

Making Space, not Demands: Literacies of Autonomy and Dissensus

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I think when it looks like we're winning more, and we're actually making gains in the streets and taking more space, that's gonna draw more people out. Because I've talked to so many people who are just like, they are really hopeless and for good reason, and that that's a reason that they don't come out . . . like if we made anything in the resemblance of [the 2006 teacher's strike and occupation in] Oaxaca, or something, I bet we'd be seeing thousands of people, or at least hundreds more, than we've seen before. Cause it's exciting, and it's new, and a lot of people do feel discontent, and also alienated in this society, and the need to feel inspired, and it's gonna have to look like something new that America never really sees. And it's not gonna be a police baton in the face, because we've all seen that before.

—"Cindy" ¹

NEOLIBERALISM'S ANTAGONISTIC EXIGENCIES AND THE INADEQUACY OF CIVILITY

The neoliberal era has witnessed fundamental shifts in hegemonic maintenance, imposing a particular set of exigencies upon any who would respond to its offenses. With the US currently incarcerating the highest number of prisoners in the world and indeed in human history, in both proportional and absolute terms, policing, for example, has become a key issue for social justice in the US. As former director of the ACLU's Racial Justice Project Michelle Alexander puts it, rather than merely expressive of economic, housing, and educational inequalities, policing has become a central site for the *production* of inequality. Media consolidation has stifled what was once a central tool of grassroots social change actors: while Daniel Ellsberg met with heroic acclaim on the front pages of *The New York Times*, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning are forced into hiding, exile, or decades in prison for essentially the same whistleblowing acts; *Time Magazine's* coverage of the My Lai massacre is replaced by embedded reporting of Fallujah. The global nonprofit

sector (Incite!), with an economy the size of a developed nation, appropriates the symbols of social transformation while generally prevented by its funding cycle from adequately carrying through on its promises. Tokenistic political leadership and structures of “indirect rule” (Katz 192) achieve the same effect, as representatives are divorced from their communities. Under such conditions, sociologists Patrick Gillham and John Noakes observe that the neoliberal state works through forcible *incapacitation*—the taking-away of power—of movements, rather than by contesting their claims to *righteousness*, compelling them to respond in turn. Gone are the days when a president would argue for the need to fight for “a society where progress is the servant of our needs” (Johnson); rather, as Loic Wacquant argues, as its provisionary and regulatory aspects fall aside, the neoliberal state presents itself primarily as a face of “hypertrophied penalty,” (42) domestically and globally. Under such conditions, social movement actors find themselves primarily challenged not, as did previous generations, to demonstrate the *justice* of their cause, confronting the state in terms of righteousness; but rather to confront endemic hopelessness by demonstrating the *possibility of agency* in an era which Thatcher famously claimed allows “no alternatives.”

As the global wave of protest beginning in 2011 has manifested a public antagonism unprecedented for decades, economist David Harvie and The Free Association writing collective (Free Association) provide a helpful analysis of the reappearance of antagonism in this clash between movements and the constituted powers they face. Just as capitalism is constituted on an essential antagonism—between labor and capital, between use and exchange value, between the forces of production and the relations of ownership of the means of production—so each historic era of capitalist accumulation develops a regime, with attendant discourses, to manage this antagonism. From the era between the New Deal to Johnson’s New Society, core-industry workers were offered a guaranteed proportion of growth as a reward and incentive for social quiescence. As the domestic market for durable goods became saturated and youth widely rose up against the tedium of such bureaucratic “disciplinary” existence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new means of continuing was cobbled together in response. Neoliberalism, consequently, came to manage antagonism through deferral, rather than amelioration: shrinking real wages are replaced with easy credit and rocketing debt, cheap commodities manufactured overseas buy personal pleasures at the cost of outsourcing and overseas exploitation, and insecurity is repackaged as mobility, as “Hope” and “Change.” The economic crisis of 2008 marked the very literal end of hope, as investors decidedly refused to have faith in debt salience: the future had arrived. In such a light, the most surprising aspect about the evident antagonism of contemporary social movements is that it took so long to appear.

While the continuing global wave of social unrest has responded to neoliberalism’s antagonistic exigencies in astoundingly innovative and compelling ways, composition scholars and observers alike have generally been reluctant to appreciate the appropriateness of these responses, tenaciously clinging to uncritical conflict-averse frameworks. Composition/Rhetoric has long entertained a deep ambivalence about conflictuality. In “The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist,” Edward Corbett acknowledges the ubiquity of a confrontational “body rhetoric” typifying the protests of the time but bemoans this predominance as a sign of the inarticulate incivility of the era, rather than as a means of persuasion appropriate to its conditions. James Andrews presents the con-

frontational rhetoric during the 1968 occupation of Columbia University as exemplary of what he terms “coercive rhetoric,” eloquent only in restricting the administration’s options, an analysis which ignores the power differences between the student groups and one of the country’s most powerful universities. Wayne Booth (qtd. in Welch, “Informed” 45) in his 1974 introduction to *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* mourns “the inability of most protest groups to get themselves heard,” judging social movements by the standards not of their own rhetorical process but by the standards of enfranchised actors with institutional access. Movements’ irrational preference for conflictuality and performances of antagonism, in Booth’s analysis, are to blame. James Darsey traces this conflict back to a tension in the roots of the Western rhetorical tradition. Contemporary activist rhetoric’s conflictuality descends from the Hebraic tradition of jeremiads and prophecy, in contrast to the Hellenic tradition long dominant in Rhetoric as a field: while the former confronts and disturbs the audience, the latter generally attempts to resonate with its sympathies. As the Vietnam War drew to a close, Richard Ohmann specifically chastised first-year composition for avoiding engaging any “materially rooted conflict of interest” and instead purveying “the ideology of the open society with decisions democratically and rationally made by citizens all of whose arguments have an equal chance of success” (qtd. in Welch, “We’re Here” 225).

Composition’s conflict aversion seems to have changed little since Ohmann’s time. Diana George and Paula Mathieu note that confrontational approaches “def[y] every lesson on audience at least as it is traditionally taught in rhetoric handbooks” (252), including works as recent as Crowley and Hawhee’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. George and Mathieu note that “English-department aesthetics [in the present] generally favor ambiguity over polemics, complexity over clarity” (261). Laura Micciche argues that “compositionists have collectively generated an ethos that sticks to the field, calling to mind, for instance, frequent representations of it as *democratic, inclusive, and friendly*” (3, my emphasis). Although several older works in Composition Studies urge the field to embrace conflictuality (e.g. Lu, “From Silence to Words,” “Conflict and Struggle”; Ellsworth; Pratt; Miller; Trimbur) as inherent in the writing process and classroom, recent studies which acknowledge and critique the field’s tendency towards conflict aversion are notably more sparse (e.g. Welch, “We’re Here,” “Informed”; George and Mathieu; Scott; Welch and Scott).

What is it that might make Composition—particularly in our time—so averse to conflictuality? Ann Larson suggests that this nervousness around conflict may not merely be an innocent bias but instead indicative of unease on behalf of composition’s “managerial unconscious” (Strickland), faced with the all-too-obvious antagonism of labor conditions in which composition is deeply complicit. In Larson’s analysis, Composition’s anxiety about its own professional status, often hastily tied to the sad status of its own beleaguered object—the under-prepared and under-appreciated writer—works to deflect the conversation from its own involvement in atrocious labor practices. Although less antagonistic to conflict when Composition as a field was actually in some sense beleaguered, the success of Composition Studies (in parallel with the graduated collapse in position of Composition’s contingent laborers) has brought it to a pitch: “The problem is not that Compositionists lost that battle against disciplinary discrimination; the problem is that they won it” (Larson). Composition Studies may even display a sort of bad conscious, given that—judged by the standards of its own

making in past studies—scholars should know better.

Nancy Welch notes an additional cause for this rhetorical preference for civility: as incivility becomes associated with the Right, progressive rhetoricians come to view civility itself as inherently politically commendable:

Especially given the toxicity of what passes for public discourse on corporate radio and cable-news broadcasts, the projects of cultivating civility and opening rhetorical space appear interdependent. Hence the rekindled interest among compositionists in civic literacy and public rhetoric along with a pedagogical emphasis on rhetorical listening, balance, and civility. (“Informed”35)

Political theorist Jodi Dean points out the risks of this reluctance before conflict, which she holds as presently endemic among progressives and the “academic and typing left”:

As conservatives have resolved to fight any and all opponents to the death and neoliberals have been ever more emboldened in their grotesque grabs for greater and greater shares of the world’s wealth, many on the academic and typing left have urged peace, love, and understanding. These influential voices advocate a turn to ethics, a generosity to difference and awareness of mutual vulnerability. They respond to the religious, nationalist, and market fundamentalisms dominating contemporary social and political life by rejecting dogmatism and conviction, advocating instead micropolitical and ethical practices that work on the self in its immediate reactions and relations. They are likely right that engaging others with affirmation and generosity is a nice thing to do. But it’s politically suicidal. The more the left refrains from divisive political engagement, the more the right advances. (123)

The research I present in the next section bears out Dean’s concern, indicating that under the conditions of the present, it is essential that listening must be balanced with assertive speech or even shouting, vulnerability with commitment, and civility with the courage to break the rules. Indeed, fluency in what gets called “incivility” might well be what is most missing from our students’ rhetorical repertoires, especially those students whose interests are most in conflict with hegemonic orders. In the present situation, what appears as violence at the antagonistic boundary functions to constitute a space apart, an alternative of new subjects, agencies, and ways of living. In seeking to make such spaces, rather than a place within, new social movements have embraced autonomy as a key value, in direct contrast to petitionary pleas for inclusion. In some sense, this autonomy is necessarily defined by two directions of conflict. Antagonism without seeks to set boundaries to the structures of power it seeks to call into question, disrupt, and perhaps even replace; conflictual dissensus within fosters a diffuse deliberation that brings differences into productive conversation without attempting to assimilate or reconcile them. As should be obvious from the continuing wave of global unrest begun in 2011, the violence of making and defending these autonomous spaces is often not metaphorical; however, it would be unfair to typify these as spaces of violence without also acknowledging that they are spaces of hope, of possibility, even of love. In order to better understand the nature of such spaces, I will now turn to the characteristics of recent social movements before finally asking what Composition Studies may learn from them.

MAKING SPACE FOR POSSIBILITY

While in some sense a trivial assertion, it was only rarely recognized in public discourses that the Occupy movement was, in fact, about occupation. In one statement of solidarity to Occupy authored by participants in Egypt's Tahrir Square, the distinction is made clear:

We are not protesting. Who is there to protest to? What could we ask them for that they could grant? We are occupying. We are reclaiming those same spaces of public practice that have been commodified, privatized and locked into the hands of faceless bureaucracy, real estate portfolios, and police "protection." Hold on to these spaces, nurture them, and let the boundaries of your occupations grow. After all, who built these parks, these plazas, these buildings? Whose labor made them real and livable? Why should it seem so natural that they should be withheld from us, policed and disciplined? Reclaiming these spaces and managing them justly and collectively is proof enough of our legitimacy. ("Solidarity Statement")

The incommensurability of occupation with traditional forms of protest was nowhere so immediately obvious as in the persistent complaint that Occupy lacked "demands." Although the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, for example, issued an extensive list of demands within weeks, the movement, by any account, was never about its demands. Any given Occupiers would likely voice their own concerns, with more or less overlap with other Occupiers, which was in some sense the point. Additionally, as the Tahrir statement makes clear—"What could we ask them for that they could grant?"—power cannot grant its own alternative. Even requesting this is self-defeating, as Occupy poet Adam Roberts articulates: "demands are directed at authority and help make that authority real / our one demand is instead an offering / join us" (qtd. in Schneider 58). In contesting rather than petitioning power, spaces of autonomy question who it is that makes decisions and how they are made, rather than the content of the decisions themselves. This point was made poetically when, after the loss of the New York camp involving horrific police brutality, Occupiers surrounded police and yelled, "What is your one demand?!" At issue was constituting a new sociality, new subjects, and, in the face of the undeniable antagonism of the hegemonic Other, constituting power. If, under antagonistic conditions, actors were seeking to constitute new possibilities, acting as new subjects that demonstrated possibilities of agency and power in the face of state attempts at incapacitation, then petitioning existent powers in familiar terms for actionable items would have indicated the *end* of the very process participants were attempting to foster. What, then, did they do instead?

While the global wave of contention in 2011 applied the idea of occupation at an unprecedented scale, performing alternative possibilities by "making space" was certainly not a new idea. Latin American movements, such as those in the wake of the 2002 economic collapse in Argentina, had already sought to act by creating a space apart, rather than finding one within, as Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini explain:

From the indigenous movements reclaiming territories in Latin America to the neighborhood movements from big cities such as Buenos Aires and Caracas, to new movements in

Europe and the United States taking over the plazas and founding social centers, concrete territory plays a central role in the construction of new social relationships. Even if the examples are very different from one to the other, they can be traced back to a common origin and a common sensibility. (99-100)

Space, as any Occupier could have explained, was not just a metaphor; the magic formula of 2011 relied on very literally “making space” in the squares and centers of cities and towns. But it was what happened in these spaces—the practices and discourses, subjectivities and affects—that gave them such transformative power for participants. It is what people do, how people dwell and bustle in autonomous spaces (as with any spaces) that gives them meaning. As the Tahrir statement movingly says,

In our own occupations of Tahrir, we encountered people entering the Square every day in tears because it was the first time they had walked through those streets and spaces without being harassed by police; it is not just the ideas that are important, these spaces are fundamental to the possibility of a new world. These are public spaces. Spaces for gathering, leisure, meeting, and interacting—these spaces should be the reason we live in cities. Where the state and the interests of owners have made them inaccessible, exclusive or dangerous, it is up to us to make sure that they are safe, inclusive and just. We have and must continue to open them to anyone that wants to build a better world, particularly for the marginalized, excluded and for those groups who have suffered the worst. (“Solidarity Statement”)

As a participant observer in Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Seattle, I was left breathless time and again by the commitment participants showed for these spaces. One day early on in the Occupy Seattle camp, I met a white older middle-aged man named Joe. Our first conversation began with an intimacy impossible between strangers, touching on shared wonder and bewilderment at what we’d found ourselves in the middle of, and offering up without needing to be asked our motives for showing up. Joe, as it turned out, had recently retired after a comfortably middle-class career; he owned his home and had sent his kids to college. When 2008 hit, he quite literally lost it all and was now—without any professed or apparent chemical dependency or psychological problems—living out of local shelters and soup kitchens. As severe as I’d known the effects of the crash to be, I wouldn’t have suspected that situations as stark and sudden as Joe’s were possible. Awkwardly, I told Joe I was sorry to hear what had happened to him. Joe’s response caught me surprised. “It’s okay. No, I mean, I’m happy. I actually prefer it. Otherwise I never would have thought to leave my house and come down here; I wouldn’t have met everybody. It was worth losing everything to be part of this” (“Joe”).

What was it about this space that inspired such unfathomable commitment? At the first glance upon entering the camps, the character of the space was visibly manifest as an intensive and diffuse *participation*; a chaotic rhizomic activity that had no center. Suddenly, physical space facilitated a space of relations where each one of our hidden passions and talents could find expression and alliances, where we could start with who we wanted to be rather than whatever was on offer on the job listing. This wondrous chaos is precisely what proved endlessly frustrating to officials seeking to talk to “the leaders,” or media outlets trying to figure out how to narrate what participants themselves could not. Nathan Schneider describes New York’s Occupy Wall Street in unforgettable terms:

You couldn't keep track of it all, or even start. There was always something new: a water-saving dishwashing system at the kitchen, a bicycle-powered generator, another celebrity visitor, another person shouting nonsense, a dozen new websites, a dozen new posters. The skill and imagination on display—constantly, unpredictably—mounted ever more as an indictment of the alienated world outside that before had kept us from sharing what we could do with one another, that had tricked us into selling our time and talents for money. There was so much. There was too much. There was always, also, a crisis. (80)

Suddenly, the dual nature of work under capitalism was stunningly obvious. Work for all of us, to whatever degree, of course entails selling our time and talents for others' gain, making products and services often useless, or worse, in ways frequently damaging to our bodies, our lives, and our dignities. And yet work is also, persistently, contradictorily meaningful as we find each other in moments of collaboration and sometimes, if accidentally, fulfill the needs and desires of others. Occupy in its better moments was in some amazing sense an opportunity for absolute distinction between the two, the purest space for collaboration and fulfillment without a hint of exploitation. Use value suddenly, absurdly, existed absolutely apart from exchange value. And always, participants only worked on what they *wanted* to work on, although hardly under conditions of their own choosing (hence the "crises" of which Schneider speaks). The chance for non-alienated, meaningful activity—"doing something" in every sense—was, by many accounts, Occupy's most powerful affordance.

The kaleidoscopic activity characteristic of this space was only possible because of a less immediately evident characteristic that allowed these spaces of possibility: the astounding extent to which they were able to withstand and nurture what John Trimbur terms *dissensus*. Particularly in the pseudo-public spaces of most American cities, whose anti-rhetorical nature has been so acutely analyzed by David Fleming, the only apparently possible shared practice is that of shuttling between sites of anonymous individual consumptions. Debate occurs third hand and is generally limited to expressing solidarity with or disavowal from various signifiers of the culture wars. In the emergence of the autonomous spaces of 2011, we learned that such debate is hardly adequate to encompass the political convictions of most members of these yet-to-be-constituted publics; the reintroduction of a material public sphere of tension was transformative for anyone who fell into it. Bound in a sort of situated love by shared rage and histories of frustration, it was this tension in discovery that drove so many of us to stay; we changed through these incessant conversations across difference and learned how thoroughly each of us is a product of our relations. The power of Occupy—what evoked that passionate commitment in action admired even by those who decried their democratic commitments as ineffectual—was precisely the persisting of bodies in space, bodies which, in better moments, came together both in shared hopes and transgression, in clashes of difference and bewilderment. Always before, a dismissive shake of the head, a shared understanding that the Other was beyond the pale, would have sufficed. Now, the persistent presence of the Other, in a way from which one could not turn away, finally—finally! —forced each of us to take responsibility for our ideas and to listen.

While acrimonious disagreement is certainly not novel to American political space, it was the sustained engagement and the co-presence of differences that allowed a painful process of dissensual

development. Schneider observed that this disagreement was “participatory as opposed to partisan” (72); we shared a sort of panic as our categories quickly proved insufficient, but the presence of the Other outlasted the panic. Instead of quickly managing to find those one mostly agrees with, to recreate the filter bubble, the interactions we realized we were all starving for were precisely those across such differences, even across the greatest differences. Who does not at some point rehearse to oneself, with accumulating frustration, a confrontation with a bigoted uncle or a snobbish co-worker? And yet, when we find each other at the family reunion, or the office, we politely stick to talking about marriages or pencil sharpeners. What power there is, Occupy discovered, lies in *not* changing the subject, in searching out the tools to have those impossible conversations, in a context where your own freedom rests on the Other’s presence (since, if our numbers were any smaller, we’d never have been able to get away with it.) For that reason alone, these spaces of transgression fostered a respect for the autonomy of the Other, for their embodied sociality which suddenly seemed so intertwined with our own present and future. Those differences became worth having out, not fleeing from in the multitudes of dismissals, avoidance, and excuse that make up every other moment of our anti-public lives. Occupy was, more than anything else, an uptake of this challenge, of the impossibility of living and deciding together how to live, in America, or in whatever country on Earth.

The conversations found themselves often opening up during the General Assemblies, where hundreds or sometimes thousands would attempt—in an act of absurd but admirable faith—to come to agreement on the multitude of decisions we faced collectively as a movement. Should we approve of the proposal brought by Native Americans to change our name from Occupy to Decolonize in recognition of the genocidal history of the land on which we stand, at the risk of illegibility to wider audiences? Do we consent on a nonviolence agreement before we have any shared notion of the term’s meaning? If the camp is supposed to be a place for everyone, when does behavior merit exclusion? Though painful and ultimately impossible to work out or resolve, conversations on such topics made us think through our collective values and reflect as we never had on our individual ones. Such conversations frequently spilled over into small groups hours after the General Assembly had ended. Habermasian categories of deliberation, free of the “distortions” of emotion and personalism, were far from hand; it was indeed the intensity of affect, a charge through bodies in the circulation of ideas, that proved so compelling. One Seattle interviewee described, in halting phrases revealing the difficulty of narrating such affective deliberation, the subjective transformations people underwent in conversations around policing:

[I]t was really personal, too, and people were crying, talking about their personal accounts. I think that, I have to believe that some of these people that were against, for example were pro-cop or whatnot, had probably not even like thought about police terrorizing immigrant communities, or if they had, they don’t think about it, because it’s not part of their life. And that these sort of personalized experiences, but also the political theory behind it too, for some people, that I don’t think, can’t discount the raw emotional element of it. (“Cindy”)

What those who insisted that Occupy articulate a set of demands to power missed is that such interactions were themselves the stakes for participants; this is why we stood before pepper spray and batons, why we went without sleep and caught cold in our wet socks day after day, why we rushed back to the square after teaching our classes or tending to our ailing parents or being released from

jail. This is what all of us lost, even those who never even knew what they missed.

FOSTERING LITERACIES OF AUTONOMY AND DISSENSUS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

The question these movements pose for us as compositionists is, in George and Mathieu's words, "if we choose to teach public writing—as many of us do—just what public writing do we teach? Do we teach the rhetoric of electoral politics, the language of corporate structures, the appeal of non-profits? What about the rhetoric that students are warned against—the bare outrage of radical politics? What is the rhetoric our students need for this time, in this place?" (247). The creation of such autonomous spaces, in our classrooms as in our cities, relies primarily on a willingness and capacity to stand up to conflict at its boundaries, a preparing in enacting the "bare outrage" appropriate to contemporary antagonistic conditions. Welch suggests that precisely by studying the rhetoricity of antagonism, students without easy access to official channels of deliberation might become more familiar with the available means of enacting change, from those places where they already find themselves:

[W]e can bring into view, and into our teaching, the wider field of rhetorical practice and the history of the rhetorical means that have won social change. Through that history we and our students can consider, against the seemingly common-sensical claim that audience unruliness always closes communication channels, those instances where it has taken unruliness to create the conditions . . . within which communication and respect can actually flourish. ("Informed" 46)

Welch elsewhere mirrors Dean's concern, stated above, about the Right's monopoly of disagreeability: "Particularly in a moment when far-right groups have seized upon means to project loudly their arguments, and when the hopes of many for basic reforms . . . are thwarted, we might investigate . . . how effective movements for economic and social justice have played *against* as much as *with* reigning ideas of decorum and civility" ("We're Here" 237). Often, as Welch says, such means of appeal are met with recriminations for the exercise of a universalist, decontextualized *civility*, a topic long central to the dominant Hellenic approach in rhetoric. Drawing on political philosopher James Schmidt, Welch reveals the field-dependent nature of this criticism, which relies both on the positionality of the speaker and the admissibility of the topic: "Although civility can smooth dialogue about contentious issues between people already meeting on a plane of equality and respect," for those excluded from this plane, civility instead represents a "history of enabling 'timid acquiescence' to inequality to masquerade as 'reasonable compromises in the name of the public good'" ("Informed" 36). For those otherwise excluded from deliberation, "civility functions to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic in access to decision-making voice" (36).

As compositionists, we must scaffold space for practice in facing up to antagonism, a safe space for standing up to unsafety, if we are to prepare students to engage the world as it is, and not merely as we wish it was. The question remains: What would a classroom look like in which students learn to make and hold space in the face of antagonism? However much the field acknowledges the importance of learner-centered participation, how might antagonism and dissensus be drawn on as a means to bring this about? George and Mathieu suggest that by studying antagonistic historical

texts, students can gain a vivid, practiced awareness of how rhetorical approaches “are not universal rules of good writing but rules for writing that operates within certain accepted rhetorical situations. When one seeks to create change, or make something different happen in discourse, the rules might seem to fly out the window” (252). Welch notes that “rhetorical preparation” for conflict “is necessary for groups without official credentials and backing to make arguments that can ‘open up’...as a matter of concern” (“Informed” 35-36) the discussion of topics previously excluded from polite debate. Analytical work such as George and Mathieu suggest would seem indispensable for such preparation.

If students are not only to be analytically prepared for antagonistic rhetoric, but even *practiced* in it, how might the Composition classroom play a role? One model of interest to instructors seeking to scaffold antagonism might be found in Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed.” In Boal’s model, antagonistic situations are elicited from the audience before the beginning of the play, often from dismaying situations already encountered that the audience members felt powerless to address. The actors then enact in their respective roles the situation, until someone—anyone—in the audience has the courage (it takes some practice) to yell out, “Stop!” The audience applauds the intervener, who steps into the play and takes the place of an actor acting in the disprivileged role. The situation is replayed from before the intervention, and the audience member acts out their notion which might lead to a more equitable resolution of the conflict, with the more practiced actors improvising their likely responses. The facilitator waits until the scene plays out or is stopped again and then facilitates a discussion among the intervening audience-actor and the audience members, allowing the audience to interrogate the actors for their motives. The scene is replayed, with either the same intervener or others, until the audience is satisfied with the resolution. In the composition classroom, the result might not be unlike Welch’s “soapboxing” exercise (*Living Room*), with the additional pausing to explore just those moments most fearful in practice and fertile in rhetorical significance.

The antagonisms that surface through these performances, like the problems of the disprivileged, generally run underground like a dark stream, unacknowledged but with a very real presence. The notion behind Boal’s and the Occupiers’ approaches is that, by facilitating an exceptional space of acknowledgement and practice in theater, in protest, or in our writing assignments and discussions, subjects are transformed by interrupting, precisely in the way so many of us wish we could in daily life, and by working through uncomfortable antagonistic scenarios in a more or less scaffolded manner. By acting as skilled facilitators of antagonism, teachers can work to deconstruct the inequalities reproduced in performance, making space to build literacies of autonomy and dissensus, if we are willing to risk allowing classrooms to be such a space. Such literacies of acknowledging and artfully engaging antagonism have been too long absent from Composition, in the classroom, in our acknowledgement of labor practices, and in our institutional locations.

NOTES

¹Occupy interviewees are identified by pseudonyms. The interviews were anonymized following my IRB protocol. Occupy Seattle was being investigated by the FBI when I conducted my interviews and interviewees were anonymized for their protection.

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