ing groups and support writing center instruction. However, the essays in this important collection also confirm that, when it comes to the subject of intellectual property we may be stuck at a liminal moment between the modern and the postmodern. Our academic policies, documentation practices, writing textbooks, and colleagues in literary studies lag far behind in the epistemological shift from the modern to postmodern, from print to cyber publishing. Perhaps that is why I think this collection is an excellent text for introducing graduate students in teacher-training courses to the multifaceted, multicultural, multilayered complexity of plagiarism and the attendant larger issue of intellectual property. I agree with Alice Roy who argues that, regarding the cultural construction of intellectual property, change may occur "with the arrival of new generations, more multilingual, more multicultural, less entitled, rather than through an unlikely about-face by the generation(s) educated in and currently invested in the maintenance of textual ownership, for whom the blurring of author-text-reader boundaries constitutes not liberation but unethical, immoral acts of deceit and theft."


Reviewed by Margaret Morrison, Maryland Art Institute

I had been reading Diane Davis’ Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter in the rural Virginia mountains when I noticed outside my window a huge trash pile burning in my neighbor’s front yard. When I ran outside to ask the neighbor why he was burning trash dangerously and illegally, he yelled that it was none of my business. I countered that I was concerned that the fire could spread. We argued. Then he pulled out a gun, brandished it in my direction, and demanded that I leave. I did—and called the sheriff. Later, I realized that my reaction to my neighbor was no less innocent than my neighbor’s reaction to my reaction to him. Both of us were demonstrating a need for control. We were also participating in what Nietzsche calls “slave morality” and its concomitant ressentiment, the master/slave mentality operating within the closed, restricted signifying economy’s trap of negation, the hierarchical binary system based on a metaphysics of substance that speaks us and, through us, says “no” to what is Other. The negatives of phallogocentric metaphysics are so burned into
our memories that neither my neighbor nor I was willing to listen to what the Other was saying and how language speaking us might be differently (culturally) charged, how each might be "legitimate" within his or her own perspectival realm. (While my neighbor was protecting his right to burn wood trimmings from his tree-cutting job, I was protecting myself and the woods from catastrophe.) Lyotard's "differend"—"the differences, unresolvable through litigation, between two parties who do not share the same rules of cognition"—was at loggerheads. In such cases, mechanisms of power tend to mete out a decision, often called "justice."

My dispute illustrates much about the impulses out of which Davis has written her thorough, "joyfully destructive," and enticing book. One of the most important impulses is the urgent postmodernist need to find new metaphors to "postpone perpetually the 'wreck' of the negative" because the potential now for fascist explosions has grown exponentially with the repression of the signifying economy's closed systems. As Davis reminds us, the "epistemic-philosophic attitude" that promises an origin it can never make present must continually reestablish its pure presence in the face of disruptions within "schizoid language" by excluding what threatens it; reestablishing the "lost or impossible presence" means "reterritorializing" what can't finally be contained or fixed, forcing into presence what "finally can only be a trace." The epistemic-philosophic attitude thus engages "a terrifying and contagious ressentimental politics" that includes "genocide, genus-cide, gynocide, systematic exclusion/extermination," for, since systems of negation depend on defining themselves through what they are not, whenever borders are drawn, the Other is left out.

In her critique of the landscape of the paradoxical, posthumanist subject, Davis' densely linked, superficially manipulated book itself seems to act as a "rigorous [sophistic] hesitation," or as the moment of a decision for our time when "the experience of the undecidable" comes into play, for the book recalls us to what will have been our sophistic dilemma (or Gorgian "trilemma") at the beginning of this millennium: despite signs after three millennia that logocentric metaphysics is exhausting itself, despite the deaths of God/Man, many still in the throes of "the double slumber" scramble to "save the humanist subject." Some composition classes, for example, still require writing "only according to the criteria associated with what [Lester] Faigley calls 'the modernist text,'" thus pushing "not simply a writing style but a value system that privileges hierarchy, mastery, and (Final) closure."
But in scanning this landscape, the book also invites an affirming “posthumanist ethics of decision” for the future: in seeking redemption from *ressentimental* politics, Davis suggests, Nietzsche’s Übermensch (or “Trans-human”) would opt for “self-overcoming” through a “pathos of distance” (directing a “value-positing eye” inward, not outward), reflexively re/marking the distance between the “subject-creating” and the “subject-created” (the changing self that is never self-identical). Such self-overcoming attempts to create “an affirming nobility” that looks ahead, not back (Nietzsche’s “noble morality”), thus “actively forgetting the boundaries defined by a metaphysics of presence and . . . releasing . . . ill will from its ‘No!’” to a “Yes!” to what will have been willed—not to resolve things finally into a hoped-for “final solution” but to let everything go for a moment in order to open up possibilities for the future.

Through such Nietzschean rereadings, Davis signals her own book’s sophistic links, not to what Victor Vitanza has called Susan Jarratt’s “feminist sophistic” but to Vitanza’s own “third sophistic.” In her rereadings of sophistic rhetoric, Jarratt applies a “strategic essentialism” (“strategic misreadings” or “negative deconstructions”) that adheres to binaries, attempts to fix unstable terms, and continues in the humanist tradition of emancipation. In contrast, through their rereadings of Gorgian sophistic rhetoric, Vitanza and Davis offer a postmodernist, “affirmative deconstruction” (or, simply, “nonpositive affirmation”) that seeks new metaphors—that is, “re/descriptions of the world that turn on a third term that cannot be located within the standard binary divisions.” Davis offers as examples of these new metaphors not only her own “laughing logos” but also Luce Irigaray’s mimicry, Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, Jean-François Lyotard’s “pagan pragmatics—just linking,” Jean Baudrillard’s “light manipulation of appearances” of discourses, and Vitanza’s “theatricks.”

Through chapters one and two and an “Excursus,” Davis carefully lays out her own affirmatively disruptive rhetoric of laughter by linking it with scrupulously exhaustive rereadings both of those texts that seem to have carefully cultivated “the epistemic-philosophic attitude” that speaks us all (the texts of Plato/Socrates, Kant, and so on) and of the counter-texts that have “waged war on totality” and have sought to witness “the unrepresentable” (the texts of Gorgias, Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard, Vitanza, Butler, and so on). Through chapters three and four, Davis reads current, oppositional feminist politics and composition pedagogy across her rhetoric of laughter as a means of opening up both
fields to an(other) possibility beyond a binary trap of negation. In the face of the “posthumanist paradox” (that “we both make and/but are also (more so) made by History”), one of Davis’ principal aims appears to be to sketch out a “posthumanist ethics of decision” that would introduce a third term (and Nietzschean “self-overcoming”) to break up the reactionism constituting the binary and to set “exscriptions” into motion.

At the risk of reducing a book that depends primarily on complex, paratactic linking (not on the “hypotactic linking/thinking strategies” crucial to “a rhetoric of totality,” I’ll attempt to redescribe Davis’ rhetoric of laughter before indicating how she applies it to feminist politics and especially to composition pedagogy. In chapter one, “Physiological Laughter,” Davis introduces the notion that laughter has a tendency “to be laughed”; that is, human beings are routinely “caught in the co(s)mic ‘sweep,’ seized by outside forces, which manifest themselves, for instance, in bursts of irrepressible laughter.” Because these seizures “echo from the ‘noise’ of physis (nonrational) rather than the melodies of nomos (rational),” rendering human reason impotent, they confuse humanist, idealist notions of subjects as unified and stable: “To be possessed by this movement of energy, laughed by a co(s)mic Laughter, is to be thrown into a petit mal in which one’s consciousness, one’s capacity for meaning-making is suspended.” Her posthumanist, affirmative response to this notion is to offer “a simulation of the ‘sweep,’ which would point up the illusions of fixed identities and what we have thought of as human agency. In the moment that one . . . laughs with the Laughter that laughs her, s/he both laughs (functions as subject) and is laughed (functions as object). . . . At this moment, meaning/logic exceeds itself in a burst of laughter, and the boundaries of the ego crack up.”

In chapter two, “Discursive Laughter,” Davis links the seizures of “outside forces” (force of Laughter) that we are “routinely caught in” with the “logos that hails us into subject positions and speaks us,” a logos that itself is jolted by seizures or laughed. This laughing logos that hails us, Vitanza’s “schizoid logos,” continually defers and disseminates meaning; itself continually ruptured, it can’t found/ground/fix anything. To be spoken by a language contorted in laughter is to be spoken by “language on the loose” that can interpellate into being only fragmented subjectivities. Her affirmative response to this notion is to offer her “posthumanist ethics of decision” that, in a “pause of indecision,” urges us to counter Lyotard’s “white terror of truth” in a postmodern world that has “lost its criteria for responsible action” by listening for the exscribed that is “sacrificed for the clarity of One voice, One call, One legitimate position.” In its single-
minded will-to-truth and longing for pure presence (the One), epistemic philosophy would deny this laughing logos and try to control, repress, and contain it within its own snug structurations. Despite this, however, the repressed always returns, for the pure presence is always already absent and so defers its absolute meaning continuously in the “trace.” Within systems of language where only unstable differences play along a surface, there is never any complete closing down of the flow of “language on the loose” that possesses us. Davis suggests that we humans are “at least twice possessed: by co(s)mic [kairotic] Laughter and by the [laughing] Logos.”

Davis also stresses, however, that there is no final escape from the trap of negation. We can only engage the laughter we laugh and that laughs us in flashes and, thereby, momentarily experience “the excess beyond our control, beyond our (violent) grasp,” which highlights and problematizes the very metaphysics of substance and its linguistic categories that determinedly create, then systematically exclude Others. “The hope,” Davis notes, “is that the experience of abandoning oneself to abandon­ment in [an] affirmative alliance will nudge our perceptions into a space where a different and post-humanist Being-with-others might be/come possible,” a Being-with-others based on shared but unsharable finitudes, not on “essence,” not on a “substantial project (qualities which, for example, would underlie a fascist community).” In resisting the tyranny of the One, Davis seeks new “metaphors of excesses and overfflow,” turning on a third term, that radically redescribe the world. In her Excursus, “Being-Hard/Wired: Cyburbian Convulsions,” for example, Davis calls attention to techné, itself possessed by a kairotic laughter, that not only hails and enframes us but that also laughs us, “a laughing techné” that takes “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries.” Thus, through technology humans are at least thrice convulsed and dispersed.

In chapter three, “A Rhetoric of Laughter for Feminist Politics,” and chapter four, “A Rhetoric of Laughter for Composition Pedagogy,” Davis first critiques idealist and revisionist feminist politics and composition pedagogies, primarily current-traditional rhetoric (CTR) and radical liberal pedagogies. She suggests that both idealists and revisionists continue to depend for their own critiques on hierarchical binaries and a faith in human agency, though idealists generally still subscribe to humanist ideologies that take the metaphysics of presence as an a priori, while revisionists generally engage in negative deconstructions of power relations that simply flip the binaries to reverse the privilege. She then offers possibilities that attempt “nonpositive affirmative” ways out of the
reactionism of the binaries' traps of negation, however momentarily.

In chapter three, Davis comes to her critique of revisionist feminists partly from rereadings of Nietzsche on his three kinds of women: idealist women whom men create as their Other; revisionist feminists who seek to reverse the power equation but remain trapped in a masculinist signifying economy; and a "concept-metaphor 'woman'" that refers not to the woman of the man/woman dichotomy but to a woman that stands in as the "nontruth of truth"—truth, that is, with no substratum indemnifying its status as an absolute essence, that courageously stops "at the surface" and recognizes that no/thing else is there, and that therefore suggests the laughing (force) that laughs always already "schizoid" language. Davis critiques revisionist/reactionary (pragmatic American) feminist politics in the hope of dis/solving the determination of these feminists, in their common struggle for "full re/presentation," to solidify their identity as a community and, thus, reconfirm their faith in the very phallogocentric system and its myths of essential truths they profess to disdain. This determination, she notes, is based on an "arrogant humanism" that assumes knowing and autonomous subjects and inclusion in a political community that is based on the "myth of common-being as such," the idea that community can be built and subjects can be bound together in that community by a common project, community that, nevertheless, through consensus, "operates as an effect of exclusion"—that is, exists "at the expense of the loose ends of finite being." What we share in our "being-in-common," however, is our unsharable but "constantly communicating" finitude that a posthumanist community exposes. As a community consciously undergoes the experience of sharing, an ethical feminist politics could operate to unwork reactionism through "an affirmative unraveling" or "resistance to closure" of any kind (of self, of situation, of time).

In chapter four, Davis links her critique of feminist theories with her critique of composition pedagogies and offers a "(post)pedagogy of laughter" that in part integrates her "ethics of decision." In the old debate raging among compositionists between pedagogies that support the ideological claims of CTR and those that support the ideological claims of liberal politics, Davis would say that both pedagogies "prostitute writing" to the service of something: in CTR, to the service of the state—the status quo—which needs students molded into "productive citizens" with the (marketable) skills to write coherently; in liberal politics to the service of revolution, which needs students molded into political activists with the skills to think, read, and write in ways that help them resist the
“false consciousness that drives big business, government, etc.” CTR often employs a pedagogy that Paulo Freire calls a “banking system,” teaching/depositing reductive, packaged sets of facts and practices; liberal politics, though acknowledging that truth/knowledge can neither be fetched nor deposited, still relies on humanist, resisting agents making/teaching meaning. Thus, both pedagogies continue to foster foundationalism and have faith in self-identical selves of writer-students and teachers as “subjects-supposed-to-know.”

Both options of this reductive dichotomy, Davis suggests, “turn on the question of power.” While the two pedagogies claim to “empower” students, power always “belongs to Some/One,” and either way in this dichotomy, teachers must opt for power, “for both assuming power (/knowledge) and then for passing it on.” Even if the teacher is a feminist who has altered her teaching style to make herself into a nurturer (not an authoritarian) and her classroom collaborative (not competitive), her benign authority still conceals power and domination. In our pedagogical tyrannies (fostering “particular kinds of subjects or student-citizens”), much gets silenced or erased in the name of a “reproducible practice.” But without teacher-subjects disseminating codifiable packages of knowledge/truth to student-subjects, pedagogies as we almost universally practice them are “quite ‘impossible.”’ So what’s a teacher to do? Supposing posthumanist composition teachers don’t know and, therefore, can’t codify into teachable practices the supposed truths they might wish to transmit to eager students wanting to know what they know, what will the teaching of composition look like in the future?

Davis, first, would no longer prostitute writing to the service of something disguising its humanist, ideological underpinnings. Instead, she would prostitute writers to writing in order to free writing for writing—that is, for a writing able to write without its being compelled into some practical purpose derivable or deduced from it that could be used by the game of knowledge for totalizing ends, a writing not possessed by what Lynn Worsham calls “the will to pedagogy,” the requirement that every theory of writing be immediately translatable into a workable classroom practice. This pedagogical imperative conceals the impulse to ground writing in the certainties of truths we hope for nostalgically but that always already have been deferred in the “trace.” Such “pedagogy hope” aims to produce students who simply reiterate the reiterable ad infinitum without opening spaces for whatever escapes the reiterable because it has been excluded from the thinking allowable within thought’s “enframement.”
What would a composition class look like if writing were no longer forced into "representational servitude" but were allowed to write the "writer as laugh(t)er" and, thus, open spaces for the unrepresentable, for the "feminine"? Davis suggests that, by consciously undergoing the experience of sharing unsharable finitude, such a class could operate critically to "unwork reactionism" by affirmatively unraveling "preestablished truth/knowledge in a radical resistance to closure/totality." A writer in such a class, Davis suggests, would not be asked to be "expressive" in order to find his or her "unique voice" or to write as if he or she were practicing to master the "genre of genres": the clear, unified discourse with a single purpose and thesis. Instead, such a class would encourage students to put themselves at the service of writing that would set them in motion to write "genuine texts." Borne along on the force of its own language, such "writing-for-writing" would not be referentially anchored or phallically aimed at others; instead, it would be writing designed to "make and unmake us simultaneously and perpetually," exposing itself by "giving in to itself," by leaving illusions of the ego's control and mastery behind and by exposing the ego's finitude. This would not be an arrogant conducting of language through "prefabbed grids" for the sake of identity, meaning-making, and teachability; instead, by means of a steady, ongoing listening that "calls a writer toward the other," this writing would write a writer. The teacher in such a class, Davis suggests, might "mimic phallic authority . . . in a way that would pervert its [illusory] authenticity." Such a teacher might model his or her own performances after Butler's drag performances, which parody/pastiche the idea of an original gender. If, as Butler argues, being can be read "as precisely that potentiality that remains unexhausted by any interpellation," we as composition teachers can overperform "the excess we are," and this farcical play on authority might indeed "expose the law as less powerful than it seems," might make it "laughable."

Davis' must-read book offers no quick political fixes or helpful pedagogical tricks on the way to teaching mastery; instead, by engaging in third sophistic readings of the grounds on which composition has been built, it asks how we might reconfigure composition teaching to enable us to recognize what "antibody rhetoric" can teach us about what we're trying to teach in composition classes and how we might free writing for writing hypertextually/hyperactively in such a way that we expose its "rustle of finitude." The third-sophistical interventions (on behalf of libidinized or laughing writing) that Davis' redescriptions invite are dangerous to the status quo, and they are immensely compelling.