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Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance

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Karen Kopelson

## **Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, The Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered As a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance**

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In today's classroom and larger cultural climate, overtly politicized "critical" composition pedagogies may only exacerbate student resistance to issues and identities of difference, especially if the teacher is marked or read as different her/himself. I therefore suggest that the marginalized teacher-subject look to contemporary theoretical notions of the "radical resignification" of power as well as to the neglected rhetorical concept of *métis*, or "cunning," to engage difference more efficaciously, if more sneakily. Specifically, I argue that one possible praxis for better negotiating student resistance is the *performance* of the very neutrality that students expect of teachers.

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*Performative pedagogy's only life . . . is in relation to its context and moment. . . . Performative pedagogy makes claims not to Truth and validity, but to viability and efficacy in relation to a particular audience and intention within a particular situation. It strives not for Truth, but political social response-ability, credibility, and usefulness-in-context, and in relation to its particular "audience" of students.*

—Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address*

*... I exert conscious control in my classroom in ways I didn't used to . . . I'm a better teacher because I am no longer the evangelist of old. I'm savvier, sneakier, more capable of the usefully ignoble . . .*

—Michèle Aina Barale, “The Romance of Class and Queers”

*At our current stage of simulation, we need simulators, not philosopher-kings—we need artisans, [forgers], like Hephaestus. This forging, at once artifice and artisan, is the work of mētis [cunning] . . . And although Plato excludes artisans from crafting the Republic, the proper civic body, the myths surrounding the origin of politics and community suggest that artisans, not philosopher-kings, were responsible, as in the story of Prometheus stealing the fire.*

Michelle Ballif, *Seduction, Sophistry, and the Woman with the Rhetorical Figure*

**D**iscussions about student resistance to writing instruction have helped to define and shape composition’s disciplinary conversation since its inception. In fact, in a recent *JAC* article, Richard Boyd traces our “preoccupation” with student resistance—its “omnipresence” and “incessant return” as narrative and theme—not only through three decades of contemporary disciplinary discussions but back to A.S. Hill’s *Our English* of 1889, wherein Hill mournfully noted students’ recurrent and vociferous complaints of “‘repression’ in the writing classroom” (Hill qtd. in Boyd 589). Jumping ahead a century or so and remembering 1970s idealism about writing “without teachers” in communal and “peaceable” classrooms, Boyd reminds us that “[t]his was not the way things were supposed to be” (590). Yet, to teach composition is to encounter resistance on multiple levels, arising in response to a multiplicity of variables.

On what is perhaps the most basic of these levels, the university’s “introductory” writing class is, of course, more realistically experienced by many students as the long awaited *exit from writing* class. Many of our students slump into our classrooms, enthusiastic only that this is the last English course they’ll ever have to take and with a concomitant resentment that they have to take it at all. However, there are obviously more complex reasons for student resistance than an impatient disdain for all things “Englishy.” As composition theorizing and teaching have evolved in more cultural-studies-based or “critical” directions, student resistance has evolved from a rudimentary resistance to the writing course per se into resistance to the writing course as “inappropri-

ately” politicized. Indeed, many of our students view the increasing pedagogical focus on “difference” as an intrusion of sorts, resenting and often actively rebelling against what they may experience as the “imposition” of race, class, gender, sexuality, or (more generally) cultural issues on to their “neutral” course of study (Johnson, “Participatory” 411). As Johanna Atwood, Dale Bauer, and Linda Brodkey have all discussed at length, students often come to us having been taught—and believing—not only that neutrality and objectivity are possible but that “objectivity is good and subjectivity is bad” (Brodkey 199). Moreover, they come to us believing that academia is the quintessential realm of objectivity, that anything overtly political or opinionated is “biased,” and that “bias” is most certainly “something to be avoided by authors, teachers, and other authorities” (Atwood 132). “[M]ost traditional views of education,” Atwood summarizes, “code the classroom as an objective, nonhistorical, and apolitical space” (133; see also Bauer; Bauer and Rhoades). This may be especially true of the composition classroom, as composition, perhaps more than any other university course, is expected by students to be without content, to involve little more than impartial instruction in the transferable and neutral skill of writing “correctly.”

But today’s students are ideologically encumbered by much more than expectations of schooling’s general or even composition’s specific neutrality; they are hailed by, and often become both victims and proponents of, a conservative backlash that, in turn, poses critical teachers with distinctive political and pedagogical challenges. Astutely summarizing such developments in his essay, “Endgame Identity,” Grant Farred argues that tangible social gains for “women’s, minority, and gay rights” over the last few decades have led to vigilant counterassaults that have congealed and become most evident in a pervasively nonspecific “anti-P.C. movement”: “There are few easier ways to score political points”—with either the right or the left—Farred notes, “than to disavow or bash” anything that smacks of “P.C.-ness”—*or* of the groups with which this general straw-man concept is associated (feminists, racial minorities, gays and lesbians). The “backlash against marginalized constituencies is so widely sanctioned” today, Farred continues, that feminist, minority, and gay-bashing are not only beyond “censure,” they are simply “fashionable” (631–32). Infiltrating the university (and some would say, stemming from its endeavors), this fashionable hostility often eventuates in what Pamela Caughie describes as a “multicultural classroom situation” in which “reticence, misperception, and distrust” are so prevalent that they may serve to structure the entire pedagogical exchange (136). Resistance, it would seem, is all the rage.

This essay begins from the premise that composition's "critical pedagogies" fail to meet the challenges posed by today's specific formations of student resistance and that they fail particularly, and most ironically, because of their inattention to differences among classroom rhetorical contexts and among teacher subject positions within those contexts. In what follows, I will argue

**For the marginalized teacher . . . the performance of the very neutrality that students expect from their (composition) instructors, and from education more generally, can become a rhetorically savvy, politically responsive and responsible pedagogical tactic that actually enhances students' engagement with difference and that minimizes their resistance to difference in the process.**

that overtly "critical" pedagogical approaches may be especially ineffective, and even counter-productive, for the teacher-subject who is immediately *read* by students as belonging to any of the marginalized constituencies listed above. I will go on to theorize an alternative critical pedagogy for the marginalized teacher-subject—one that is based in a cunning performative reappropriation of traditional academic postures, such as authority, objectivity, and neutrality. For the marginalized teacher, I will argue, the performance of the very neutrality that students

expect from their (composition) instructors, and from education more generally, can become a rhetorically savvy, politically responsive and responsible pedagogical tactic that actually enhances students' engagement with difference and that minimizes their resistance to difference in the process. However, there is much work to do first. Before elaborating the performance of neutrality, *and in order to demonstrate the exigencies that call for it*, I want to provide a more nuanced account of student resistance and/(to) teacher identity than is commonly offered in much of the literature on critical pedagogies and also to acknowledge the ethical conundrums that inevitably arise with any appeal to neutrality.

### **Re-viewing resistance; resisting reductionism**

Boyd, in the previously mentioned article, indicts compositionists for "continu[ing] to construct and essentialize resistant students" as somehow "flawed," while our positions, pedagogies, and progressive politics remain beyond reproach (591). Many others have pointed out that student resistance is simply inevitable, "not something to be overcome" by teachers at all but a dynamic to be embraced as an inherent and even productive component of the pedagogical exchange (see, for example, Bauer and Rhoades 100). To be fair, then, students are not as monolithically conservative nor as hopelessly duped as some of the above characterizations would suggest, and resistance, of course,

is often productive—evidence that something important is going on in the minds of resisters or in the classroom at large. Resistance is often, at the least, understandably *protective*: As anyone who can remember her or his own first uneasy encounters with particularly challenging new theories or theorists can attest, resistance serves to shield us from uncomfortable shifts or all-out upheavals in perception and understanding—shifts in perception which, if honored, force us to inhabit the world in fundamentally new and different ways.

Yet, while resistance may at times be understandably protective, or little more than an inevitable and ultimately productive first step along the way to new knowledge or even to new ways of living, and while monolithic constructions of our students as hopelessly “flawed” are both inaccurate and unfair, there remains a form of student resistance that precludes rather than eventually proliferates an engagement with difference. As Brodkey has written, some students may “refuse outright even to listen to unfamiliar voices,” may refuse so ardently, in fact, that their resistance proves nearly beyond the hope of pedagogical intervention (194). Moreover, it also clearly remains the case that many if not most students come to the university in order to gain access to and eventual enfranchisement in “the establishment,” not to critique and reject its privileges (Atwood 133; see also Jones; Smith). Seeking entry into extant systems of domination and unwilling or (even temporarily) unable to “submit to [a] total critique of their prior beliefs,” what students often actively challenge and vigorously resist, then, are “not the dominant discourses” we would like them to contest but, instead, their composition instructor (Jones 86).

These dynamics are by now well-known, much-experienced, and, to a certain extent, perceptively theorized by compositionists. But resistance becomes a bit more complicated and remains undertheorized when the composition instructor is automatically read as somehow *different* her or himself. In her 1996 essay, “Coming Out in the Classroom,” Mary Elliot astutely reminds us that “some of our bodies can not disembody identity” (700), and anticipated political goals are scripted onto some of our body-texts from day one, before we can even hand students the syllabus or open our mouths. Many teachers have begun to describe this discomfiting phenomenon of late. Celeste Condit, for example, has written of her experiences teaching at a Southern university that merely to walk into a classroom “in pants and short hair” is to be “branded . . . a liberal, a feminist, a dyke” and, as such, rejected (160–61). Numerous women of color have written at length about an even more specific form of rejection—the rejection of their very authority to teach—when occupying the traditionally white and male place at the front of the classroom as

female and “brown drenched signifier[s] of difference” (Johnson, “Disinfecting” 132; see also Hoodfar; Karamcheti; Logan; Shankar). In short, as Indira Karamcheti summarizes in her essay, “Caliban in the Classroom,” “academics who are blessed . . . with the ‘surplus visibility’ . . . of race or ethnicity”—and to that I would add, of perceived sexuality or even female gender identity—are always at some level understood to “demonstrate and act out difference, often

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with an imperfectly concealed political agenda.” We are read/cast, in other words, as teaching “the personal but usually unspoken story of ourselves in the world” (138).

The differences that mark us will, in turn, demarcate and delimit any critical pedagogy’s context and effects, no matter how conscientiously we “teach for diversity” (Caughie 133). In fact, I would argue

that in today’s suspicious and resistant classrooms, it is often this very conscientiousness, the concerted effort with which we do “teach for diversity,” that itself delimits pedagogical effects and effectiveness, especially if we are marked or read as “different” in such a way that students may ascribe political agendas to us the minute we walk into the classroom. Many compositionists have argued, and will continue to argue, that “in order to be ethical instructors” we must foreground our political commitments—that “teaching rhetoric,” in particular, “requires [the] ‘modeling’ [of] political advocacy” (Fitts and France 14). Brodkey, for instance, who has written extensively on the subjects of difference and composition *and* who has suggested that we make “difference” the very *subject* of composition (56), has stated unequivocally that “pedagogy intentionally remote from political activism” remains complicit with hegemonic discourses (125, 180). But such de-contextualized, rather shockingly a-rhetorical calls for instructors to foreground their politics deny the specificity of both teacher identity and of student “audience.” In fact, imperatives to figure oneself as an “out” activist in the classroom seem to come from a place of rather naïve safety and privilege—the privilege of being read as of the majority/a normative subject one’s whole life—and thus may not be particularly relevant or helpful to the most marginalized of teacher-subjects. As Homa Hoodfar, a sociology and anthropology teacher who is Muslim, Iranian, and an immigrant to the U.S. writes, “[t]urning to critical or even feminist pedagogy literature offers little guidance for me. Clearly visible minority teachers are faced with

questions and dilemmas which are fundamentally different” from those faced by teachers who are not so readily marked (225). Ironically then, composition’s decade-long focus on difference may have largely overlooked the impact of *teacher* difference, may have overlooked the complexity of the dynamic in which advocating a certain intellectual or political position becomes much more highly charged and fraught with risk when the teacher-advocate is read as occupying a corresponding identity position.

I overstate the case somewhat to make a point, for, certainly, counter-discourses have been developing alongside and within the literature on critical pedagogies, as many minority *and* majority teachers have started to realize that the hostility, reticence, and distrust described by Caughie can become counterproductive to student learning. These alternative voices have begun to suggest that if students are indeed shutting down in the face of teaching practices perceived as “heavy handed” and “coercive,” we may need to develop a different pedagogical focus than today’s often explicit and emphatic focus on difference; we may need to “look at strategies that preclude long term antagonism” but that still allow and encourage students to engage critically with sociopolitical issues (La Duc 161). Before proceeding any further, however, it is crucial to draw a distinction here between these types of claims and the claims of, say, Maxine Hairston who has infamously mandated that we “stay within our area of professional expertise” and “teach writing for its own sake” (186, 179). The theorists who frame my arguments and, indeed, my arguments themselves by no means advocate, as did Hairston, (the impossible task of) abandoning “politics” to privilege “craft”; nor do they hold that the introductory writing course be *for* nothing and *about* nothing “other than writing itself” (179). Quite the contrary, what I suggest is that if, *or because*, we have political commitments to “teach for diversity,” we need to develop and enact innovative pedagogies that will better negotiate students’ resistance, precisely so they may *more productively engage with difference*. In sum, composition instructors need to invent and adjust our praxes—as all rhetors do—based on the audience we face *and* based on how we are read by that audience. Faced with an audience of resistant students, the determinedly progressive pedagogue—and/or the pedagogue read/cast as such because of identity markers that link her to progressive politics—may simply need to be sneakier. The performance of neutrality may allow such teachers to work with and, in many cases, work against their own identity markers and, in that process, to work with and against student antagonism to identities and issues of difference more generally.



### **Stealing the fire; co-opting the cornerstone; rehabing neutrality**

It has been widely accepted in composition studies for at least a decade that, of course, no rhetoric or corresponding pedagogy can ever be neutral, apolitical, nonideological, or disinterested and that rhetorics/pedagogies that promote themselves as such generally disguise their own authority in order to (quite politically) serve reigning ideologies (see, for example, Berlin; Clifford). Neutrality, as Patricia Sullivan and James Porter summarize in *Opening Spaces*, is “quite a thorny concept,” a concept long used and abused to promote the mythical and impossible absence or “innocence of political and ethical involvement” in teaching, research, and a number of other always-interested social-discursive practices (47). In short, “neutrality” has been the very “cornerstone” of an elitist, exclusionary, masculinist “Western intellectual tradition, established by [white, heterosexual] men to safeguard their privilege” (Ng 47) and to safeguard the privilege and univocal claims to Truth of the dominating theories and practices they advance.

That it carries with it such an undeniable history of oppression and exclusion makes advocating for any form of pedagogical neutrality quite a “thorny” task indeed. Feminists and other critical-researchers/theorists have labored for years to “bring that authority out of the shadows of neutrality,” so that we might interrogate and resist the privilege and power neutrality aims to conceal (Sullivan and Porter 74). My discussion by no means attempts to dismiss or undo this crucial theoretical and political work; in fact, it could not proceed without its insights. Yet it *does* attempt to bring *neutrality* out of the shadows of an always *malevolent authority*—to argue for a *specific* and *contextualized* implementation of neutrality that itself arises out of carefully considered and progressive political/ethical concerns, that arises to engage rather than obscure in order to dominate what is “other” (Sullivan and Porter 108–10).

Moreover, and lastly, this pedagogical implementation of neutrality does *not* proceed from the individualist, liberal-democratic desire to grant commensurate liberties to any and all viewpoints (for example, Fishman and McCarthy 347). As Virginia Anderson has noted, not only does the position of neutrality often work to conceal and safeguard privilege, it may also suggest to students “that all views are equal” (198), thus potentially intensifying their already pronounced propensity for the beloved “everybody has a right to their own opinion” refrain—a refrain which, despite its professed openness and tolerance,

clearly forecloses interaction among viewpoints and serves as an easy-out dismissal for views too troubling or *intolerable* to engage at all. Yet, as the pedagogical examples offered below will demonstrate, the performance of neutrality I am advocating here is *not* akin to silence. It is not a complacent refusal to interrupt or interfere with the expression of any and all student views; it is not the liberal-humanist acceptance of all views as equally valid. The performance of neutrality I am advocating is a deliberate, reflective, self-conscious masquerade that serves an overarching and more insurgent political agenda than does humanist individualism. It is never a stance that believes in or celebrates its own legitimacy but, rather, feigns itself, *perverts* itself, in the service of other—disturbing and disruptive—goals.

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One such goal is the *delegitimation*, the destabilization, of students' identity-based presumptions. Karamcheti, for example, pedagogically enacts what she calls a self-consciously "Brechtian performance" of race and ethnicity, a classroom performance "which alienates the viewer from the spectacle, discomforts rather than fulfills audience expectations" (145). Because Karamcheti believes that teachers marked by race, ethnicity, and other visible signs of "difference" can never be read as "objective, impartial purveyors of truth" and are thus strangely alienated from the very "attributes traditionally associated with the performance of teaching" (138–39), she suggests that the minority teacher "can cast himself or herself as the traditional authoritarian personality, the hard-driving, brilliant, no-nonsense professional" (143). Through this performance, Karamcheti claims, the minority teacher "seiz[es] control of the machinery of representation" and uses that machinery to play subversive "visual and epistemological games": Adopting "the master's" manner, inhabiting the master's language and voice, the minority teacher, in what Karamcheti describes as academic and "racial drag," confuses and exceeds the overriding and marginalizing "evidence of race or ethnicity" to lay claim to a subject position considered out of bounds for women of color: She "insists on the authenticity of [her academic] guild-membership" (143, 145).

While Audre Lorde's famous title phrase, "the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house," provides an obvious and highly relevant cri-

tique here, for Karamcheti the embrace of the objective, impartial role is a determined refusal to become a token or representative body *for the master*. It is a means of resisting what she derides as “the modern-day skin trade, the postmodern trading in the flesh” that would make of minority subjects literal *bodies* of knowledge, “travelling icons of culture” who are then seen and used as “flesh and blood information retrieval systems” (138, 145–46). Moreover, the ability to seize an authoritative, impartial role is not for Karamcheti an assimilatory move but is a co-opting move. It is a move that, in her view, reveals that marginality itself “is not an inborn, natural category” but something constructed and “something learned” (144).

Thus, in a manner consistent with contemporary theoretical notions of the “radical resignification” of power, Karamcheti’s mimetic tactics here are more than mere imitations or extensions of hegemonic authority (Butler, “Changing” 741). Turning to Judith Butler’s recent work on the legacy of *Antigone* may help to clarify this point. As Butler explains, many critical readings of Antigone’s role within the play persist in conceiving of her as the embodiment of resistance to the state, a figure simply and diametrically opposed to Creon’s representativeness *of* the state (740–41). Yet, Butler argues that the process of *critical* mimesis is a central and overlooked element of Antigone’s political/rhetorical strategy, that “hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalously impure” (*Antigone’s* 5): In her resistance to the state, Butler claims, Antigone co-opts and exploits *Creon’s* language, “the very language of the state against which she rebels” and “the language of entitlement” from which she is purportedly excluded, so that she may “produce a new public sphere for a woman’s voice” (*Antigone’s* 5, 82; “Changing” 740–41). She is perfectly willing to “steal the fire,” as Michelle Ballif might put it. Yes, Butler admits, “the father’s words are surely upon Antigone; they are, as it were, the medium in which she acts.” But, Antigone “transmits those words in aberrant form, . . . betraying them by sending them in directions they were never intended to travel” (*Antigone’s* 58). Though inevitably “mired in” established power and authority, Antigone’s mimesis is not a simple mirroring of that power but a “deterritorializing” twist of power that reiterates and restages it “in new and productive ways” (“Changing” 740–41). In short, neither Antigone, nor Butler, nor Karamcheti, for that matter, “engage the fantasy of transcending power altogether”; they work instead from the Foucauldian understanding that resistance does not stand in nor arise from “a position of exteriority in relation to power,” but, rather, “can only exist in the strategic form of power relations”

(Foucault 95–96). They work from the understanding that the extension of power is rarely a linear or predictable process but one with “unanticipated effects” in and for “an unknown future” (Butler, “Changing” 740–41).

Of course, as Ellsworth notes in *Teaching Positions*, “[t]he teacher’s performance is never in full possession of itself” (164), and thus its reception and interpretation by the audience of students become unanticipated effects in and of themselves. Karamcheti yields to this insight, concluding her essay by noting both the improbability and ultimate undesirability of ever fully “silenc[ing]” (or rendering invisible) race/ethnicity, which she describes as “irrepressible” components of one’s personal performance that inevitably leak into one’s teaching (145). She also quite emphatically states that the performance of objective impartiality is just one of the “various performative roles available to the minority teacher” (her essay enumerates several others), and that she is by no means “suggesting that minority teachers have their mouths washed out with soap” (144). Yet, despite her careful caveats, Karamcheti is not alone in advancing the apparently precarious argument that certain teachers might benefit both themselves and their students by portraying authoritative objectivity in the classroom. Feminist philosopher Kathryn Pauly Morgan, for example, encourages feminist educators to engage in “radical egalitarian nurturance,” while also laying claim to the “rationality” traditionally associated with white men (126). Craig Heller, who defines himself as a “male feminist teacher,” writes that while he refuses for *himself* “those strategies that have typically been the reserve of male authority figures,” the implementation of these same strategies “can be . . . beneficial for a female teacher . . . especially if their use can challenge oppressive stereotypes” (232). And Susan Talburt, like Butler, suggests repeatedly in her ethnography of lesbian academics, *Subject to Identity*, that “citations of objective/authoritative stances” can refigure existing norms in powerful if subtle ways (133): “To shift positions,” Talburt writes, “to undo location” in ways that contradict the “a priori” positions we are assigned or, perhaps more to the point, relegated to “may perform a rescripting of sedimented meanings of race, gender, and sexuality” (97). This (shape)shift-ing, in other words, may, like Antigone’s impure speech acts, “[draw] into crisis the representative function itself” and thus point us toward “that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed” (Butler, *Antigone’s* 2, 22). But a pedagogical performance of neutrality or objectivity may have benefits to students that exceed even the important benefit of disrupting stereotypic identity-based

assumptions. The masquerade of neutrality actually may help open our students to more far-reaching explorations of difference.

### **So close, and yet, so far: distance-teaching for (a) difference**

*“Julie sought to locate herself nowhere . . .”*  
—Susan Talburt, *Subject to Identity*

Cheryl Johnson, Shirley Wilson Logan, and Hoodfar have all described pedagogical situations in which student engagement with issues of difference decreases dramatically when the teacher is perceived as somehow too close to the subject matter at hand. Specifically, both Logan and Johnson warn that, in a mostly white classroom, the mere presence of a woman of color “at the front of the room” often “is read as a signal that now oral and written expressions of ideas may need to be suppressed lest they offend the person who will evaluate them” (Logan 50). Johnson, for example, finds that, having noted her difference *and* her position of authority, white students invariably “struggle with the possibility of insulting [her]” (and thus potentially receiving a lower grade) when issues of racial or gender difference arise. As a result, they produce “language which is so neutral, so bland, that it disinfects the very subjects under discussion” (“Disinfecting” 132). Logan similarly describes her students’ explorations of racial issues as “stifled prose that sticks to stock responses,” and also hypothesizes that her students play it/write it safe in order to be “non-threatening” to her (50). And Hoodfar, noting these same phenomena, so urgently “wonder[s] whether there would be greater engagement with the themes of imperialism, alternative feminisms, and other critical issues if [she] did not embody them,” that she actually considers having white colleagues either intervene in or take over altogether her mostly white classes (224).

Clearly, and as both Karamcheti and Elliot have pointed out, certain markers of difference are “irrepressible,” and thus, perhaps, certain of these student “stock responses” in the face of teacher difference are nearly and unfortunately unavoidable. The performance of neutrality, or of greater teacher distance, however, may help to increase students’ critical involvement with difficult issues by decreasing their preoccupation with the teacher’s identity position. This, in fact, is the very conclusion Hoodfar comes to: Unwilling to simply abandon her courses after all, Hoodfar chose instead to experiment with a variety of pedagogical strategies along a spectrum of what we might call student- to teacher-centered—and with intriguing results. Ironically, Hoodfar’s teaching

evaluations revealed to her that the more “dialogic” and student-centered her pedagogy, the more students focused on *her pedagogical performance*, specifically, and, predictably, the more they questioned her authority and knowledge: “In making room for dialogue,” Hoodfar explains, “I am not taken as a liberal teacher experimenting with . . . different pedagogy, but as someone lacking experience in controlling a class, or worse yet as someone too lazy to deliver more conventional lectures.” Obviously and destructively framed by racialized and gendered stereotypes, Hoodfar’s “progressive” pedagogy, then, was viewed by her students not as a welcome departure from the monotony of lecture, as we might generally expect, but only as her “not being confident as a teacher, or as compensation for [her] lack of knowledge” (221, 224).

However, and more importantly for this segment of the discussion, deviations from a teacher-centered pedagogy resulted for Hoodfar not only in student combativeness and stereotyping but in an over-determined focus on her own teaching style that she felt precluded critical engagement with the actual issues raised by the course. Hoodfar thus concludes that she can get the focus off herself and mobilize more rigorous critical thinking when distanced both from students themselves and from the subject matter, when performing the more disinterested, academic, authoritative role. Again, though, this does not mean that she abdicates or silences her pedagogical commitment to “incorporate minorities’ life experiences and world views—including [her] own—into [her] lectures.” Quite the contrary, Hoodfar writes that by “monopolizing the conventional language and authority of a teacher I implicitly make it difficult for students to negate these experiences,” and, rather than asking questions about her ability and authority to teach, students instead begin to “ask questions to clarify the issues involved” (224).

In the collection *Teaching What You’re Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education* (Mayberry), literature professor Nancy Peterson makes an equally convincing case for teaching from a distance when she chronicles her experiences teaching Adrienne Rich’s lesbian feminist poetry to students in undergraduate survey courses in American Literature—students who, by Peterson’s account, had a “great deal of difficulty [even] saying the word lesbian.” But her *students’* relationship to lesbianism was not Peterson’s only concern, as she

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writes that she used to “dwell solely on [her own] negative qualifications” to teach Rich’s texts in the first place, wondering, for example, how her own heterosexuality “inevitably distorted Rich’s ideas and words.” Soon, however, what Peterson calls “a fortuitous accident” changed her perceptions of her abilities to do Rich’s work justice: Peterson taught Rich while she herself was in the last trimester of pregnancy and marveled that, for the first time, students praised Rich in course evaluations as one of their favorite and most important poets on the syllabus. And, Peterson reveals, most all of them, this time, could at least write—if not speak—the “L word” by semester’s end. Told with good humor, Peterson’s anecdote nonetheless conveys a serious point of which she is well aware: *for students*, their teacher’s pregnancy signified definitively (if illogically) that she was not a lesbian and that she was therefore including and asking students to study Rich’s work for disinterested, academic—rather than personalized and politicized—reasons. Of course, Peterson was quite politically invested in her teaching of and students’ engagement with Rich—so much so that she wondered still and again whether embodying such visible markers of heterosexuality “inevitably neutralized” Rich for her students (32). I would argue, however, that, as in Hoodfar’s example, it was precisely *because* Peterson somehow managed to neutralize Rich through her own distance that students were finally able to engage with her texts at all.

Drawing on the “startling and even disturbing claim” generally traced through Shoshana Felman and, later, Eve Sedgwick, to Jacques Lacan that “ignorance” is a deliberate and active condition “rather than a mere absence or a passive state,”<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Martindale suggests that overtly antihomophobic pedagogy and, more generally, the formal institutionalizing of “radical subjects” is likely to prove a futile enterprise (71, 80). Because ignorance is not a “passive lack” but the willful “desire to ignore,” Martindale writes, it is “not only less than amenable to pedagogical replacement” by counter-knowledges but may become even “more insistent” when those counter-knowledges threaten (66, 71). Marshall Alcorn Jr. has similarly claimed that “a psychoanalytic understanding of resistance” necessitates that we “formulate new strategies” for coping with and eventually dismantling it. Like and as the ignor(e)-ance it bolsters and protects, resistance, Alcorn explains, functions as the subject’s defense against what is feared and is thus often only fortified by challenges experienced as somehow too direct (3–4). As Sedgwick has eloquently written in *Epistemology of the Closet*, ignorance is not the “originary dark,” not the “ab-original maw of darkness from which the heroics of human cognition can oc-

asionally wrestle . . . insights [and] progress.” It is instead both “produced by” and correlated with “particular knowledges” and thus functions as and/or *to maintain* another truth within overall “regimes of truth” (8). If we lend credence to these insights from psychoanalytic theory, then teaching as an “out” activist may inspire our students only to more active states of resistance and ignor(e)-ance. Clearly, this was not the way things were supposed to be . . .

### **Taking it to the limit: rhetoric on “the edge of cunning”**

Accordingly, there is a growing contingent of queer teacher-scholars who corroborate the claims made above to suggest that our students make greater strides critically exploring homophobia and heterosexism when we teach from a “less out” position. These teacher/scholars have complicated the often-monolithic rhetoric of acclaim surrounding “gay visibility” in the classroom to extol the potentially greater benefits of teaching from a position of ambiguity. Carol Davis (pseudonym), for example, a participant in Talburt’s aforementioned ethnography, states pointedly, “I want my sexuality to be ambiguous, because I want students not to think the only reason I raise [sexuality issues] is that I’m queer and I’ve got some sort of axe to grind or some political agenda. Let them think perhaps that I’m straight” (*Subject* 96). While critics might see Davis’s performance as a retreat into the closet, its ultimate goal, again, is to *open doors* for students, to prevent them from shutting out critical social issues they would likely script as merely personal. As Talburt writes of her participant, Davis’s pedagogical approach is a “response to [particular] circumstances,” a response arising from the belief that “visibility, or overt personal mediation, is not the only desirable strategy,” from the belief that, at times, “ambiguity” may prove even more effective in “combat[ing] heterosexism and homophobia” (*Subject* 96).

Talburt describes another participant in her study, Olivia Moran (pseudonym), in these terms: she “performs herself as *tabula rasa*”—both with respect to her sexual identity *and* with respect to any and all “professorial intentions” (“On Not” 69). Moran’s primary pedagogical goal, in other words, is to perform, as much as is possible, her own absence—the absence of identity, the absence of *any* preconceived agendas for student learning—and she openly acknowledges the trickery in her approach. Moran admits, for example, that her seemingly “open-ended” questioning style really leads always toward *her* desired conclusions. She finds, however, that her Socratic method succeeds (just as it did in ancient times) precisely because it convinces student inter-



locutors that they *are interlocutors*, that they are central contributors to a genuine dialogue, and that the insights and conclusions they come to through this process are thus actually theirs (*Subject* 125–26).

Moran's example, and the performance of neutrality more generally, is what Kenneth Burke, more than fifty years ago, might have described as rhetoric

**The performance of neutrality . . . is what Kenneth Burke, more than fifty years ago, might have described as rhetoric brought “to the edge of cunning”; rhetoric that feigns one purpose in the pursuit of an eventual and seemingly opposed goal, rhetoric devised for specific ends and willing to proceed by “sly design” in order to achieve them.**

brought “to the edge of cunning”; rhetoric that feigns one purpose in the pursuit of an eventual and seemingly opposed goal, rhetoric devised for specific ends and willing to proceed by “sly design” in order to achieve them (36–37). Interestingly, the concept of “cunning,” or what the Greeks called *mêtis*, has a significant but largely erased history within both classical rhetoric and its surrounding culture (Detienne

and Vernant 1–2)—a history and concomitant erasure that deserves our renewed attention and here a brief digression.

In *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Marcel Detienne and Jean Pierre Vernant attempt to recover for us the central “place held by *mêtis* in Greek civilisation,” marveling throughout their 1978 work (which concluded a ten-year study) at its “all pervasive” influence in various realms of Greek activity, at its undeniable but virtually unremarked upon “presence . . . at the heart of the Greek mental world” (1, 3). According to Detienne and Vernant, the term *mêtis* encompasses all “forms of wiley intelligence, of effective, adaptable cunning,” that work through the implementation of “resourceful ploys . . . and stratagems” (3–4). As a distinctive *technê*,<sup>2</sup> *mêtis* is concerned always with the production and effectiveness of knowledge within “a particular sphere of activity” (Detienne and Vernant 11). The term is also related to *kairos*, but in that it involves “mastery over” it—an ability, that is, not simply to seize the moment but to seize it with forethought, preparedness, and thus with *foresight* as to how events should unfold (16). Those possessed of *mêtis*, therefore, engage in “weighty reflection” about consequences, never attending only to “the immediate present” but “taking the widest point of view” and using the wisdom of experience to consider long-term advantages and disadvantages of any course of action (16–17, 27).<sup>3</sup>

In short, *mêtis* may be understood as “mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, [and] subtlety of mind” with “resourcefulness, vigilance, [and] opportunism” (Detienne and Vernant

3). Fully contextual, *mêtis*, as a way of knowing, understands that “each new trial demands the invention of new ploys” and willingly operates through reversal, deception, and disguise when necessary (3, 21, 44). Because *mêtis* arises out of and works within what Detienne and Vernant describe as a “shimmering” reality, a “divided, shifting world of multiplicity” and “becoming,” it does not concern itself with “true being” or “unchanging essences.” In fact, one possessed of *mêtis* “takes the form” required “to deal with whatever comes up” in “circumstances of conflict” and amidst “the difficulties of practical life with all its risks” (22, 44).

Detienne and Vernant also describe *mêtis* as especially useful “to reverse an unfavourable situation,” or in the face of “forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves without ever being confronted head on” (12, 47). It is thus often associated with the camouflaging or polymorphic capabilities of various animals who blend with and adapt to their surroundings for survival (159–61) and also with gods and even mortal figures in Greek mythology who “master” the natural elements only by working within rather than against them, and/or by possessing the very qualities of the elemental forces themselves. The navigator on a sea voyage, for example, can only succeed through “a many-sided intelligence” that is as changeable as the winds and the seas (224–25). Similarly Hephaestus, divine blacksmith of Athenian legend, “must be even more mobile and polymorphic” than the “shifting, fluid powers such as fire, winds and minerals with which the blacksmith must cope” (272–73). And the bit which Hephaestus and other blacksmiths forge for the horse must be possessed of the same qualities *as* the horse: In Greek mythology the bit was thought effective only because it was “born of the flame,” was “the product of the fire used in metal work,” and was thereby thought to contain the same “strange and secret power,” the same “mettlesome spirit” of the horse itself (194, 281).

As this digression into the forms and properties of *mêtis* should begin to illustrate, this ancient concept may prove an ideal rhetorical framework within which to consider the pedagogical performance of neutrality, both historically and anew. To use the theoretical parlance of today, *mêtis*, like the performance of neutrality, accepts and works within *and because of* its implication in power and precisely by eventually twisting that power against itself (Butler, *Bodies* 241). “The essential features of *mêtis*,” Detienne and Vernant write, are the same qualities “attributed to the curve, to what is pliable and twisted, to what is oblique and ambiguous as opposed to what is straight, direct, rigid and unequivocal. The ultimate expression of these qualities is the circle, the bond

that is perfect because it *completely turns back on itself* (46, my emphasis). The performance of neutrality helps to recover the lost art of *mêtis*, exemplifying as it does pedagogy based in “cunning stratagem,” invented to negotiate the specific trials of student resistance. Like or as a form of *mêtis*, the perfor-

**Like or as a form of *mêtis*, the performance of neutrality is unabashedly opportunistic, using students’ assumptions about education, and any prevailing classroom and political attitudes, as *resources* to achieve desired and opposing ends. Like *mêtis*, the performance of neutrality succeeds by working *with* these powerful forces or encompassing elements; it succeeds by enacting reversals *for* reversals.**

mance of neutrality takes the widest point of view possible, considering the immediate pedagogical moment primarily as it relates to and eventuates in long-term pedagogical goals. Like or as a form of *mêtis*, the performance of neutrality is unabashedly opportunistic, using students’ assumptions about education, and any prevailing classroom and political attitudes, as *resources* to achieve desired and opposing ends. Like *mêtis*, the performance of neu-

trality succeeds by working *with* these powerful forces or encompassing elements; it succeeds by enacting reversals *for* reversals.

That such a powerful rhetorical concept as *mêtis* should be so glaringly absent from composition scholarship is curious indeed,<sup>4</sup> especially when related concepts such as *kairos* and *technê* have been so widely and successfully imported into our theory and pedagogy alike. But, as Detienne and Vernant suggest of ancient and Greek scholarship more generally, *mêtis* is only made “conspicuous by its absence” (3), and thus its omission demands interrogation. Detienne and Vernant themselves offer several astute and far-reaching speculations as to why *mêtis* has been overlooked throughout centuries of scholarly inquiry into ancient culture and thought. They remind us, for example, that in myth *mêtis* was often negatively associated with magic and “spell-binding” (189) and in the practical sphere was associated with hunting, fishing, warfare (44) and thus with the deceit and “‘duplicity’ of the trap” or the disturbing idea of a “lethal nature” disguised by a “reassuring exterior” (27). It was also, as we have seen, widely associated with the polymorphic survival strategies of various animals, and, while animal *mêtis* was not necessarily perceived as a malicious cunning, Detienne and Vernant assert that as the “Christian point of view” gained prominence, “it was inevitable that the gulf separating” humans from animals be emphasized and increased so that human reason might reign supreme (317–18). Returning to the human and expressly rhetorical realms, the dismissal of *mêtis* is certainly tied to the concomitant and more general dismissal of those “scheming,” “beguiling” soph-

ists, quintessential masters of *mêtis* who used it to “make the weaker case the stronger” and commit other egregious acts of “rhetorical illusionism” (Detienne and Vernant 2, 45, 307).

Ultimately, however, Detienne and Vernant postulate that *mêtis* is continually dismissed despite its “its coherence and amazing stability” throughout 1,000 years of Greek history because scholars of Greek thought have been “concerned with emphasizing . . . the distinctive characteristics which mark the originality of Hellenism in comparison with other civilisations: its logic of identity, its metaphysics of being and of the Unchanging” (2, 47). The enduring esteem of these distinctive characteristics they in turn trace to Plato and to his renowned condemnation of any and all intuitive, conjectural, or “oblique procedures” in *Gorgias* (315–16). In short, though Detienne and Vernant do not say so explicitly, the obliteration of *mêtis* is thus fundamentally related to, if not one and the same with, the denunciation of rhetoric. Ballif helpfully elucidates this link: “when Plato, in the dialogue, *Gorgias*, condemns rhetoric,” she reminds us, he does so precisely because he considers rhetoric “not a *technê*.” That is, to Plato, “rhetoric, like *mêtis*, is characterized by trickery and stratagem and remains a stochastic intelligence, not rational, ordered, nor measurable” (Ballif, *Seduction* 191). Though Detienne and Vernant maintain that Aristotelian rhetoric came along fairly quickly to “correct” Plato and to “[rehabilitate] conjectural knowledge and the type of intelligence that proceeds obliquely,” they nonetheless conclude their study of *mêtis* by stating that “the concept of Platonic Truth” has “overshadowed a whole area of intelligence with its own kinds of understanding” and has “never really ceased to haunt Western metaphysical thought” (316–18).

**The obliteration of *mêtis* is thus fundamentally related to, if not one and the same with, the denunciation of rhetoric.**

The dismissal of *mêtis* and devaluation of cunning may also be linked to our more commonplace distaste for and discomfort with any endorsement of artifice, a discomfort which D. Diane Davis, drawing on the work of Avital Ronell, traces to a distinctly Puritanical American tendency to privilege the ideals of sincerity and honesty. Certain influential forms of American feminism, too, Davis argues (again with Ronell), have tended to demonize artifice and self-invention, to favor authentic “self-presentation” over “self-creation” (Davis 201).<sup>5</sup> James Baumlin, however, in a discussion of historical and contemporary treatments of *ethos*, suggests that our valorization of authenticity both precedes and exceeds either American feminism or Puritanism and itself has roots in the ancient debates that positioned philosophy as the noble search

for truth and rhetoric as the dissembling quest for persuasion. Baumlin writes that, with only “a few striking exceptions, Western intellectual culture has tended to embrace the ‘central,’ serious, or . . . *philosophical* model of selfhood over the ‘social,’ dramatic or *rhetorical* model” (xviii, original emphasis). He thus finds the privileging of authenticity linked to the denigration of rhetoric and, like Detienne and Vernant and Ballif, traces this denigration to a Western intellectual tradition, “beginning with Plato,” that “treat[s] the self as a moral, metaphysical, and ultimately, theological category (rather than as a function or effect of verbal behavior)” (Baumlin xviii).

These theorists advance compelling arguments that dismissal of *mêtis* and the pervasive sense of discomfort we still feel in the face of any recommendations to disingenuousness are themselves traditionally, culturally, and ideologically mandated as well as inextricably linked to the diminishment of rhetoric itself. Davis recommends that we disobey these metaphysical mandates, arguing that the Puritanical American or American feminist (or Western intellectual) investment in the ideals of sincerity and honesty are always and only evidence of our “servility” and “docility,” of our continued subordination to “the burned in memory of unified and fully present selfhood” (201–02). Drawing on Nietzsche’s concept of self-overcoming and on French feminism’s “playfulness,” Davis asks us to refuse to *be ourselves* and to revalue and celebrate self-creation and artifice instead (200–01).

However, while Davis’s call for artifice and self-invention is a laughing, playfully irreverent repudiation of what she (again following Nietzsche) calls the constraining and too-serious notion of bodies and selves that are “weighted

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down with meaning and (humanist) morals” (200), the artifice implemented in the pedagogical performance of neutrality is, again like *mêtis*, reflective, goal oriented, and decidedly serious in its play. That is, while Davis’s “artifice as politics” (199) is a politics that refuses the pedagogical/political imperative itself in the name of a genuinely open and unknowable “futuraity,” that refuses to use pedagogical authority to preconceive

and deem a specific “worthwhile end” (163, 211), the performance of neutrality is a politics that openly anticipates and prepares for desired end results. The artifice involved in the performance of neutrality is, like Burke’s conception of rhetoric, “directly designed for use” (Burke 36). Moreover (if/ and some-

what moralistically), it accepts its own “falsity,” as Burke would have put it, primarily because there is a type of honesty—rhetorical honesty—“in the assuming of [it]” (36): the honest desire and honest effort, that is, to keep students open, keep students learning, keep students open *to* learning, so that they may engage with rather than shut out difference.

To return to the classroom then, Condit may provide for us here a final and perhaps one of the most pointed and controversial illustrations of cunning as pedagogy: Finding that in her speech-communications classes, most attempts to teach “white male elite students” egalitarian and “other”-directed communication practices fail repeatedly when those practices are presented as simply more ethical, open, or kind, Condit instead demonstrates to students that these same modes of communication have been found to be “correlated with higher income.” The “impur[ity]” of this attention-getting device, she writes, “does not trouble [her] overmuch,” for she believes the egalitarian communication practices that she teaches (in disguise) will nonetheless infiltrate students’ ways of being, ultimately making them “better friends, lovers, and colleagues” (171, 173). As in the pedagogical scenarios elaborated earlier in this discussion, Condit does not seek to deny her political responsibility but to find more efficacious and perhaps more realistic means of achieving her political, pedagogical goals. “One cannot walk into a classroom that is structured against progressive teaching and simply enact a progressive world,” Condit argues (168). She believes as I do that seemingly “conservative’ pedagogical practices” may well serve—and serve well—“progressive ends” (171).

Many, of course, would and will decry Condit’s pedagogical use of mainstream capitalist values as abhorrent and frankly dangerous. More generally, many would and will condemn the pedagogical co-optation of traditional forms of academic authority elaborated herein as both dishonest and politically suspect. As Bauer and Rhoades write decisively in their essay on resistance to feminist pedagogies, “[w]e *could* use the authority our students are socialized to confer upon us, but it would be wrong and hypocritical, since that authority is so often coercive” (101, original emphasis). While Davis and Ronell would no doubt, and rightfully, critique this statement as one laden with a heavy(handed) moralism, it is perhaps even more significantly burdened by naïve idealism. As Frank Lentricchia wrote in 1983 in an analysis of a Burke speech, there is “no morally pure, no epistemologically secure, no linguistically uncontaminated route to radical change.” The “attempt to proceed in purity,” he continues, both misses the opportunity to make an impact, *and misunderstands rhetoric* (qtd. in Anderson 204). Rhetoric, Burke himself re-

minds us, especially rhetoric brought “to the edge of cunning,” is discursive action concerned primarily with audience and reception and thus always “framed for [its] effect” (36). With audience and effect in mind, then, the performance of the authoritative objectivity that students expect from us actually becomes a paramount rhetorical strategy, for, as even Bauer and Rhoades acknowledge, it is when our teaching incites and thus forces us to engage student opposition that our pedagogies are *received* as inappropriately persuasive and “coercive,” not when we use the academic authority conferred upon us (99). With audience and effect in mind, “[t]he ‘political,’” as Talburt writes, is suddenly not only the “rejection of ‘neutral’ teaching”; like *mêtis*, the political is often also, or instead, “the tactical use of resources at hand, such as the university’s rationalism,” and what looks like “conformity” proves “not inherently conservative” but “part of a set of tactics” (*Subject* 97, 188). This is precisely what Burke calls “identification,” a term which (again like *mêtis*) designates “a specialized activity that participates in” and works as part of “a larger unit of action” or in a “wider context” (27). To exemplify the dynamics of “identification,” Burke has (in)famously pointed to the way in which the “shepherd” is ultimately “identified with” the eventual slaughter of his sheep, despite the many “specialized activities” he engages in on their behalf prior to that fateful moment (27). Conversely, and in a (necessary) reversal of Burke, the teacher who performs neutrality seeks to awaken, rather than to deceive, students; she works for and within the larger unit of action that is their more active and productive engagement with difference. In short, the specialized tactics, the cunning ploys and stratagems in the performance of neutrality are decidedly impure, sneaky, covert, mired in established and perhaps even coercive power. Yet ultimately, they participate in, are identified with, the most crucial of pedagogical goals: students’ more open encounters with the new and unfamiliar.

### **Contaminated classrooms? crossing yet another theory/ practice divide**

Interestingly, however, some of the teachers cited above admit that they find their pedagogical practices inconsistent with and, in some cases, plainly inimical to the theories that inform the rest of their intellectual work. Martindale, for example, laments what she calls the “uneven developments . . . between the sophistication of poststructuralist queer theory” and what gay or lesbian teachers must face, do, and become within “the crude, rude, and raw realities of [our] classrooms” (62). More bluntly still, Condit states outright that her use of

certain authoritative teaching strategies—regardless of either motives or results—“is not consonant with theories of rhetoric . . . or with progressive thought” and resolves this tension simply by conceding that her “teaching practices are not dictated by [her] theories, but by the specific constraints [she] face[s]” (167). In other words, both of these teachers seem to understand themselves, to use Gayatri Spivak’s terms, to be “throwing away their theoretical purity,” even as they are implementing strategies they would defend as powerful, effective, socially responsive, and responsible (*Post-colonial* 12). Spivak, of course, has rather famously suggested that we be willing to do just this: that we occasionally must risk “incoherence” and the “contamination” of “theoretical excellence” in order to engage in socially relevant work (for example, *Postcolonial* 11–12, 39–41). In fact, Spivak has stated repeatedly that practice “norms” theory, that “a strategy suits a situation” and, in so doing, “is not a theory” (*Postcolonial* 12, 44; “In a Word” 127).

**There seems to be no theoretical inconsistency whatsoever in the performance of objective impartiality when either “poststructuralist queer” or rhetorical theories frame and inform this praxis.**

While this discussion has amply demonstrated that I do not deny either the existence or the efficacy of “impure” approaches, I find claims such as Condit’s and Martindale’s both startling and strange, for there seems to be no theoretical inconsistency whatsoever in the performance of objective impartiality when either “poststructuralist queer” or rhetorical theories frame and inform this praxis. Poststructuralist queer theory, we must remember, views identity slots as “regulatory mechanisms of the dominant culture” (Carlson 113) and, like poststructuralist or postmodernist theories more generally, denies that there is any “honest,” “real” identity or self to return to. As the self in (many if not most) queer theoretical formulations is understood to be performatively constituted by repeated acts and their effects (see Butler, *Gender Trouble*), poststructuralist queer theorists are usually fairly uninterested in “sincere” or “true” representations of identity—gay/lesbian and/or otherwise. Queer theories and the politics that arise from them, in other words, are hardly purist enterprises; as Butler’s discussion of Antigone suggests, queer politics are invested in strategies of reappropriation and resignification. They do not seek—nor even believe it is possible—to proceed in purity outside of formations of power but, instead, willingly grab the power that the center unwillingly—and perhaps unwittingly—grants (Levinson 86).

Any pedagogy informed by poststructuralist queer theory will thus likely be unconcerned with the “truth” and purity of either its strategies or its prac-



titioners. Like rhetoric, a pedagogy informed by queer theory will likely strive for “viability and efficacy” in relation to and of power, in relation to “context and moment,” and in relation to “audience and intention” (Ellsworth 160, 162). In fact, rhetoric itself may even more convincingly resolve this purported theory/practice dilemma for practitioners of neutrality *and* subvert Spivak’s claim that in suiting a situation, strategy is not a theory. For what is rhetoric (I’ll ask rhetorically) if not a *theory of situated* communicative *strategies* that are invented to meet and work optimally within contextual constraints?

I make this case for abiding theoretical consistency not to assuage guilt or assure practitioners/performers of neutrality that there is theoretical ground and justification for their pedagogical work (though these are, perhaps, important tasks in themselves) but to (dis)integrate the binary that we risk developing (and in some cases have already developed) around this particular pedagogy. The performance of neutrality, though contestable to be sure, is not or need not be a pedagogy we enact *in spite of* our theories. To conceive of it so builds yet another theory/practice binary on foundations of both specious reasoning and forgetfulness—forgetting especially and perhaps most ironically the history, purposes, and power of the rhetorical tradition. In fact, if we believe with Burke that rhetoric is nothing if not “the speaker’s attempt to identify himself favorably with his audience” (37), nothing if not the effort to “[ensure our] message as favorable a reception as possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed” (Cole qtd in Fleming 171), then the performance of neutrality is not only fully and compellingly theorized but (again) becomes for many teachers a consummate rhetorical, pedagogical, and political strategy for engaging students with the new and unfamiliar.

### **Subversive savvy or systematic selling out? neutrality: the return to the hard place**

*Their eyes are all asking  
are you in or are you out  
and I think, oh man  
what is this about?*

—Ani DiFranco

There are those who will remain convinced that the performance of neutrality described and defended at length in these pages cannot help but (re)secure the very sameness it seeks to disrupt; those who will argue, that is, that even if/

as these pedagogical strategies co-opt power for subversive or salutary purposes, they nonetheless hazard and perhaps ultimately relinquish too much. To hark back to Talburt once more, there are those who will ask whether, and/or how much, the performance of neutrality “[rescripts] sedimented meanings of race, gender, and sexuality” (*Subject* 97) or whether/how much it simply reinscribes a monolithic (straight, white, male) norm desperately in need of total obliteration. As Lavina Dhingra Shankar phrases this question, “in forging communities with ‘majority’ students” (and/or in seeking identification with a resistant student audience) do marginalized teachers send “a message of voluntary self-erasure?” (199). Does this self-erasure then, to round out Shankar’s question, translate or extend into a more generalized and more pernicious erasure of otherness? In simple terms, there are those who will wonder how much the performance of neutrality simply neutralizes, and what is lost.

In response to these concerns, I can only acknowledge that, yes, the risks here are obvious and the stakes are high. While Karamcheti, Talburt, and others, including myself, may view seizing traditional academic authority as a potentially radical performative that at once refuses representationalism and marginalization, diminishes student resistance, and *infuses* academia with unanticipated modes of subjectivity, many will view it as a regressive lapse into invisibility that only refuses radicalism itself at every turn. Johnson, for example, though struggling and ambivalent throughout her essay “Disinfecting Dialogues,” ultimately comes to view her reliance on academic authority and, particularly, on academic language as a “sanitizing,” “disinfecting,” and “‘unrevolutionary’ behavior” that “avoids the potential for violence” to her “history, background, and culture,” but in its retreat to safety deprives students of opportunities for encounters with the “other” and for the understanding and transformation that these encounters might yield (134–36).

Yet, such (anticipated and real) rejoinders, while clarifying of the risks endemic to this pedagogy, are also obfuscating, rendering indistinct and unimportant the crucial difference that will remain—embodied in the teacher—to “queer” the performance of neutrality before it even begins, the difference, too little attended to and here again forgotten, that motivated this inquiry in the first place. The performances of neutrality chronicled in this paper do “mimic phallic authority in the classroom” (Davis 241). Yet, and again like Antigone’s speech acts, they do so always from a position of alterity *to* that authority, and thus they “pervert [authority’s] authenticity,” “expose its illusoriness” (Davis 241). This is mimicry that makes a mockery of phallic authority because it reveals that authority is really nothing but its own performance and

that authority is simply the imitation of the pedagogical and rhetorical conventions that constitute authority as such (see Caughie 57–58).

Moreover, these (real and anticipated) rejoinders begin from and infinitely return to what Ballif variously calls the “imperative,” “tyranny,” and “trap” of “metaphysics” and of subjectivity. That is, they begin from and return to the guilt-laden demand that we “search out” and “uncover” ourselves, that we be and remain true to our [marginalized] place and true *for* others (*Seduction* 116, 111, 134). This pedagogy, however and again, “has no representative aspirations, no desire nor intention to create truth” (Ballif, *Seduction* 117). Rather than beginning from and returning to the truth of the self, it begins from and returns always and only to the question of rhetorical/political efficacy in the pedagogical context.

While the refusal of representationalism that Ballif advocates is, like Davis’s “artifice as politics,” an infinite “becoming” that will not be (reduced to) a particular pedagogical or “political program” (Ballif, *Seduction* 116–17, 127), the refusal to represent oneself in this pedagogy, and the co-optation of neutrality more generally, is primarily, programmatically, unapologetically, and urgently political. What Brodkey seven years ago called “the endless spectacles of the terror of difference” are only becoming more spectacularly terrifying, and students’ frequent embodiment of this terror and their resistance to its interrogation demand our continued and continually inventive pedagogical attentions and *interventions*.

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Certainly, no one knows this more or more acutely than those of us who stand before our students as the very subjects/objects of their terror every day. However, many of us who are thus positioned have also come to know that the representation of our true selves and/or of our insurgent politics is both not enough and at times is counter-productive. Since composition’s turn to critical pedagogy, we have often been presented—have often presented ourselves—with only simplistic, reductive, and falsely dualistic options: we either foreground our politics or irresponsibly negate them; “impose” our beliefs or “efface” them (Anderson 197). We either hide or seek, are either in or out. Yet the choice is not now and has never been this simple, and today’s classroom and larger sociopolitical climate demands more, and more innovative, approaches to and for politicized teaching.

As Cornell West wrote in 1990, the “politics of difference” arose in response to “the precise circumstances” of a particular historical moment as “marginalized first world agents” began to contest “degraded self-representations” (11). As West explains, the politics of difference (much like the pedagogies of difference derived from them) “makes explicit its moral and political aims” while engaging in “[s]ocial structural analyses of empire, exterminism, class, race, gender, nature, age, sexual orientation, nation, and region.” These politics (pedagogies) work, West continues, primarily through a process of “demystification”; that is, they strive to expose “the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures in order to disclose [to students] options and alternatives for transformational praxis” (19–20). Yet, the process of demystification and the politics it serves has several attendant risks or, as West puts it, “deadly traps” (20). West himself, for example, fears “reductionism”—“one factor analyses (crude Marxisms, feminisms, racialisms, etc.)” that lose sight of the interconnections among various identity formations as well as of the ideological forces that produce them (20). And Ballif fears that any “demystification” always and “merely results in a remystification,” by obscuring the rhetoricity and constructedness of the subjects, social forces, “truths,” and causalities it seeks to expose (*Seduction* 111, 119). My concern, however, has been that in our explicit pedagogies and politics of difference, we have mystified and finally lost sight of both rhetorical principles and rhetorical resources—forgetting the constitutive and constraining power of context, and forgetting the need, the capability, the responsibility we have to invent and adjust praxes in accordance with context.

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Student resistance to composition instruction indeed may have been around since 1889 or longer; it may be timeless and inevitable. Yet, even if student resistance is itself transhistorical, the moment in which we live and teach is not. The resistance of *this moment*, arising out of and reflecting as it does white (supremacist) fear and racism, antifeminism, homophobia, mounting xenophobia, a generalized and culturally sanctioned “anti-P.C.” and conservative backlash, and an even more generalized, pervasive, and increasing terror of the new and unfamiliar calls for particular, contextualized, and sometimes

cunning responses. With Karamcheti I would assert that the performance of neutrality is but one potential pedagogical response to our historical moment,

**How might we speak, as whom might we speak, so that students listen?**

and I would call on others to develop more and alternative responses. But I would contend that this is a *new* moment, with its own precise circumstances, and that it is a moment within which explicit pedagogies and politics of difference will not only fail but may fuel the fire of conservative counterassaults. I would suggest with Ballif that it is this (raging) fire we can steal, putting it to unanticipated and crafty uses. And I would absolutely insist with Spivak that “the question ‘Who should speak,’” as we continue to struggle with complex questions of difference, pedagogy, and politics, is a far “less crucial” question than “Who will listen,” (*Postcolonial* 59) which, because it is crucial, is a question that only begs another and another still. It begs the questions to which this essay has offered one reply: *How might we speak, as whom might we speak, so that students listen?*

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

1. See Shoshana Felman’s 1982 essay, “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” in *Yale French Studies* 63, pages 21–44, and also 1987’s *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. For Eve Sedgwick’s explorations of active ignorance as it pertains to homophobia, see *Epistemology of the Closet* and, later, *Tendencies*. See also Constance Penley’s “Teaching in Your Sleep: Feminism and Psychoanalysis” in Cary Nelson’s *Theory in the Classroom*, SIUP, 1987.

2. Following Janet Atwill, I define *technê* as a productive art, capable of becoming “a set of transferable strategies,” but *incapable* of being reduced to “a set of deductive postulates” (6–7). *Technê* for Atwill, and in my own view, is thus “stable enough to be taught . . . , but flexible enough to be adapted to particular situations and purposes” (48). It is, in fact, a power of “intervention and invention” that is wholly “contingent on situation and purpose” (7). While my view of *technê* is fundamentally consonant with Atwill’s, my view of *mêtis* as a *technê* departs slightly from her understanding: In *Rhetoric Reclaimed*, Atwill defines *mêtis* not as a *technê* per se but as the type of “intelligence identified with *technê*,” or as the type of intelligence

that “enables” *technê* (56–57). (Much) More divergently still, Michelle Ballif actually *opposes* *mêtis* to *technê* as she associates the former more with chance (*tuchê*) and the latter with order and control (“Writing” 59, 66). *Technê* for Ballif is a strictly modernist (and irrecoverable) concept, aligned (in her view) with all the evils of production, codification, strategy, reason, and Truth and reduced to mere “method,” while *mêtis* is compatible with chance (*tuchê*) and thus with postmodernist or “third sophistic” anti(dote) rhetorics (*Seduction* 158; “Writing” 53, 59, 66). In my understanding, however (an understanding based largely on my reading of Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant), and as the remainder of this segment of discussion will demonstrate, *mêtis* is itself a *technê*. There are several places throughout *Cunning Intelligence*, for example, where *mêtis* becomes synonymous with the phrase *dolie technê*, i.e., a *technê* of “cunning tricks and stratagems” that (quite like rhetoric itself) arises within and is particularly well suited to respond to situations of chance or indeterminacy (for example, Detienne and Vernant 29, 112).

3. Here again, Janet Atwill departs slightly from Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, arguing that because *mêtis* (and also *technê*, more generally) is so closely associated with *kairos*, it is more concerned with the present moment than with producing foreseen results in a distant future. While she acknowledges that it is “the anticipation of an immediate future that allows for a specific act of intervention by way of art,” she stresses the ultimately changeable and unknowable nature of that future, suggesting that at most the person possessed of *mêtis* is “alert to what is happening in order to affect what *might* happen (Atwill 114, original emphasis). Detienne and Vernant, however, indicate that precisely *because it is an art* (or *technê*), *mêtis* develops and matures through experience: Using examples from the *Iliad* and from Sappho, they describe the *mêtis* of the young as underdeveloped or “light,” constrained by shortsightedness and impulsiveness, while the *mêtis* of the old is characterized by both more and more extensive foresight and planning (16–17).

4. As indicated by the two previous notes, both Janet Atwill and Michelle Ballif make fairly extensive use of the term. Like my discussion here, both Atwill’s and Ballif’s coverage of *mêtis* draw primarily upon Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant’s 1978 book, an apparently (still) unrivalled study of cunning intelligence.

5. Avital Ronell cites the 1970s’ “ban on makeup” as a literal example of the feminist distaste for artifice (qtd. in Davis 201).

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