"Hands Up, You’re Free": Composition in a Post-Oedipal World

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One of the lessons which Hitler has taught us is that it is better not to be too clever. The Jews put forward all kinds of well-founded arguments to show that he could not come to power when his rise was clear for all to see. I remember a conversation during which a political economist demonstrated—on the basis of the interests of the Bavarian brewers—that the Germans could not be brought into line. Other experts proved that Fascism was impossible in the West. The educated made it easy for the barbarians everywhere by being so stupid. The farsighted judgments, the forecasts based on statistics and experience, the comments beginning “this is a subject I know very well,” and the well-rounded, solid statements, are all untrue.

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

At all events, it is better to be controlled by someone else than by oneself. Better to be oppressed, exploited, persecuted and manipulated by someone other than by oneself.

In this sense the entire movement for liberation and emancipation, inasmuch as it is predicated on a demand for greater autonomy—or, in other words, on a more complete introjection of all forms of control and constraint under the banner of freedom—is a regression.

—Jean Baudrillard

I believe in Jesus, I just don’t have belief.

—House of Love

Cynicism and violence have come under increasing scrutiny by political agencies, the media, and educational organizations. According to Henry Giroux, and as the professional pollsters tell us, we live in a “culture of cynicism” (“Cultural” 505). Associated with a postmodern sense of futility about the power of critique or the ability to substantially change
the world for the better, this pervasive cynicism undercuts collective and individual engagement in socio-political activity, reducing the investment necessary for sustained and vibrant public commitments (see Bewes; Craig and Bennett; Sloterdijk). Meanwhile, social violence and its media amplification are also perceived to be pressing issues requiring redress. Indeed, our “culture of cynicism” could as well be described as a “culture of fear.” Fear of violence underwrites the battery of security mechanisms that shape postmodern life: surveillance, monitoring, guards and patrols, gates, procedures, and the like. Violence and cynicism together produce a climate of resignation: the sense that any attempt at social transformation will yield more of the same, or perhaps something worse.

Concerns about cynicism are often centered on Generation X, the generation born between 1961 and 1981. From their endlessly discussed cynicism and apathy to their violent behavior, Generation X has become an object of concern for political pundits and educators. Neil Howe and William Strauss note that Generation X’s reputation has become a “metaphor for America’s loss of purpose, disappointment with institutions, despair over culture, and fear for the future” (“New” 79). Complaints about their stupidity, hatred, laziness, and antisocial behavior abound. The litany of grievances paints a picture of cynical, violent youth who lack the discipline or knowledge to overcome their shortcomings. These negative portrayals have only become more pervasive in the media since the occurrence of a string of school shootings in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado. Such events foster in the public imaginary a conflation of images of bored, disaffected youth with incidents of violence and crime.

Educators find themselves confronted with these problems of cynicism and violence in their teaching. Peter Sacks’ bestselling account about the current state of education, Generation X Goes to College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Postmodern America, openly proclaims that cynicism is the direct response to the pervasiveness of media culture and the de-legitimation of knowledge and power. A reluctance to complete any assignment not tied to a grade, the relativist slogan of “It’s just your opinion,” and a distrust of teachers and schools are commonplaces. Overall, Sacks claims, the paralytic effects of large-scale, deep-seated cynicism are apparent in Generation X’s indoctrination by media culture, which leads them to expect to be entertained; their internalization of the attacks on science and reason, which delegitimates
large swaths of knowledge; and their loss of faith in authorities and institutions, which erodes trust in the possibility of effective socio-political action. These are the students who give us "the look": the blank, bored stare of utter disengagement (Sacks 9).

The problems of cynicism and violence, while certainly not new and arguably not as severe as the media coverage might suggest, are nevertheless noteworthy for being symptomatic of larger cultural shifts. These shifts, often given the general descriptive term "postmodern," can also be described in terms of what Gilles Deleuze calls the "society of control" and what Slavoj Žižek calls "de-oedipalization." These two otherwise disparate theories of the social resonate with one another since they both argue that Michel Foucault's concept of the disciplinary society no longer carries sufficient descriptive force. Deleuze and Žižek suggest that power is no longer organized primarily through institutions to produce compliant, useful, and productive bodies; instead, institutions are breaking down and forms of external regulation are withdrawing. However, as has been noted by several cultural theorists, there has not been a concomitant resurgence of liberatory practices. The usefulness of Deleuze and Žižek is that they provide two ways to model how the flow of power has found new modalities through which to exercise control. Žižek further suggests that the withdrawal of the body of external social regulations and constraints—what is referred to as "the big Other" in Lacanian theory—has initiated post-oedipalized forms of subjectivity no longer keyed to the oedipal scene. Lacking the libidinal, internalized attachment to authority (typically in patriarchal forms of the Father and its substitutes), these subjects are prone to disaffected attitudes and behavior, including cynicism, apathy, disregard, and violence.

Composition studies has recently taken an interest in cynicism and violence. Apropos in this regard is Michael Blitz and Mark Hurlbert's *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*, which presents a body of narratives about post-oedipal subjects in the classroom. In one account, Blitz writes to Hurlbert about a student, Matthew, who snickers throughout class, "making cynical remarks about the project proposals . . . choosing the paths of least resistance in [his] own writings, and spending, at most, 10 minutes per short assignment" (30). Matthew waits until the last minute to do his project, and when he finally turns it in, it is less than half the required length. In his paper, Matthew relates his experiences as an emergency medical technician (EMT) who has witnessed many traumatic episodes that most people do not see except on television. He recounts a time when he was the first EMT on the scene
where a man had brutally raped and killed his girlfriend's daughter, a toddler; the perpetrator was then himself brutally beaten by the police while in lockup (30–32).

Blitz is understandably at a loss. How does one evaluate such work? It is filled with superficial errors, and Matthew’s conclusions are neither apt nor particularly well-considered. Blitz sees that Matthew is simply “at his limit for sensitivity” (32). At the same time, how can he give him credit simply for going through a harrowing experience? Blitz’s problem is noteworthy because it illuminates larger issues. To what extent can Blitz offer Matthew anything that will undercut or sever the tight connection between violence and cynicism, or that will allow him “to make sense” of what he has witnessed? Blitz’s problem is, I suggest, of primary importance to education in general, and composition in particular—that is, if we take seriously the idea that pedagogy should address problems such as violence and cynicism and find effective means of intervention.

This essay will employ Deleuze’s and Žižek’s theories to illustrate the limitations of writing pedagogies that rely on modernist strategies of critical distance or political agency. Implicit in such pedagogies is the faith that teaching writing can resist dominant social practices and empower students; however, the notion that we can actually foster resistance through teaching is questionable. As Paul Mann states, “all the forms of opposition have long since revealed themselves as means of advancing it. . . . The mere fact that something feels like resistance and still manages to offend a few people (usually not even the right people) hardly makes it effective” (138). In light of Mann’s statement, I urge us to take the following position: teaching writing is fully complicitous with dominant social practices, and inducing students to write in accordance with institutional precepts can be as disabling as it is enabling. By disabling, I do not mean that learning certain skills—typically those most associated with current–traditional rhetorics, such as superficial forms of grammatical correctness, basic organization, syntactic clarity, and such—are not useful. Such skills are useful, and they are often those most necessary for tapping the power that writing can wield. In learning such skills, however, we should also ask what students are not learning. What other forms of writing and thinking are being foreclosed or distorted, forms of writing that have their own, different powers? If one of our goals as teachers of writing is to initiate students into rhetorics of power and resistance, we should also be equally attuned to rhetorics of contestation. Specifically, we must take on the responsibility that comes with the impossibility of knowing the areas of contention and struggle that will be the most
important in our students’ lives. Pedagogy could reflect this concern in its practices by attending to the idea that each student’s life is its own telos, meaning that the individual struggles of each student cannot and should not necessarily mirror our own. Or, to put it another way, students must sooner or later overcome us, even though we may legitimate our sense of service with the idea that we have their best interests in mind. However, we should be suspicious of this presumptive ethic, for, as Mann astutely observes, “nothing is more aggressive than the desire to serve the other” (48).

The next step for writing pedagogy, however, cannot be that we just stop teaching writing as we have been teaching it. Given the institutional and cultural fetishization of thesis statements, grades, and grammar, this would be nearly impossible anyway. Instead, we might infuse our own particular pedagogies with this insight into education’s general culpability, to the extent that we grant students the possibilities for a writing that would be, as I argue below, their own “act.” This approach asks us to acknowledge that we do not always know best how to rectify social problems for them, and this further necessitates that we partially relinquish control to, and learn from, students. Not only should student knowledge be incorporated into the subject of the pedagogy (as in class discussions), but it should be incorporated into the pedagogical structure itself, so that both content and methodology become intermeshed with student knowledges and experiences. Nowhere is this more pertinent than in cultural studies-based pedagogies that seek, in general, the dissolution of hierarchies of power and privilege—especially in terms of race, class, and gender—and the politicization of these categories. It will be my contention that despite the good intentions and soundly reasoned groundwork underlying many of these pedagogical approaches, they can nevertheless produce new forms of power and privilege that in turn produce new resistances; further alienate already cynical students; and (re)produce the possibility of violence. Such problems arise in part because of the continued reliance on critique as a means of personal and social transformation. This is a modernist approach that is increasingly problematic in our postmodern climate because it runs the risk of reinscribing disciplinary modes of authoritarian violence.

In what follows, I employ Deleuze’s and Žižek’s ideas concerning the global society of control and de-oedipalization to argue that many writing pedagogies manifest an authoritarian violence that restrictively re-oedipalizes students. I suggest that we might theorize what I call a “post-pedagogy” that recognizes the inventive possibilities already inherent in
post-oedipal subjectivities in order to promote writing acts that shift control of the dominant loci of contention from the teacher to the student. This would not be a decentering of the classroom so much as a remodulation—in terms of content, practice, and evaluation—that refuses to mirror the society of control in a pedagogy of control. The goal would be to resist projects of re-oedipalization and to avoid the dismissal of writing acts that have unacknowledged value, transgressive or otherwise.

The Global Society of Control in a De-oedipalized Age

In *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*, Giroux discusses some of the transformations that have occurred in youth’s relation to the process of schooling. He argues,

Youth . . . often find themselves being educated and regulated within institutions that have little relevance for their lives. This is expressed most strongly in schools . . . Schooling appears to many youth to be as irrelevant as it is boring. . . . In a rapidly changing postmodern cultural landscape, the voice of authority no longer resides exclusively in the modernist spheres of the school, family, and workplace. (13)

Giroux suggests that not only do schools too often present a curriculum that fails to address real student needs and interests, but that institutions, like schools, have lost some of the authority and power that they once had. Giroux’s argument resonates with the post-Foucauldian work of cultural theorists who claim that the modernist society of disciplinary institutions is waning as new forms of social control emerge.

The transformation from a disciplinary society (Foucault) to a global society of control (Deleuze) ensures what Michael Hardt calls “the decline of the mediatory functions of the social institutions” (140). Institutional or disciplinary control is predicated on a certain stability of subject and discourse, as in the dialectical play of inside and outside. Yet, what may have been clearly defined spaces and flows in modernity give way to a smooth space in which “there is no place of power—it is both everywhere and nowhere” (143). As Hardt explains, “the walls of the institutions are breaking down in such a way that their disciplinary logics do not become ineffective but are rather generalized in fluid forms across the social field” (139). The breakdown of institutions, however, has not yielded a corresponding breakdown in forms of control. Rather, the matrices of control have themselves been transformed, finding flexible, less discernible modalities through which to operate. These remodulations
in the flow of power have certain concrete effects on the kind of subjectivity that is produced, which further changes the social and discursive fields within which strategies of control operate. Nikolas Rose describes this transformation in terms of the movement from individuals to “dividuals”: we are not dealing “with subjects with a unique personality that is the expression of some inner fixed quality, but elements, capacities, potentialities. These are plugged into multiple orbits, identified by unique codes, identification numbers, profiles of preferences, security ratings and so forth: a ‘record’ containing a whole variety of bits of information on our credentials, activities, qualifications for entry into this or that network” (234).

Control becomes dispersed and distant, concerned with actual conduct rather than with a “self.” Since changing people’s beliefs is difficult and costly, the focus of control mechanisms shifts toward actual behavior. Management strategies deemphasize direct contact in favor of preemptive structures of prevention. Such control strategies, Rose states, are “based upon a dream of the technocratic control of the accidental by continuous monitoring and management of risk” (235). Rose notes that as control strategies shift loci of contention away from individual subjectivities and groups, the possibilities for resistances organized through identification (with an individual or group) lose vitality (236). Modernist forms of resistance through identification with a subject position (criminal, patient) or ideology (Marxism) lose political effectiveness when power no longer operates along those lines of contention. Control dissolves its investments in any particular group or strategy, finding renewed vigor in a highly generalized effectiveness: what matters is whatever works.

Žižek, like Deleuze, is also interested in exploring transformations in subject formation initiated by the breakdown of institutions and the dispersal of power. He argues that changes in social and discursive fields indicate a lessening of the structural influence of what Lacan calls “the big Other”—that is, the social discourses and institutions that mold and discipline subjects (332). Žižek suggests that once the big Other withdraws from the scene of meaning, the perspective from which the sign is approached becomes determinant, as opposed to any broader social assignment of meaning. The big Other no longer functions as the guarantor of the modicum of consensual agreement that works to stabilize meaning. Instead, we enter the world of multiplicities, technés of the self, dispersed subjectivities, performances. It is a world that slip-slides out of Foucault’s disciplinary society where institutions (church, school, family, hospital, prison, state) fashion particular modes of subjectivity by
means of internal and external conjunctions of power and knowledge. As
the big Other withdraws, so also repressive, oedipal forces withdraw. We
are left in a world of multiplicitous possibilities, embodied flows that are
not now quite what was meant formerly by the term “subject,” which, it
should be recalled, cannot exist without repression (Deleuze and Guattari
26; Butler; Davis). Žižek argues that the subject that emerges in the
postmodern world is post-oedipal, meaning that it is not produced via the
same modernist mechanisms that produced the properly “humanist”
subject. In this way, too, Žižek insinuates that identification with external
institutions and subject positions has lost its formerly preeminent place in
political practices.

The idea of a de-oedipalized subjectivity is not especially new, but its
characteristics, aesthetics, practices, and ethics are not fully explored.
Fred Pfeil suggests, though, that a post-oedipal form of subjectivity was
being broached in 1980s music, theater, and film. Paradigmatic for Pfeil
is the 1986 film River’s Edge, based on a true story about a group of high
school adolescents who hide the murder of one member of the group by
another. Pfeil analyzes the film and its portrayal of “a social field
characterized by the decline of the oedipal/patriarchal authority” that is
“without replacement by any other psychic and social principles for
meaning, individuation, and order” (217–18). The world depicted in
River’s Edge resonates with other descriptions of the decline of orienting
metanarratives and consensually established, guiding criteria. Pfeil com­
ments, “In such a morbid situation, marked by the devaluing of both
private and public figurations of significance and signifying power, pathologies run rampant, especially insofar as, for men, the dissolution
of the oedipal ‘solution’ to the task of separation and individuation from
the female mother opens the way to a vast outpouring of fearful
misogynist rage, and a desperate, protofascist attempt to restore
patriarchal authority in the private and public realms at all costs” (218;
emphasis added).

The waning of patriarchal, oedipal, symbolic authority has been
greeted with a variety of responses, from glib celebration to dire predic­
tions of violence and lawlessness. It is not my purpose to join in any of the
responses that lie along that continuum, but to suggest instead that there
is a certain fait accompli about the transformation. We should explore
what is entailed by such a transformation in order to ascertain its
potentialities as well as its dangers. Pfeil addresses this issue by expres­
ing doubt about the continued viability of socialist goals. A new strategic
project of attaining socialism without “any ordering principle or a priori
category of the Real” is problematic not because he doubts its validity, especially “given the exhaustion of all the strategies of immanence we have seen,” but because he cannot see how, “in the world we share with the kids in River’s Edge, it could ever work” (Pfeil 222). I read Pfeil as falling into a cynical accommodation, since he is unable to articulate an effective socialist strategy to the newly emergent posthuman subjectivities.

More than likely, however, there are multiple forms of post-oedipalization possible, allowing theorists to develop a variety of de-oedipalizing strategies. Deleuze and Guattari’s attacks on oedipalization, for example, are designed to produce schizo-subjects who can resist the territorializing effects of family, state, and capital. My discussion below should indicate that this form of de-oedipalization—literally an anti-oedipalization—is not congruent with the forms of de-oedipalized subjectivity currently emerging. Deleuze and Guattari want de-oedipalization to occur through a concrete realization of the schizophrenic desire that is inherent in capitalism; for them, resistance is thus not a form of opposition, per se. They are not so much concerned about the resistance to or withdrawal of external regulations as much as the acceleration and proliferation of desire within regulations. Unfortunately, as forms of external regulation withdraw in favor of other forms of social control, it is difficult to see a corresponding acceleration and proliferation of desire. What this means, perhaps, is that capitalism has found a way to counter the possibility offered by Deleuze and Guattari, or at least to make it more difficult to achieve, and has thereby made possible the reterritorialization of de-oedipalized subjects by means of an internal master unsupported by any direct, external regulation. If this is so, then we must be wary of supporting practices and theories that offer the promise of liberatory hope while in fact opening up the possibility for even greater forms of control and disempowerment. Deleuze, I think, was well aware of this problem, for some of his last work was centered on the possibility of resistance in the new global society of control.

Deleuze and Guattari are in the minority concerning the positive aspects of de-oedipalization. Most cultural critics cast a dubious eye on de-oedipalized subjects. Pfeil calls them “paradigmatically decentered subjects, individually and collectively slipping and sliding around on an ever more loose and gelatinous field of discursive positions,” none of which is strong enough to secure the subject, or to be articulated with any other discourse to form a general framework or guide for action” (222). Pfeil’s description corresponds to that of the multi-positioned poststructuralist subject, and consequentially it suggests problems with
writing pedagogies predicated on stable identifications and articulations as the means for practicing critical resistance. Linda Brodkey, for example, underscores the importance of articulation as a "crucial notion" that makes "distinctions between the intentions of discourses (which have to do with positioning people as subjects) and the effects of discursive practices (which have to do with whether people identify themselves as the subjects of a discourse)" (14–15). Brodkey's investment in subjectivity is modernist since it insists on a discursively stable subject. This modernist subject is predicated on a mechanism of identification in which the writer is called on to create a stable position vis-à-vis another person, group, or discourse. These attachments to specific subject positions necessitate the ability to make clear distinctions between positions, which in turn requires libidinal investments in the creation and demarcation of subjective boundaries. Problems arise, however, in climates of rampant disinvestment, especially where the distinction between intention and effect can no longer be readily discerned. But as Pfeil explains, "the gap between affect and effect, between feeling and its meaningful, significant, effectual articulation, is massive" (220). The problem with projects of articulation is that they neglect to account for this gap, and thereby can leave entirely excluded from the pedagogical situation the distance that the student sets up between his or her notion of self and the discursive products that are required in the class. Indeed, it can be that assignments directed toward this kind of subjective identification can actively produce cynicism and apathy in students who are well aware of the language game they are playing for the sake of teacher and grade. However, this pedagogical failure is often projected onto the student, so that the student is held responsible (not being good enough, not working enough). Such strategies of blame—whether directed toward the student, teacher, or pedagogy—are all ultimately insufficient (see Segal). All should be considered together inasmuch as each is implicated in the other, and inasmuch as each is situated in and forced to negotiate with the unique matrix of effects that is postmodernism.

Teachers often forget that there is a significant discrepancy between the intention of our pedagogy and the larger lessons that our students derive from it. What we (think we) teach is not quite what they learn. In the context of Brodkey's project of articulation, another way of making this point is that students are fully aware that symbolic articulations and rearticulations ultimately do little to change the status quo. Instead, they are just variations on a fundamental (fantasy) structure that remains undisturbed (Žižek 266). Regardless of the nature of the articulation or the
sophistication that is brought to the analysis of the identification, the actual ensemble of social practices and institutions being challenged continues unabated and unchanged. This ensemble includes the university itself and, by association, the writing classroom. The incitement to challenge disempowering practices by means of the analysis of identifications and articulations is itself already complicitous with practices designed to exercise control over students in ways that are synonymous with other mechanisms of control at work in postmodern life.

Grades are one obvious example of how this complicity manifests itself. Whatever the content of the course, evaluation still serves to initiate students into the competitive, hierarchically structured job market they will soon face. The writing classroom thereby perpetuates the continuation of practices of valuation and exclusion, as is often the case with radical, cultural studies-based pedagogies, the very same practices that are being challenged. Furthermore, many classrooms offer what I would call a pedagogy of “slackening” in which the strict rules pertaining to organization, grammar, and format are relaxed in favor of an emphasis on critical thought. These strategies can backfire when students develop an inflated sense of the importance of the deemphasized elements. We can see here how the writing classroom becomes complicitous with the generalized strategies in a society of control. The withdrawal of direct external regulation does not of itself create the conditions for liberated, creative, and critical writers. Instead, other control mechanisms emerge to mold student conduct; for example, assessment, credentials, and competition produce anxieties concerning class grade, academic development, or job future. Students are thereby induced to police their own writing, even if they are not very good at it, or suffer the possible academic and vocational consequences. Additionally, their goals may well be given primary shape by the strategies of risk management to which they are subject, so that they become preoccupied with, as Rose suggests, the “identification, assessment, elimination or reduction of the possibility of incurring” penalty or failure (261). The critical content of the writing pedagogy is reduced to a disaffected form of “whatever works” for the student, a situation often accompanied by a preoccupation with superficial forms of correctness.

The implicit challenge to pedagogies that require a certain amount of emotional investment—as, for example, in an assignment that requires students to care about injustice, misfortune, inequality, or other social ills—is the extent to which many students are disinvested, and not because they are just “apathetic” or “bored,” but because de-oedipalized
subjectivities may have a structural predilection for such attitudes. Now, this is not to argue that all students are uncaring or apathetic, but that in the social realm there is a general waning of affect, an inability or reluctance to tie emotional investment to people and practices (see Jameson; Pfeil; Worsham). It is becoming increasingly difficult to get others to see or care about injustice, at least in the way that we want them to (see Vitanza). The withdrawal of standard forms of pedagogical regulation has not produced engaged, liberated students, nor has the opportunity to develop and explore a critical sensibility resulted in a slew of good, politically engaged, social critics. As James Berlin notes, and with a significance that has yet to be given the attention it merits, the most remarkable effect of critical, cultural studies-based courses has been “the intensity of resistance students have offered their teachers, a stiff unwillingness to problematize the ideological codes inscribed in their attitudes and behavior” (52). Berlin goes on to say that eventually he had to forbid certain strategies of accommodation on their part, such as the turning of personal hardship into a narrative of growth. The question that arises: From where does this resistance spring? Berlin and other cultural studies teachers would argue that it indicates a mystified investment in ideological narratives. Thus, their pedagogies espouse a process of demystification; if students can be forced to acknowledge how ideology disempowers them, they will in turn become responsibly critical. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of the consequences for pedagogies that try to empower students through critique, but at the risk of authoritatively re-ocidalizing students who, as I will argue in the last section of the essay, have other means of resistance that too often go unrecognized and undeveloped.

Violence, Cynicism, and Pedagogy

In “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” Lynn Worsham argues that there may be a connection between critical pedagogies and violence. Worsham argues that postmodernism can be considered to be a kind of pedagogy that generates disaffected forms of behavior (229). I understand her to mean that culture does not simply construct subjectivity, but that it continually schools subjects. Worsham writes, “If it can be said to be a pedagogy, then postmodernism is a wild pedagogy; the subject it educates, a wild subject. As such, it inculcates a kind of ultimate estrangement or dissolution from the structures that traditionally have supported both self and world. More specifically, the ‘waning of affect’ is one of the defining features of this new epoch.... The
waning of affect is the liberation from the structures of recognition that bind meaning to feeling” (229). Worsham also points out that, on the one hand, the de-oedipalizing effects of postmodernism have helped authorize many of the progressive social movements that have developed since the 1960s, including feminism, civil rights, environmentalism, and gay rights; on the other hand, they have created a bored and apathetic subject, one who experiences “the total defeat of all desire,” one who “feels its power only in feeling too much or in feeling for the sake of feeling, in the absence of the possibility of anything more significant” (229).6

Furthermore, Worsham argues that postmodern violence, which she calls “wilding,” originates in this kind of boredom and apathy. While Pfeil claims that the dissolution of the “oedipal solution” leads to rampant pathologies, Worsham finds the conditions of possibility for violence in the dissolution of emotion or affect, which is compounded by pedagogy’s emphasis on a limited emotional scope. As she puts it, “wilding is perhaps the predictable form violence takes when meaning is cut loose from affect: free-floating violence, so to speak, and its apparent randomness makes it seem purely anonymous and impersonal.” She recognizes that this representation of violence is a mystification that masks the “othering practices that we call gender, race, class, and sexuality” (231). Radical pedagogies that seek to empower students by obtaining from them critical understanding of the discourses and practices that disempower them—which, typically, are aligned along the axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality—thereby perpetrate a particular kind of authoritarian violence on the student.

An example of the connection between violence and pedagogy is implicit in the notion of being “schooled” as it has been conceptualized by Giroux and Peter McLaren. They explain, “Fundamental to the principles that inform critical pedagogy is the conviction that schooling for self- and social empowerment is ethically prior to questions of epistemology or to a mastery of technical or social skills that are primarily tied to the logic of the marketplace” (153–54). A presumption here is that it is the teacher who knows (best), and this orientation gives the concept of schooling a particular bite: though it presents itself as oppositional to the state and the dominant forms of pedagogy that serve the state and its capitalist interests, it nevertheless reinscribes an authoritarian model that is congruent with any number of oedipalizing pedagogies that “school” the student in proper behavior. As Diane Davis notes, radical, feminist, and liberatory pedagogies “often camouflage pedagogical violence in their move from one mode of ‘normalization’ to another” and “function
within a disciplinary matrix of power, a covert carceral system, that aims to create *useful* subjects for particular political agendas" (212). Such oedipalizing pedagogies are less effective in practice than what the claims for them assert; indeed, the attempt to "school" students in the manner called for by Giroux and McLaren is complicitous with the malaise of postmodern cynicism. Students will dutifully go through their liberatory motions, producing the proper assignments, but it remains an open question whether they carry an oppositional politics with them. The "critical distance" supposedly created with liberatory pedagogy also opens up a cynical distance toward the writing produced in class.

Concerning the oedipalizing effects of liberatory pedagogies, Worsham argues that they triangulate "the pedagogical situation and [give] the teacher the authority to stage the kind of oedipal conflict that the de-oedipalized family and postmodern society no longer provide. The authority that has become disembodied and abstract as a consequence of the bureaucratization of postmodern space is re-embodied in the ( impersonal) figure of the teacher" (236). In the face of the waning of affect and the dissolution of institutional power, then, the call to achieve a critical position toward authority unwittingly reinscribes these quite traditional forms of adherence to authority. Furthermore, such pedagogies reduce the full spectrum of human emotions to just a very few, such as pleasure, desire, and anxiety. The consequences for this are continual processes of redirection and redescription in which the emotions, especially the ones evoked by disempowerment, are actively elided, forestalled, or refused recognition. Thus, as Worsham points out, expressions of disempowerment such as "boredom, apathy, bitterness, hatred, anger, rage, generosity, nostalgia, euphoria, sorrow, humiliation, guilt, and shame"—to name only a few—are not only excluded from the general pedagogical scene, but the authoritarian structure of this kind of pedagogy "offers a re-oedipalization of emotion" that "requires a reassertion of the dominance of emotions of self-assessment" (236–37). Just as students are immersed during their entire period of schooling in external matrices of assessment, so now pedagogies that are explicitly or implicitly authoritarian demand them to self-reflexively internalize assessment.

Worsham argues that the schooling of emotion can lead to eruptions of postmodern violence because students are "arguably acting out the kind of omnipotence and rage that results from the failure of mutual recognition and a thwarted sense of agency" (240). Pedagogies that predicate
their modes of operation on the continuation of oedipalizing processes, then, are complicitous with the structures that contribute to the production of postmodern violence qua wilding. Additionally, they have demonstrated little success in staging for analysis, discussion, and exploration in the classroom the mechanisms by means of which such violence erupts. In such a scenario, incidents of schoolyard slayings or going postal will continue to be misrecognized as the purely pathological, criminal, or evil acts of those who are isolated, disaffected, or crazy (Worsham 240). The legacy of the shootings at Columbine is exemplary here: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were lambasted in the media as “natural born killers” who listened to questionable music (gothic and industrial), dressed inappropriately (too much black clothing in their wardrobes), and were steeped in media violence (video games and films). Public and media discussions did little to understand Harris, Klebold, and similar violent killers in ways that declined simple narratives of blame and condemnation. I take this to mean that the array of generative social forces—especially in regard to the production of violence—remains largely beyond understanding, not to mention significant pedagogic intervention.

**Between Two Laws; Or, Father Doesn’t Know Best**

Let us pause a moment to take stock. What is clear is that postmodern students are the most commodified generation the world has yet seen, and as such they are uniquely “schooled” to be subjects of late capitalism; indeed, Deleuze states that the primary instrument of social control is now the operation of markets (“Postscript” 6). Such forms of control, it should be emphasized, depend on integration and participation rather than on prohibition. Law as prohibition must be flexible, in keeping with the generation of new forms of production and the continual search for new and larger markets. Instability and flow are the keys to growth, which means that if these strategies formerly had oppositional power, that power has undergone a transformation such that it can often serve capital more readily than it can resist it. Thus, new generations experience both more and less freedom than previous generations as they make their way through a world where power is, as Hardt claims, “both everywhere and nowhere” (143). Slippery and unstable, signs shift and cynicism reigns—we are all in on the joke, we acknowledge the simulacrum with the knowing wink, and we hunker down to necessity and work with the suspicion that there is little else to be done. Meanwhile, the big Other qua regulating symbolic order is receding in favor of flexible, continuously modulating flows of power and control, making every strategy of resis-
tance provisional and temporary at best, or, at worst, ineffectual or recuperated in advance. Most pertinently, the challenge to pedagogy is to find ways to grapple effectively with the unique particularity of this highly commodified global society of control. Accordingly, we have been considering the complex interrelations and intersections between the postmodern era and pedagogy, the desire for justice and the inertia of cynicism, the administration of subjectivization and the eruption of violence. Radical pedagogies that offer alternative “schooling” practices are to be applauded for their intention to meet such challenges, but unfortunately they remain enmeshed in authoritarian and oedipalizing practices that do little to disturb the structures of domination or that replicate those practices at another level (such as the level of unacknowledged practice). As Victor Vitanza reminds us via Deleuze, “A deterritorialization followed by a reterritorialization does not bring the expected liberation” (“Hermeneutics” 127). Similarly, trading the oedipalized subject for a de-oedipalized subject does not necessarily bring about a liberated subject in an era in which the processes of de-oedipalization are too easily made to serve capital.

This claim should not be taken to mean that there are not forms of de-oedipalization—specifically those described by Deleuze and Guattari—that retain transformative potential. It may be that they can, but this will only be to the extent that de-oedipalization is accompanied by a corresponding “de-negating” of subjectivity. So long as subjectivity emerges as schooled by the negative—and especially as it emerges within the logic of the globalized market—de-oedipalization will find new loci of control in the internal master (the injunction to enjoy), which can be described as being just another form of the manifestation of the negative in a different modality. Another way of saying this is that Deleuze and Guattari’s project of negating Oedipus cannot be said to emerge unproblematically within the logic of the global market. Or, as Vitanza argues, capitalism may in fact produce “schizos” (de-oedipalized, schizophrenic subjects of desire) that it cannot in turn control or re-oedipalize, but not all forms of post-oedipal subjectivity correspond to the de-negated schizo-subject (Negation 118). The schizo-subject may no longer be subject to the logic of the market, whereas other post-oedipal forms have been reterritorialized by the market. This effect of reterritorialization is apparent to Berlin when he describes his students as being on fire to achieve the good life despite their classroom “schooling” about its complicity with social injustice (see Hurlbert and Blitz 137). It is also apparent in the resurgence of identity politics and hate crime in an era of multicultural pluralism. The waning
of external regulations and prohibitions can intensify the desire for the
benefits of capital or identity formation rather than encouraging the
exploration of other possible subject positions outside such restricted
economies. In short, despite the fact that forms of de-oedipalization are
engaged in the dispersal of desire, the logic of the market reterritorializes
the majority of subjects in the proscribed forms, including even the
oppositional margins, which, as Mann suggests, actually begin to function
as an advance guard for the center (106). Although schizo-subjects
may operate outside the logic of the market, for other post-oedipal forms
the logic of late capital returns as the injunction to enjoy, erupting out of
the withdrawal of external forms of prohibition and law.

If, as Žižek argues, law is nothing but crime taken to an extreme, it is
somewhat ironical to reframe the postmodern condition in terms of two
forms of law. Žižek argues via Lacan that there are two kinds of law (the
two Fathers), external and internal law. External laws, Žižek claims, are
the ensemble of social regulations that make peaceful coexistence possible;
internal law is the call of conscience, the perfectly subjective moral
law that manifests itself as a kind of traumatic injunction disruptive of
external law. We know the form well: it is Martin Luther nailing ninety-five
theses to the Wittenburg church door in 1517, or claiming, “Here I stand; God help me, I can do nothing else.” Žižek’s suggestion is a curious
reversal of the standard claim that we need external laws to maintain order
over and against the inner call for disruption, such as hedonism, violence,
disregard, rebellion, and all the other joyous forms it takes. Instead, Žižek
asks, “what if the subject invents external social norms precisely in order
to escape the unbearable pressure of the moral Law? Isn’t it much easier
to have an external Master who can be duped, towards whom one can
maintain a minimal distance and private space, than to have an ex-timate
Master, a stranger, a foreign body in the very heart of one’s being?” (280).
External laws can be, and always are, justified and justifiable—belief is
a subsidiary and often an irrelevant consideration. The inner call of
conscience, however, does not partake of reality in this way and cannot
be so easily justified; it is of the order of the Real, and is, hence,
unconditional, inescapable. It is also unsubstantiated by any direct exter­
nal, explanatory narrative. Instead, it takes the form of being “in you
more than you,” the form of a traumatic demand: “God help me, I can
do nothing else.”

The question regarding pedagogy invokes relations to both of these
manifestations of law. If we apply an authoritarian, oedipalizing peda-
gogy, then we run the risk of promulgating cynicism or replicating the
same social structures that contribute to the social production of violence. However, Pfeil and Žižek both argue that with the waning of the social symbolic edifice, particular forms of pathological behavior increase in frequency. There are two ways to look at this. First, the escalation in the particular, idiosyncratic behavior associated with post-oedipal subjectiv­ity has accomplished little toward achieving an increase in general freedom and justice or forestalling the smooth operations of the global society of control. Second, it seems that the ground is now cleared for the eruption of further pathological behavior, including violence, and this situation is only aggravated by the emergent society of control. In this way, we return to the question asked by Wilhelm Reich—considered at length in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*—about why the masses choose oppression and servitude: “After centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they actually want humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves?” (29). It is not, as Reich attests, that people are stupid or fooled. Rather, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, they are predisposed, as subjects produced though oedipalization, to reinscribe through their everyday behavior the same subjectivizing processes that produced them as subjects: “The masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for” (29). In an era of de-oedipalization, we must ask again this very question: Why, given the possibility of occupying multiple subject positions or reformulating capital, do subjects choose to do otherwise and thereby contribute to their own continued subjugation? How have their desires been perverted on the very brink of deterroritilization?

Žižek takes this idea from another angle and attempts to demonstrate why it is that in an era in which oedipalization is no longer the primary means of subjectivization—that is, in the era of the de-oedipalized, dispersed, multiplicitous subject—people are still, ever and again, choosing servitude and domination, while at the same time manifesting new and virulent pathologies. Or, as Žižek pointedly asks, “Why does the decline of paternal authority and fixed social and gender roles generate new anxieties, instead of opening up a Brave New World of individuals engaged in the creative ‘care of the Self’ and enjoying the perpetual process of shifting and reshaping their fluid multiple identities?” (341). Žižek’s argument is that we should be wary of seeing this problem as an indicator that postmodernity is an incomplete project. The argument runs that once postmodernity has achieved its goal of a fully de-oedipalized
subjectivity, the self-fashioning, dispersed, multiple subject will come into full flower. This form of subjectivity corresponds to the decentered, pluralist subjectivity of poststructuralism and is not the de-oedipalized, schizo-subject theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. Having said that, I might also say that it is easy to see that the logic displayed here for the poststructuralist subject is in principle (and ironically) the same that is claimed for modernity, which is also called an incomplete project by its apologists. The problem with conceiving postmodernity as something incomplete until it has completely broken with modernism is that the hindrance actually lies elsewhere—"in the obscene need for domination and subjection engendered by the new 'post-oedipal' forms of subjectivity themselves" (Žižek 360). For Žižek, then, the recession of the socio-symbolic order, of the matrix of regulating norms and prohibitions, clears the ground for the eruption of an internal master—what he calls the "superego injunction to enjoy." The price, as he sees it, is an increase in individual perversity without a corresponding increase in real social progress or freedom.

This injunction to enjoy can occur either at the individual or group level. Jenny Holzer’s famous dictum "Protect me from what I want" describes the operation of this injunction on the individual level: what "I" want, or most profoundly desire, is of course already the desire of the Other erupting from the unconscious or the inner injunction to enjoy erupting as a form of self-reflexive fascism. The unconscious cannot be considered as a pure resource for resistance. This constituted Berlin’s main criticism of Marshall Alcorn’s essay, “Changing the Subject of Postmodernist Theory,” to which Alcorn concedes, admitting that “libidinal structure is always ideological” (345). Although I consider Alcorn to be somewhat mistaken in this assertion—the libidinal is not necessarily ideological even though it may find its modes of expression through the ideological—the point is illustrative of how there is no recourse to some pure scene that would underwrite resistance. Or, let’s consider Nick Land’s charge: “The unconscious . . . howls and raves like the shackled and tortured beast that our civilization has made of it, and when the fetters are momentarily loosened the unconscious does not thank the ego for this meagre relief, but hisses, spits, and bites, as any wild thing would” (124–25). Alcorn and Land are not expressing opposing views on the unconscious but rather two sides of the same coin. The unconscious—insofar as it is produced by and operates within a restricted (repressed) economy—is the already colonized other scene to consciousness, and when it erupts, it erupts with the force of law, regardless of whether that force is on the
side of orderly accommodation or reactionary wildness. Thus, we should reconsider the narrative that has consciousness as the dupe of restrictive, repressive law. Žižek says, “It is consciousness, the conscious ego, which is the agency of the imaginary misrecognition of and resistance to the unconscious symbolic Law!” (307 n.18). This move leaves the door open for resistance to occur at both conscious and unconscious levels while it simultaneously shows the precariousness of theories that hold out unqualified resistant potential for the unconscious.

This precariousness is demonstrated every day through capitalism, which not only provides a climate conducive to the eruption of the injunction to enjoy but also a spectrum of strategies that can appropriate it. A way to illustrate this point is by considering how capital has moved towards collapsing the distance between work and hobby. Žižek points out that this is the case with computer hackers. Hackers who are hired by corporations must follow “the injunction to be what they are, to follow their innermost idiosyncrasies,” even if this means ignoring social norms of dress and behavior; in other words, corporations target the subject’s special, creative, idiosyncratic core, and the minute that this imp of perversity is lost, the minute the countercultural edge is supplanted by “normal behavior,” the employee becomes useless (368). The point is that this kind of appropriation is made directly possible by the lack of symbolic prohibition—the kind that would prevent the entrance of countercultural perversity into the corporation, both at the level of the formerly conventional corporation (in which that kind of employee would not be considered employable) and at the level of the conventional employee (who would have to conform to specific normative codes). It could be said that teachers ask something similar when they direct students to be creative and original for the fulfillment of conventional grade requirements. Students will typically be penalized for not finding their authentic voices or using too bland a style. What we see in such scenarios, then, is the dissolution of the conflict between the institution and the uncanny, idiosyncratic person who must be properly disciplined. This conflict has vanished, to be replaced by the demand of the inner master to be what you are; and capitalism, operating as flexible accumulation, has responded by finding modalities of appropriation.

This situation is summed up by the thesis of Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. The modernist conflict between the repressed behavior required in the workplace (the Protestant work ethic) and hedonistic consumerism (buy, buy, buy!) is resolved, at least symbolically, by hip
consumerism. Frank argues, “However we may rankle under the bureau­
cratized monotony of our productive lives, in our consuming lives we are
no longer merely affluent, we are rebels. Efficiency may remain the
values of daytime, but by night we rejoin the nonstop carnival of our
consuming lives . . . Our celebrities are not just glamorous, they are
insurrectionaries; our police and soldiers are not just good guys, they
break the rules for a higher purpose” (232). The lesson is that rebellion is
both hip and useful, that resistance to capitalism has been effective only
to the extent of becoming “good business,” and that this transformation
in the way capitalism functions was in part initiated by the loss of
oedipalizing symbolic structures. Keeping in mind Marx’s formula that
the limit of capitalism is capital itself, the waning of the authority of the
oedipal father and its authoritarian substitutes might now be seen as a
problem that capitalism has found ways to benefit from. Indeed, we can
take this thesis another step by taking it into the classroom: the rise in the
popularity of cultural studies-based pedagogies of critique can be seen to
follow the same logic. Critique is a form of hip schooling that corresponds
to the hip consumer; we may be going to work or school as normal, but
we can tell ourselves that underneath this surface appearance, we are
radical critics.

I understand Žižek to be saying that ultimately we are between two
Fathers, between internal and external manifestations of Law. Yet,
Father—whether as the matrix of oedipalizing prohibitions or as the inner
master qua injunction to enjoy—does not provide the coordinates for any
substantial action that would maintain a critical capacity that is not co­
opted in advance and made to serve what it purportedly resists. Father, it
seems, does not know best.

Writing the Act
At this point, it becomes clear that we should be looking for ways to
address post-oedipal forms of subjectivity in our pedagogies, using
strategies that circumvent, forestall, or resist the replication of authoritar­
ian or proto-violent modes of control. In an interview, Deleuze responds
to a question about the issue concerning the possibilities for resistance in
a society of control, voicing doubt about the effectiveness of communi­
cation as a strategy: “Maybe speech and communication have been
corrupted. They’re thoroughly permeated by money—and not by acci­
dent but by their very nature. We’ve got to hijack speech. Creating has
always been something different from communicating. The key thing
may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we
can elude control" (Negotiations 175). Since postmodern society operates primarily through continuous, modulating control and instant communication, Deleuze seizes on the idea that one way to elude control is to break up the circuits of communication that are key to monitoring, tracking, and administering everyone. Thus, current forms of computer piracy and viruses could be understood as breaking up the logic of the communicative circuit, which is increasingly tied to production as corporations continue unabated their Internet feeding frenzy in much the same way that factory slowdowns, sabotage, and strikes were the disruptive forms of the modernist age. Breaking up the circuits of communication is precisely what the schizo-subject does; its inability to communicate effectively curtails capitalism’s drive to make it a productive subject congruent with the productivity of the market. Instead, the schizo-subject is desirous, producing according to a logic that cannot be effectively utilized by the global market. However, Deleuze acknowledges the difficulty of resistance in the society of control, noting, “The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill” (“Postscript” 7). Elsewhere he warns, “Compared with the approaching forms of ceaseless control in open sites, we may come to see the harshest confinement as part of a wonderful happy past” (Negotiations 175). In short, the means for achieving resistance through subjective transformations are fleeting and provisional; the dominant forms of post-oedipal subjectivity remain co-opted and controlled.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that our students are entering a world in which increasingly their every utterance, their every communicative act, is noted, saved, utilized, and deployed. School transcripts, church records, credit ratings, shopping habits, browser cookies, the “*69” code and “caller ID” on the telephone, surveillance cameras, police records, medical records, polls and surveys, mailing lists, licenses, evaluations—all these things and more identify and gather information about people, circulating it in databases that are open to those who are granted access. In such a world, we should not be surprised that there is a cynical detachment toward the writing that we elicit from students since such assignments are part of larger ongoing projects of assessment and information-gathering. The usefulness of such an undertaking is also questionable. Asking students to take a critical attitude toward, say, advertising does little to dissolve advertising’s persuasive power over them, but it does provide yet another forum in which they will be evaluated and ranked, a procedure that is most useful for their future employment opportunities (see Dean). The language game of criticism
seldom attains the level of personal affect because students understand all too well that their writing ultimately only services their own continued servitude. This is the world of what Deleuze calls "continuous assessment": from school to workplace, one is always being monitored and tested (*Negotiations* 202 n.7).

It is in this context that I want to examine the (in)famous student essay that David Bartholomae describes in "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum." Geoffrey Sire, too, makes much of it in "Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where's the Sex Pistols?" Over the course of a brief paper, a student named Quentin Pierce negates himself, his writing, his composition course, and his world in general. Bartholomae, it should be noted, kept the paper for eighteen years before he wrote about it, and he considers it one of his most memorable papers. Bartholomae admits that at the time he was not prepared for the paper, that it could not be brought into the class he was teaching, that he did not know how to read it (6). I suggest that we read Quentin’s paper as what I will call an “act” that has sophisticated transgressive potential. I emphasize here at the outset, though, that I do not want to romanticize Quentin’s paper. Although I think it is transgressive, its quality of transgressiveness is not inherent. Rather, its transgressiveness emerges with the advent of post-oedipal subjectivities, perhaps because its field of contention largely derives from that particular subjective experience. Furthermore, its transgressive quality is itself predicated on the background Sire provides that ties Quentin’s strategies to those utilized by punk rock and which is itself often grounded in post-oedipal logics of resistance. With these qualifications in mind, here are excerpts from Quentin’s paper:

Man will not survive, he is [an] asshole.

... 

The stories in the books [are] mean[ing]less stories and I will not elaborate on them[.]

This paper is mean[ing]less, just like the book, But I know the paper will not make it.

STOP.

... 

I don’t care.

I don’t care.

about man and good and evil I don’t care about this shit fuck this shit, trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit

... 

I lose again. (qtd. in Bartholomae 6)
Who is Quentin? Where did he come from? What possessed him to write this piece? Bartholomae compares lines in the essay to *Leaves of Grass* and *Howl* (6). Sirc compares them to the lyrics of a Sex Pistols song, calling the essay the excess that our pedagogy cannot process (I would note that Sirc's pun on "process" is a statement about the limits of process pedagogy) (26).

A careful reading of Quentin's paper shows that it disrupts the exchange circuit on which successful communication depends. First, most extant writing pedagogies would evaluate Quentin's work as poor at best, if only because of excessive grammatical problems. And yet Bartholomae's response, followed by Sirc's, makes this paper something greater than even the typical A paper. Certainly, it can be considered memorable and, for Bartholomae, even haunting. More pertinent, the failures that the paper graphically performs serve to stage some of the fundamental contradictions that define and constrain writing pedagogy. It is not so much that pedagogy fails; it is that pedagogy is implicated at every turn in the structures that contribute to Quentin's nihilism and daily humiliation. Quentin knows all too well that "effective communication" is a trap for him; his defense is to relegate it all into meaninglessness and apathy. Cynicism is here taken to an extreme, becoming a willful nihilism used to portray the failure of the class, of the material he reads, of his writing, perhaps even of his existence (he "loses again"). It may even be that this extreme cynicism betrays an even deeper sense of care; but, again, even if this is so, the world and the classroom are arranged so that such care is difficult, if not impossible, to express.

We cannot, however, stop here. The fact remains that Quentin's paper marks a very specific movement that is transgressive in yet another sense. We could consider his paper an exemplary mark of perversity, and as such, representative of post-oedipal writing. The question we need to ask is if this writing, which is made possible by the withdrawal of the external matrix of social prohibitions, manifests its counterpart: the inner master qua injunction to enjoy. My suggestion is that it does not, but neither is it the writing of that other de-oedipalized subject—Deleuze and Guattari's schizo-subject. However, Quentin's paper can help us delineate between the eruption of the inner master and the passage to the "act." The injunction to enjoy perpetuates servitude in a new, personal key from which there is no escape (as opposed to the external master who is easier to dupe). Writing pedagogies can easily replicate these two permutations of Law. A pedagogy that coincides with external laws will say, "You must write well and conform to all the established conventions for determining
quality: grammar, organization, clarity, and all the other superficial characteristics of correctness.” Conversely, a pedagogy that corresponds to the inner Law will say, “Although you know what kind of writing is rewarded in the university and the corporation, you are free to write in these other exploratory and liberating ways if you want to.” It is easy to see how the choice is rigged: the choice is actually a “forced choice.” What makes the inner injunction to enjoy appear so slavish for the subject is precisely the fact that one is being forced to enjoy what one in any event has to do anyway. Thus, if a liberatory educator teaches students that they can critique the various institutions that disempower them, the “forced choice” imposed on them and transmuted into their own inner selves is freely to choose to present forms of writing that service institutional assessment and ranking procedures. The institution thereby hijacks for its own purposes the alleged primary goal of having students learn to write well for their own advancement. Is there any wonder that students will decline to respect and value this writing as “empowering”?

Furthermore, the unconscious, as the discourse of the other, is every bit as caught up in Law and ideology as the external world (which is also the Other). As Žižek argues, the inner injunction to enjoy is ultimately akin to speech acts because it gains its performative power from “the pre-established set of symbolic rules and/or norms” (263). Although this inner injunction is not in itself a priori ideological, it becomes so in its performative expression. Thus, the symbolic rules and norms structuring action and discourse would include codified forms of transgression as well. A certain amount of transgression is always taken account of in advance by society, and thus hardly disturbs it at all. This is especially the case with intellectual opposition, which, Mann reminds us, is not oppositional but a form of “systems maintenance” (98). What makes Quentin’s paper transgressive is not so much that it opposes Bartholomae or the classroom. Rather, it challenges the fundamental, phantasmatic core that underlies writing pedagogy in general, thereby moving beyond symbolic accommodation into the realm of the “act.” Quentin refuses to find his writing act empowering; he sees that he is being called to enjoy, through his acts of writing, his own continued servitude to the institution and the state. However, it is precisely his ability to cut through that servitude, to refuse to believe in a fantasy of writing for the university as being somehow liberating, empowering, or even meaningful that allows him to traverse the fantasy at the level of performance—which is to say, to make of his writing an “act.” Quentin takes on the risk of failure—even anticipates it—by negating the writing fantasy in such a way as to
challenge any and all readers to reconceive what good or valued writing is, as well as its place in and relation to the university and the world at large.

The “act” in this sense is not just transgression, but transgression tied to the creative transformation of the very field of social regulations and prohibitions. In this sense every “act” is both personal and social, and there can be no separation of the two. In his analogy between punk music and writing, Sirc reminds us, “It’s a gamble, of course, to refuse to reproduce old writing, to be so seized by the desire to create a new thought that one is desperate enough to try to wring meaning out [of] even such nothing junk as safety pins” (“Never” 23). Quentin may not have seen himself as being “so seized by the desire to create a new thought,” but he nevertheless predicated his writing on little more than a “fuck you” to his teacher and a sheer hatred of writing itself—on what writing is in the academy, on what we make of writing in our pedagogies.

I would note that this intense hatred of writing is debilitating to the extent that Quentin cannot ultimately celebrate his “act,” and he thereby denies the fulsomeness of productive desire. Still, this does not entirely delimit what can be done with his work. Composition studies, argues Sirc, is mostly “interested in clarifying the day, further articulating the day, bettering the day, never rupturing the day” (“Godless” 560). The “act” is interested in rupturing the day, in transforming the entire discursive field that determines what is proper and valued. The “act” refuses accommodation in favor of radical transformation despite the risk of total loss. Ultimately, this is what most pedagogies refuse to do: they do not teach “risk” (“Godless” 561). Even the most radical pedagogies, which would wage war on capital itself, betray the servitude that underwrites their success: “if you do this, then this will happen; if you plan ahead, you will save time; if you are critical of power, you will be empowered.” It is all predicated on success in the very economy that defines success in the terms of production and accommodation. Quentin, however, haunts Bartholomae and Sirc because he refuses this notion of success; he refuses to equate it with a kind of writing that is worth doing. In this way, he sets forth the possibility of a writing that would be otherwise—that would not display in each grammatically correct line, in each thesis proved and supported, in each ending skillfully reached, the utter slavishness and impoverishment of what counts as “good” writing in the academy. And, as far Quentin is concerned, there is not even this possibility; he hates what he has produced just as much as he hates the conditions and forces that
were aligned to make him produce it. In the end, Quentin challenges and dismisses the existing writing economy; at the same time, he cannot imagine, create, or otherwise point to a way out or an alternate writing economy.

This is useful for my purposes to the extent that I can note that he never sets out from any established criteria, nor does he try to establish them afterward. There is no model, no “school” here. In this sense, any writing pedagogy that could learn from Quentin’s “act” would have to accept in advance that pedagogy cannot be orchestrated directly to produce forms of writing that would be “acts.” To do that would be to reinscribe the pedagogical fantasy of control. As pedagogy is currently practiced, and as writing is currently evaluated, writings that would be “acts” can only arise out of risk and chance. Most students, I suspect, will actively decline to take such risks. However, that does not mean that pedagogies cannot be designed that would foster a climate of possibility. Such post-pedagogies would themselves have to take on the character of an “act,” and would be nothing less than disruptions on the way to becoming transvaluations of what pedagogy is and how it functions in the academy. Thus, elements of surprise, chance, and risk would be brought into consideration, with all the possibilities for deterritorialization and reterritorialization that go with them. As Gilbert Chaitin argues, “surprise is the mark of that unpredictability which betrays the operation of the subject as a ‘cause’ opposed to any law” (236). Surprise, like other aleatory elements, expresses a uniqueness often covered over in general pedagogical forms.

Just as Worsham claims that the de-oedipalizing effects of postmodernism have helped authorize many of the progressive social movements that have developed since the 1960s, so too am I suggesting that post-oedipal subjectivity is conducive to a post-pedagogy of the “act.” Such a pedagogy would be many things. It would be what Sirc calls a “punk pedagogy,” predicated on DIY (do it yourself) (“Never” 21). It would be a pedagogy of risk. It would refuse the reproduction of the everyday and demand nothing less than the new, the unthought, the unaccommodatable. It would refuse accommodation entirely in favor of a radical abandonment, an abandonment that seeks to squander its energy through forms of desiring production (see Vitanza). It is not enough for post-oedipal pedagogies merely to decenter stable subjects. The war on identity is not enough, it does not go far enough, it leaves the door open for the return of the inner master that merely replicates servitude at a different level. The inner master says, “You may,” but demands that you
thereby enjoy. Although it allows a subject to enjoy the rejection or transgression of social norms and prohibitions, it is nevertheless strictly correlative to them: these things that the subject had to renounce in submitting to traditional patriarchal symbolic Law are transgressive only to the extent that they have in advance been produced by that very same Law. Otherwise, they would not be transgressive; their transgressive qualities are defined within the field of contention set up and ultimately governed by the regulating social norms. In other words, the narrative that sees the two Fathers as oppositional misrecognizes that this is a false front. The two sides are mutually dependent.

Indeed, we might even go one step further and say that every oppositional practice or strategy, to the extent that it defines itself as oppositional, is already structured by fantasy. I do not see how this structure can be dissolved; it strikes me that it is implicit, and hence complicitous, in everything we do and say. Given that structure, and given that every opposition is to a certain degree phantasmatic, we can say that strictly speaking there is no oppositional relationship (see Žižek). Every attempt to oppose is already caught up in, or brings with it, a certain accommodation. It is, perhaps, this point—difficult as it may be to accept—to which we should abandon ourselves. This is one of the tasks for a post-pedagogy: abandonment to the idea that, as Brian Nicol says, despite our desire for it, “we cannot achieve absolute knowledge” (47). I would argue that we transform this negative inability into a positive one, and see in our inability to achieve absolute knowledge the hope for growth in others and in those who come after us. In this sense, then, a post-pedagogy warns us: “hands up, you’re free,” meaning “take on the responsibility for your inability to control everything, but do not do so by succumbing to the pressure to conform to the internal master that arises from the vacuum created by the withdrawal of external regulation.” The abandonment of the drive for control does not necessitate a corresponding surrender to other forms of control.

A post-pedagogy, insofar as it declines to participate in the dialectics of control, is an exhortation to dare, to invent, to create, to risk. It is less a body of rules, a set of codifiable classroom strategies, than a willingness to give recognition and value to unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work. Indeed, it is finally only in this way that we can see Quentin’s paper as an “act.” Writing the paper matters to the extent that it has borne fruit and achieved a social effect. As Deleuze reminds us, “It’s jurisprudence, ultimately, that creates law. . . . Writers ought to read law reports rather than the Civil Code” (Negotiations 169). To the extent that the social
works within the modern—which would here correspond to the negotiation and transformation of social laws—Deleuze seems to indicate that lines of flight are best discerned in the actual arguments that transform the laws, and not in the static codes of law themselves. Thus, change will be wrought in the journals and forums devoted to discussions of writing. At this conflict-ridden micro-level, transformations in how we teach and conceive writing at a broader level will occur. Of course, it is in these forums that reterritorializations will also occur. There are no guarantees and, in fact, at a practical level, given the restricted economy within which writing pedagogy functions, the prospects for change cannot be said to shine brightly. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that Bartholomae and Sirc have been called to challenge the conventions of what counts as writing by Quentin's paper. Quentin stages for us the way, and as Andrew Ross describes punk rock, "a surprising reinvention of the ordinary, the trivial, and the marginal is creatively transformed into a volatile micropolitics" (112). To the extent that lessons gleaned from Quentin's paper can inform composition pedagogies—and thereby create conditions of possibility for producing and valuing alternate forms of writing—this volatile micro-politics can be said to be more than just a fantasy, but perhaps only to that extent, and no further.

Ultimately, writing the "act"—or a pedagogy that would create the conditions of possibility for "acts"—must abandon the drive for explanations that would control and codify what happens and what is written, and abandon the attendant faith that is placed in those explanations. Where the "act" comes from, or where it leads, can only be a transvaluation to the extent that it is understood as a moment. As Deleuze says, speaking of a new kind of event as opposed to a new kind of subject, it is the event that matters, if only for a moment (Negotiations 176). It is this moment that matters, and it is this chance that must be seized.

There is a sense in which my reading of Quentin's paper may also be a misreading because it implies that only certain, special works can function as "acts," events, or transgressions. On the contrary, inventive resistance to control is always happening. Perhaps it is less the necessity of trying to produce its possibility—which in any event harkens back to strategies of control, of orchestrating flows and powers to produce a certain, specified result—than trying simply to recognize it. We need to see how these active moments are already present in student writing in countless different ways, and classroom practices could creatively relinquish control in order to light up the thousand tiny resistances that they produce. We should, I think, seize those moments as much for ourselves
as for them. We need *active* moments as much as our students do, and it is this creative transformation toward which we should work and strive.

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**Notes**

1. In *13th Gen*, Howe and Strauss collect a substantial body of quotes from the media that disparage Generation X. See also Bloom and Craig and Bennett.

2. For more on the possible media exaggeration of cynicism, see Craig and Bennett.

3. My use of the prefix "post" serves multiple purposes. First, it is useful as a signifier of the shift in pedagogical orientation for which I am arguing. Second, given that academia is itself increasingly permeated by the logic of the market, it is useful to be able to brand the concepts one deploys in academic writing. Third, at the performative level, my use of a popular prefix—perhaps it might even be called ubiquitous—replicates to a certain degree the waning effectiveness of critique. Although many academics, especially those aligned politically to the Left, are critical of the infiltration of market logic into academia, nevertheless the pressure to produce something new that will "sell" in the marketplace of ideas is extremely high. Thus, my use of "post" should also be taken as an ironic comment on my own entry into this market terrain, since I am to some degree also critical of this infiltration, but for all that just as caught at the material level in its logic. Fourth, "post" establishes a thematic resonance among some of the key terms deployed in this essay, such as "post-pedagogy," "post-oedipal," and "postmodern," that reinforce my argument that the postmodern age requires strategies, tactics, and concepts specially suited to it. Finally, post-pedagogy resonates with the same or similar usages—such as post(e)-pedagogy—of the term in other works. See Ulmer; Davis.

4. Although many theorists argue that disciplinary society is undergoing a transition, this should not be taken to mean that the institutions, discourses, and mechanisms of a disciplinary society are being replaced. Rather, the emergence of new strategies results in reconfigurations and realignments in the extant logics of control, not the advent of something entirely different from what preceded their emergence.

5. This phrase is an allusion to Lyotard's claim that the postmodern era is one of "slackening" (71).

6. The WB TV network's new youth-oriented shows, such as *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek*, illustrate the need to feel deeply and sentimentally. In these shows, teens are shown to be wracked with powerful feelings, passionately reaching out to each other along the tumid creek and street. We can read this need for powerful emotions as symptomatic of a general waning of affect finding its "other scene" in televised spectacle.
7. Žižek would claim that in a sense this constitutes the fundamental fantasy that serves as the support of a (liberatory) teacher’s subjectivity. Army life, for example, requires a certain homoerotic male bonding that must be disavowed in order to remain effective (Žižek 266). Similarly, the liberatory teacher ultimately enjoys his or her service to the state (and the benefits that accrue from such service) but must disavow this attachment in order to maintain the enjoyment. This adds to our understanding of academics who “hate capital” but nevertheless profit from its benefits: job, salary, validation, vacations, publishing, and all the other defining practices of the working academic.

8. On a personal note, I recall working on a salmon processing boat around the Aleutian Islands during summer vacations in the mid-1980s. Seven people were responsible for operating a machine that cut off the heads and gutted the salmon—approximately one fish every two seconds, sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. I still recall the delicious joy we experienced when someone managed—always deliberately—to jam the machine. There was nothing quite like a five-minute respite from production.

Works Cited


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