yes, but also off my radar. So their physical removal is accompanied with “discursive” absence-- that is, total silence.

What’s curious about all this to me is that even though the drop-out drops out of my class, out of contact with me, and out of discourse, they never drop out of my consciousness. In fact, perhaps I spend too much time wondering about where they are, and why they left. Are they *anywhere* right now? They were like ghosts; I’m not sure that I know what I know about them.

But now I want to get the ghosts to stop haunting me—just me. I want to get those ghosts to haunt my profession, my institution, my house. I want to make them make us ask hard questions about the house we live in, the house of higher ed. In their liminal and unreadable status, they whisper to us something urgent about the house we’re living in.

First, you may ask a fair question: why this macabre, sentimental, and pathological metaphor of the “ghost?” And what exactly do they give voice to about the house they haunt, and how they came to be its ghost? Finally I ask, what can we *do* with this knowledge—what political action can knowledge of the ghosts help us get to?

First, why “ghosts?” Why are they “ghosts” to me now, the drop outs? Why not rationalize their disappearance by reassuring myself: “this class just didn’t fit what that student was able do right now.” Students are consumers empowered to make choices for what suits their circumstances at the moment, right?

The problem with this formulation is that it relies on a certain model of the subject, one which Wendy Brown calls “neoliberal rationality,” which is this conception of humans as rational agents who act according to their self-interest. Neoliberal rationality tells me that when students drop out, it’s not because they can’t afford the tuition, fees, books, child care, transportation or health care necessary to attend school; they have other reasons. They made a choice; circumstance didn’t compel them.

But what if their dropping out has *nothing* to do with reasons, and only to do with circumstances? Things they can’t control? What if their reasons for dropping out involve contradictions, making those reasons unreadable, and rendering my drop-out’s silent in the face of my probing e-mails to an ultimately cold line. If their circumstances are “overdetermined”—that is, it’s child care plus income plus literacy issues and those issues are inseparable for some students—then my question “why did you drop it?” is far too complex to be answered with an e-mail to a prof whom you barely know.

What if, moreover, it has less to do with the consumers’ reasons *or* personal circumstances--and more to do with the circumstances of the system? The problem with neoliberalism is that it can’t think the poor. If you’re poor in a free market, you’re invisible. There’s no rational explanation under neoliberalism for your existence, so you get erased in narratives about America. Neoliberalism imagines the economy as a free market to which all actors have open access and can succeed based on merit—much the way we talk about open access and merit in public land-grant institutions like the University of Minnesota, where I teach first-year writing. If you’re not succeeding in late capitalism, it’s because you don’t know something, haven’t done something, or don’t

want to be successful. Within this framework, there is no room indeed to think the drop-out.

So we need a different framework. We could turn, for example, to Marc Bousquet's notion of "waste product." In the introduction to his book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, Bousquet, a Victorian literary scholar, theorizes graduate students as the "waste product" of higher ed: their cheap labor is needed for just long enough to justify not creating more positions for full-time teachers. When that time is up, the system has no economic interest in whether or not they actually get the degree. They are flushed out in order to make room for more cheap labor.<sup>112</sup>

I'd call drop-out's the shit that the corporate university flushes away just as Bousquet calls graduate students, except that we can see shit before it is flushed away. We never see the drop-out. The drop-out is more like a ghost: some part of your brain suspects it is around the corner, but you'll never be able to prove it.

Feminist and post-structuralist academic Julia Kristeva might offer it in her theory of the "abject."<sup>113</sup> She calls it the abject because it is neither subject (person) nor object (thing). It is a waste product created when the two collide. It is the "radically excluded object."<sup>114</sup> Because its exclusion is "radical," the abject is almost impossible to account for. This is so because it lies "beyond the set," and doesn't agree to the "rules of

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<sup>112</sup> Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: NYU, 2008): 1-55.

<sup>113</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Rodriguez, *European Perspectives: A Series* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982): 7.

<sup>114</sup> Kristeva 2.

engagement.” Kristeva says that the object “lies there, quite close, but cannot be assimilated” into any system.<sup>115</sup>

The tricky thing about the object is that you could try to look at it, but in order to see it, you have to give up reason. Kristeva says that the object draws you in, but it draws you to “the place where meaning collapses.” In this way, the object is not just the ejected beyond the scope of see-able. The object is the stuff that is “ejected beyond the scope of the... thinkable.”<sup>116</sup> The object isn’t that dark place of our consciousness that we avoid going; it’s not the homeless person we try to ignore on the street once we see her out of the corner of our eye. It’s on just the *other* side of consciousness: it’s the dark stuff that our consciousness *kicked out*. That is, the problem with the object is that it always slightly eludes our consciousness. It falls outside the parameters of what we can even imagine.

The difference between Bousquet’s formulation of the waste product and Kristeva’s formulation of the object is that the latter cannot be verified, and yet it haunts us. It’s like a ghost.

There is a crucial difference between those currently affiliated with the university--no matter how exploited they are as workers or screwed as consumers—and those who have dropped out. The crucial difference is that I can *see* the screwed and the exploited who are still here. I can ask them that famous question that union organizers use to agitate: “How’s work?” But I can’t ask a ghost. I can’t ask someone who’s not there.

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<sup>115</sup> Kristeva 22.

<sup>116</sup> Kristeva 15.

Which leads us to our 2nd question: what can the ghost, the figure of the abject, tell us about the house they haunt, the house of higher ed? This is an institution that suppresses its waste product, which scurries to erase the traces. To *not* fully articulate the economic framework of their actions is in their best interest. Mystification, like the mystery of ghost stories, is essential to the success of the neoliberal model.

I hear that sane people—especially the newly sober--pray the “Serenity Prayer:” “Through my efforts, I gain the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.” I’ve come to believe that only neoliberalism would give us the false confidence, the arrogance to suggest that humans could ever possess the wisdom to know the “difference.” Humans are most limited in the endeavor of understanding our limits.

But let’s pretend for a moment that we can do the impossible--let’s be un-serene and decidedly insane for wanting to change the things we categorically can’t—and channel the ghosts, make the ghosts speak for us when they can’t even speak for themselves in a system like ours. We can do this by taking the last space they had occupied—perhaps a desk chair in a classroom?—and calling attention to that object, mourning the loss of that student inconsolably, refusing to be ok with never seeing that student again who is the waste product of undergrad education.

But let’s not just perform a quiet, unintrusive eulogy around that chair. Let’s burn it. Let’s burn it in the middle of the quad, in the manner of a séance, to call back the abject. This last March 4 was the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual National Day of Protest for Higher

Education. Its first rally was against “tuition hikes;” this year’s was against “student debt.”

But why wait until the next March 4? How about the next graduation... in August? During the ceremony, even while we congratulate the ones who endured tuition hikes and will endure student debt. Let’s set a chair on fire in remembrance of the drop-out.

And if that’s too radical for us, let’s at least teach and act in a way that remembers the drop-out, that keeps a chair empty, not in a domesticated eulogy, but as a festering sore, and let us never be complacent that we have one less student, but enraged that it had to be a student who was the abject.

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The rhetoric of drag discussed in Chapter 3 is just one way in which we can tap the political potential of post-structuralism to facilitate a dialogue. This manifesto exemplifies another kind of attempt—one written to facilitate a dialogue not between compositionists, but between higher education activists and members of the public who are concerned and baffled by what is happening in higher education. What both are meant to demonstrate is that the rhetoric that we use to talk about something is as important as who we talk to and what we say. In the manifesto, I call attention to the “frameworks” we use at different points to think about the drop-out. This term “frameworks” is meant to call the reader’s attention to rhetoric, or the ways we talk and think about something.

As I stated in Chapter 3, in order for rhetoric to be praxis, it must have a context that gives it “force.” To give our rhetoric about transforming academia into a more just and equitable institution the necessary “force,” we must provide the context of praxis for this rhetoric. That is, we must work on all fronts—not just in our scholarly work—to transform the neoliberalized university.

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