I’m worried. As I read over, again, Lynn Worsham and Gary Olson’s interview with Chantal Mouffe, I’m worried about the impossibility of responding to a theorist whose work focuses on the concept of democracy, a signifier that circulates so widely in composition studies that it is almost impossible to open a journal or attend a conference without hearing it invoked. My worry is best articulated by John S. Nelson’s warning that when a trope “becomes so familiar to researchers that they cease to consider its proper purposes and limitations,” it no longer moves an argument forward but functions instead as a mere token (420). Given the ubiquity of the appeal to democracy in composition scholarship, then, I’m worried that each word I write will be drained of meaning at the very moment that it takes shape on the page. My suspicion, my worry, is that democracy has become an overused trope in composition studies, that the moment of invoking it marks the moment that thought stops.

Or, more precisely, invoking democracy marks the moment that thought moves in any number of directions. In a question they put to Mouffe, Worsham and Olson point out that because democracy tends to
function as a "floating signifier" in composition studies, it provides "an opening for the field to be articulated to a neoconservative agenda." From this perspective, the problem is that democracy suffers not from a lack of meaning but rather from an excess: democracy has as much currency in conservative and radical right wing circles as in liberal and radical left wing ones, and it can be used just as easily as a warrant for reactionary practices as for progressive ones. The question of how the concept of democracy is articulated—to what discourses, in other words, the concept is joined—remains unanswered (and largely unasked) in composition studies.

If democracy is to function as more than an empty token and more than a floating signifier that potentially could align the field with conservative agendas, the first steps in recuperating the radical possibilities of the concept must involve clarifying what democracy might mean and critically investigating how this concept has been made to function in composition scholarship. In fact, Mouffe regards this sort of conceptual work as a central task of leftist intellectuals, whom she describes in the JAC interview as those "who elaborate and provide the vocabularies that then can be appropriated by people in order to give some thought to their experience." What I would like to do is use the vocabulary Mouffe provides in this interview to push at the limits of how democracy has been deployed in composition scholarship and thus move from worrying over democracy as a concept to worrying the concept itself. As I will discuss in more detail below, Mouffe regards an "agonistic dynamic" to be necessary in order to sustain a democratic political community (see Return 6). The process of worrying democracy—contesting the ways it has functioned and reimagining how it might function—may serve to reinvigorate an agonistic dynamic around this concept so that it can be redeployed as an appeal that moves argument (and society) forward.

Before directly confronting the deployment of democracy in composition studies, however, I will first review what I regard as central features of Mouffe's conception of democracy, features that have the most potential for worrying the role democracy plays in composition scholarship. I will then focus on the work of James Berlin, who has formulated what is arguably the most extensive articulation of composition studies with a discourse of democracy. Finally, I will worry some of Mouffe's concepts in an effort to keep up the agonistic dynamic and continue to extend the possibilities of what it might mean to struggle for democracy.

The Subversive, Agonistic Discourse of Democracy
For Mouffe, democracy names a subversive discourse, based upon the values of liberty and equality for all, that challenges all forms of
subordination. “It’s important to realize,” she states in the interview, “that we could not find a more radical principle to fight for than liberty and equality for all.” Similarly, in “Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy,” she emphasizes democracy’s radical possibilities: “Democratic discourse questions all forms of inequality and subordination. . . . Democracy is our most subversive idea because it interrupts all existing discourses and practices of subordination” (96). Democracy, according to Mouffe’s understanding, is the discourse that worries all other discourses and practices by challenging all forms of inequality.

Democracy’s status as discourse deserves emphasis. Mouffe deploys “democracy” not so much to describe any existing political communities as to refer to a discursive tradition that embraces what Mouffe calls the “ethical-political” values of liberty and equality. As a consequence, she praises the ideals of “really existing liberal democracies” but maintains that “those ideals are not put into practice in those societies.” Moreover, Mouffe argues that democracy can never be decisively achieved: it is “something uncertain and improbable and must never be taken for granted. It is an always fragile conquest that needs to be defended as well as deepened. There is no threshold of democracy that once reached will guarantee its continued existence” (Return 6). It will never be possible simply to sustain an achieved democratic state; instead, the discourse of democracy will always function as a source for the critique of the current state of affairs.

Mouffe’s theoretical project, then, goes way beyond (while also encompassing) a defense of what she refers to as “this miserable part of democracy that we’ve got at the moment.” Mouffe argues for a radicalization of the democratic tradition. As part of the Enlightenment project, democracy has traditionally been predicated on the idea that a single, rational mind exists and that the political process involves reaching rational decisions about the common good. However, “radical democracy,” Mouffe writes, “demands that we acknowledge difference—the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous—in effect, everything that has been excluded by the concept of Man in the abstract” (Return 13). A politics of radical democracy requires the forging of a “chain of equivalence” among different struggles against oppression. Mouffe argues that “we must institutionalize a true pluralism, a pluralism of subjects” in which “we transcend a certain individualistic notion of rights and . . . elaborate a notion of solidarity” (“Hegemony” 100). Through a commitment to solidarity, democracy would work against what Lani Guinier has called the tyranny of the majority, since solidarity requires that “the rights of certain subjects are not defended to the detriment of the rights of other subjects” (“Hegemony” 100).
Encompassing difference necessarily upsets the idea of any rational consensus. As Mouffe explains in the interview, "if we're going to be faithful to the value of pluralism, we need to make room for dissension about the common good." It is precisely the status of democratic values as struggle concepts—signifiers whose meaning will always be contested—that worries the ambiguous, widespread appearances of the term "democracy" in composition scholarship. To describe the field as "radically democratic" or to praise the "democratic . . . feel" of work in composition studies, as prominent scholars have, without simultaneously clarifying what is meant by the term "democratic" is to assume that scholars in the field have a common understanding of the term's meaning (Lunsford 77; Harris x). But for Mouffe, democratic political community is distinguished by its agonistic character: making an argument for one's interpretation of democratic values is absolutely necessary in order to sustain those values. She explains that while members of a democratic society will agree on "what links us together, what certain values link us," "when it comes to defining those values, to interpreting them, there will always be competition" (178-79). In fact, to seek to reach absolute agreement on the meaning of democratic values or to assume that such agreement is possible is to endanger the very possibility of democracy. Mouffe maintains that in a truly radical and plural democracy, "conflicts are not seen as disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated, as empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of harmony" (8). Instead, "the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible . . . far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk" (Return 8). The agonistic nature of a democratic society thus demands ongoing interpretation and argumentation. Instead of functioning as an uncontested warrant in argument, democracy needs to be argued over, its meaning contested. But this struggle over the meaning of democratic values is not a "struggle among enemies" that leads to "the complete destruction of the other." Rather, it is a "struggle among adversaries" in order to establish "a different hegemony." Adversaries recognize that they share a common set of values but that they may have different interpretations of those values. If composition scholars are to describe their work as democratic, if a commitment to democracy is to define composition studies, then it will be essential to argue over the meaning of democracy. Without that ongoing agonistic—but not antagonistic—struggle, according to Mouffe, democracy simply does not exist.

Composition Studies: An Already Existing Democracy?
While the concept of "democracy" circulates widely in composition studies, perhaps no single scholar in the field has been identified with
the concept so strongly as James Berlin. Berlin's colleagues and students have testified to his strong commitment to social justice and democratic values, a commitment that is particularly clear in his final book, *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures* (see also the special issue of *Works and Days* edited by Downing, Sosnoski, and Dorwick). Because his work stands as a particularly compelling argument for a democratically identified composition studies, I want to critically examine some of the ways democracy is defined and deployed in Berlin's scholarship.

While Mouffe regards democracy as a discursive tradition whose radical potential is not realized in currently existing societies, Berlin tends to refer to democracy as an already existing political state. In one of his earliest explicit statements regarding the political exigencies of writing instruction, for example, he speaks of students as "assuming" certain responsibilities in society: "Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants" (*Rhetoric* 189). To suggest that students will assume positions in society points to the ideological function of schooling, as described by Althusser: to reproduce society through the interpellation of subjects. Berlin seems to accept the reproductive function of education and to assume that an acceptable version of a democratic society already exists. The function of education, in this view, is not to change society but to maintain it. Although Berlin's scholarship clearly attests to a desire for social change, this desire comes into conflict with a view of democracy as already existing. For Mouffe, the task of radical democracy is not to reproduce already existing subject positions—since the current hegemonic formation strongly articulates democracy with a possessive individualism that works against solidarity—but to make possible new ones: "If the task of radical democracy is indeed to deepen the democratic revolution and to link diverse democratic struggles, such a task requires the creation of new subject positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of antiracism, antisexism and anticapitalism" (*Return* 18). In order to articulate democracy with a radical agenda, the question composition scholars need to ask is not how to help students assume positions in society but how to work to make new democratic subject positions possible.

Another point at which I want to worry Berlin's (and composition studies') deployment of "democracy" is the identification of democracy with debate and participation. Democracy is often equated with open debate, as for example in the opening pages of *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Culture*: "For the citizens of ancient Athens, rhetoric was at the center of education because it was at the center of political life, the deepest and most abiding concern of the city-state. ... The end of democracy, after all, was to enable open debate of all issues that impinged upon the community" (xii). Further along in the same book, Berlin claims that the "central purpose" of
democracy is "to ensure that all interests are heard before a communal decision is made" (101). Democracy is figured in these two passages as a process that is an end in itself: democracy is open debate.

As I mentioned, Mouffe regards argument over the meaning of values to be an essential part of democratic struggle. However, she identifies democracy not as a forum for open debate but as a subversive discourse. The democratic values of liberty and equality for all are radical values, and the effort to extend those values by constantly questioning all forms of oppression and exclusion is the ongoing task of people committed to a radical democratic project. Radical democracy, in Mouffe's view, is not a matter of people arguing to defend their own positions or those of an interest group. It is a commitment to extend liberty and equality into all social relations. Thus, democracy refers not to a political process so much as to a political commitment. Certainly, a political process—namely, hegemony—is required if democratic values are to become dominant, and the ability to use rhetoric to reach reasonable decisions about how to act is essential, but the process of arguing is not in itself democracy.

What I want to worry, what I want to push against, is the too-easy assumption that an adequate version of democracy already exists and that we simply need a better political process, one in which all people participate. Calling for participation is simply not enough. Composition scholars committed to a radical democratic agenda need to deploy the discourse of democracy to question all aspects of what currently passes for "democratic" society, including the discipline of composition studies itself.

Reconsidering the Question of Epistemic Privilege

In valuing practices like open discussion as in and of themselves democratic, composition scholars may also tend to overlook inequities that are built into these practices. For example, small group work is a common strategy for eliciting all students' participation in class. However, as Evelyn Ashton-Jones and Gail Stygall have pointed out in separate studies, gender differences do not automatically vanish when students work together; Ashton-Jones argues that "to remain silent on the ways that writing groups, too, can create chilly conditions for women is to perpetuate the legacy of silence that assures that these processes will continue unchecked" (22). Moreover, Jacqueline Jones Royster used her 1995 CCCC chair's address as an opportunity to question some of the enthusiasm over the field's "democratic" practices: when the speaker is marked as "other," she asks, do we really hear that person? Do we really listen to what a person who is different from us—who, for example, is marked as racially other—is saying?
What all of these scholars are pointing to is the tendency to conceive of the subject of democracy as homogenous. As I pointed out, Mouffe is committed to an understanding of democracy as a pluralism of subjects and to the creation of a radical democratic hegemony based upon a “chain of equivalence,” or the linking of different struggles against oppression. Insofar as Mouffe is committed to the recognition of difference, her conception of democracy pushes against the tendency in composition studies (and in contemporary American society) to ignore difference and to assume a certain homogenization of society. However, I want to end by worrying her rejection of the idea of epistemic privilege; I would argue that an acceptance of subordinated groups’ epistemic privilege is necessary in order to make possible the chain of equivalence that Mouffe calls for.

When Mouffe states, “I do not really see how a group can have epistemic privilege,” she is rejecting specifically the possibility that a group of people could spontaneously develop an oppositional consciousness. She argues, “You can have groups that are obviously oppressed but who react against those forms of oppression in a way that can’t be called progressive. And I think this is true for every type of group. There is no form of oppression which automatically leads to reacting in a progressive way.” For example, “There are many many different ways in which feminism can be articulated, and some of these are not progressive in the least.” I would agree with Mouffe on this point; certainly, forms of feminism that celebrate “femininity” and the biological essence of “woman” tend to be articulated with conservative agendas. However, I cannot agree that oppressed groups of people have no epistemic privilege vis-à-vis the social relations through which they are subordinated. The idea of epistemic privilege is central to standpoint theory. First developed by Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs, “standpoint” refers to an epistemological priority of a particular social group or class in advanced society. Whatever the group or class identified and ‘privileged’ by such an argument, . . . it seeks to relate a truth claim to the social structure and phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity” (Jameson 63). While Lukacs argued for the epistemic privilege of a proletarian standpoint, feminist standpoint theorists have adopted this argument to describe a specifically feminist standpoint. Such a standpoint would generalize from women’s activities in order to develop a critical epistemology based upon what women experience in a patriarchal society. A standpoint is not self-evident, nor does it arise spontaneously, since “the vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate” (Hartsock 159). A standpoint, therefore, must be “struggled for”: although it may begin in women’s experiences, a standpoint generalizes from those experiences and looks beneath them for organizing and explanatory principles (159).
Standpoints have epistemic privilege in that they are, in the words of Donna Haraway, “situated knowledges” that offer “more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” than do “unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (191). Critical race theorist Patricia J. Williams emphasizes the importance of privileging the knowledge of situated social groups in order to challenge the dominant paradigm of thought “by which blacks are reassured that there is no real inequality in the world, just their own bad dreams; and by which women are taught not to experience what they experience, in deference to men’s way of knowing” (13). To privilege the knowledge of a given standpoint is to avoid “recasting the general group experience as a fragmented series of specific, isolated events rather than a pervasive social phenomenon” (13).

If, as Mouffe hopes, diverse struggles for equality are to come together to form a chain of equivalences, it seems essential that each group grant other groups epistemic privilege regarding their own struggle if radical democratic politics is to avoid the setbacks that the contemporary feminist movement has sometimes experienced. As bell hooks explains,

The vision of Sisterhood evoked by women’s liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression. Needless to say, it was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective, who professed belief in the notion of common oppression. . . . Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. (43-44)

Certainly, Mouffe strongly advocates the recognition of difference. But because democratic discourse is, after all, historically a product of white Europeans, people of color may have reason to distrust the argument for creating a “chain of equivalences,” just as women of color had reason to distrust the feminist plea for sisterhood. Williams argues that bridging gaps in perception “requires listening at a very deep level, to the uncensored voices of others” (150). Standpoint theories and critical race theories offer accounts of how the world appears from subjugated social positions. These accounts should continue to worry democracy by demonstrating the ways in which forms of exclusion and subordination continue to function.

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