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**Rhetoric and Institutional Critique:**

Uncertainty in the Postmodern Academy

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In “Žižek’s Rhetorical Matrix: The Symptomatic Enjoyment of Postmodern Academic Writing,” Robert Samuels addresses a paradox that has likely vexed many of us: “In the last twenty years we have seen universities and colleges taken over by bottom-line business practices, while we have also watched the dissemination of political and economic criticism into most areas of academic culture” (335). Samuels confronts this paradox at two levels. At the institutional level, he examines the forces that have placed composition, in Samuels’ words, “in a low position on the university totem pole” (327). At the theoretical level, he argues that the kind of postmodern political theorizing exemplified by Slavoj Žižek contributes to these forces by repositioning political-economic struggle onto the plain of theory and by ignoring the material circumstances in which many teach.

Samuels maintains that this situation holds special meaning for teachers of composition—for their institutional position and their relationship to postmodern theorizing. In making the connection between institution and theory, he argues that composition in the university is analogous to Žižek’s “postmodern global subject” in that both are “empty and universal” (350, 334). Žižek’s revisionist Cartesian subject, according to Samuels, “is defined by the empty and universal quality of the
subject of the unconscious.” The “totally negative quality” of this subject drains it of political agency because it can only “reject diverse political and social solutions,” not create and act on them (334). Samuels suggests that composition is similarly empty and universal. It is “empty” by virtue of the way composition courses are staffed. Samuels argues that for the last twenty years universities have cut costs in the humanities by producing “a constant surplus of overqualified but unemployable graduate students and faculty”—students trained in theoretical areas (interdisciplinary studies, cultural studies and literary theory), while “the vast majority of jobs in the humanities are still defined by traditional areas of historical periodization” (330). These graduate students provide cheap labor for the teaching of composition courses. The system is perpetuated when these students graduate and, in order to survive, are forced into becoming contingent academic workers or into “repackaging themselves as compositionists in a desperate attempt to gain employment” (331). Thus, composition courses are “universal” in the sense that they are general requirements and “empty” in the sense that they have “no inherent content”; as such, they may be taught by non-specialists—or “people with no particular skills or intellectual training” (350). Samuels concludes that theory has played a double role in draining composition teachers of their political efficacy: it has produced a labor pool with no political power and distracted both students and faculty from the material conditions in which the humanities now operate. Samuels closes by calling for a national (even international) movement that would defend the “particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists” (350).

While I am tempted to answer Samuels’ charge that theory has functioned more as an adversary than an ally, I instead—with the aid of postmodern theory—would like to focus on two elements of his argument: his characterization of composition as a discipline and his call for a movement that confronts our institutional realities. On the first point, I suggest that a more productive conception of our field does not separate rhetoric from composition; on the second point, I call attention to the theory and practice of institutional critique elaborated by James Porter and his coauthors.

**Composition and Rhetoric**

In *Pascalian Meditations*, Pierre Bourdieu maintains that “every field is the institutionalization of a point of view,” a point of view inscribed in things and in people (and, more specifically, in what Bourdieu calls “the
In this book, as in his other theoretical works, Bourdieu suggests that the inability to question a field is the decisive criterion of one’s membership in it: “Once one has accepted the viewpoint that is constitutive of a field, one can no longer take an external viewpoint on it.” In other words, because a field is a “matrix of all the pertinent questions, it cannot produce the questions that could call it into question” (99, 97). Though such an argument would seem to preclude the possibility of any kind of critical perspective, much of Bourdieu’s work is aimed precisely at defining a method and perspective that could submit both theory and practice to critique (his “theory of practice”)—a critique that is always partial, but nonetheless useful.

At the same time, Bourdieu points to less stable fields of study that, for many reasons, admit the possibility of questioning. These fields—or “ill-defined occupations,” as Bourdieu calls them—contain more “zones of uncertainty”; and, as such, “ill-guaranteed but open and ‘full of potential’ as the phrase goes, [they] leave their occupants the possibility of defining them” (157–58). This possibility is the product of the various ways occupants have “embodied” the field—the practices, exemplars, methodologies, conventions, assumptions (that is, the ways of doing things) by which “occupants” become “professionals.” While the absence of shared doxa creates more openings, it also creates more contest since success in such a field, according to Bourdieu, depends on members’ ability to “impose the definition of the profession most favorable to what they are” (158).

Bourdieu’s description of “ill-defined” fields seems strikingly appropriate to our own. While I could reflect at length on the causes and consequences of why composition is ill-defined, my point in raising Bourdieu is to introduce my own attempt to define the field. My point of view on the discipline does not fit the paradigm outlined by Samuels. I chose the field and was trained as a specialist, and Samuels’ description of composition as a field reminds me that one of the most distinctive features of my training is that it never separated rhetoric from composition. So, in this “zone of uncertainty” offered by both Samuels and JAC, I suggest that defining composition outside of rhetoric has important consequences.

First, from the viewpoint of my institutional habitus, to separate composition from rhetoric is, in many ways, to universalize the single rhetorical situation of academic writing. This is an important context, to be sure. But to view it as the only one worth teaching to students is to cut writing off from the world—to abrogate writing’s public function—and
to submit to the institutional order that is comfortable viewing composition as a service course. In contrast, to view composition in terms of rhetoric is to bring to the fore the very issue of power and circumstance in every written text—to explore how rhetorical situations are produced, to analyze how genres work to define and obscure exigencies in the world, and to examine the forces by which some constituencies are constituted as addressees, others are constituted as addressors, and others are never heard or acknowledged at all.

Another consequence is somewhat more problematic for those, like myself, who were also trained in postmodernism's suspicion of tradition. The western rhetorical tradition as I inherited it is, indeed, powerfully shaped by race, gender, and class. However, it is also a record of over two millennia of debates over many of the same issues that occupy contemporary postmodern theory: relationships between knowledge and subjectivity; between politics, culture, and pedagogy; and between theory, practice, popular knowledge, and special subject matter. Indeed, one of the most complete and nuanced examples of these debates is Cicero's *De Oratore*, which takes up the very issue raised by Samuels concerning the character of rhetoric's subject matter. From my perspective, definitive answers are not what is at stake; rather, what is at stake is the field that encompasses such questions.

**Institutional Critique**

While I contest Samuels' definition of the field, I am ready to wave a banner for his call to attend to the institutional circumstances of our work: the "particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists" (350). While such an analysis is at the heart of Bourdieu's "theory of practice," I offer as one way to implement his call to action a methodology of institutional critique already situated in rhetoric and composition.

In "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change," James Porter and his coauthors argue, much like Samuels, that theoretical problems in a discipline cannot be separated from the institutions and cultures that produce them. They also argue that while institutions have considerable material reinforcements ("buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices"), institutions are also "rhetorically constructed human designs" and, as such, are changeable (611). Institutional critique, as they explain it, "examines particular institutional formations that are a local manifestation of more general social relations, nodal points in the rhetorical relationships between general social (if not
sociological) processes and local practices” (621). The aim of this examination is to find spaces where change is most probable—spaces they describe as “zones of ambiguity” (comparable to Bourdieu’s “zones of uncertainty”) (624). Somewhat ironically, zones of ambiguity are generally sites of decision-making. Bourdieu would concur with Porter and his colleagues that “rules” about power relations need to be generated only when relations of power no longer “go without saying.” In other words, to be ambiguous (or uncertain) is to be “contestable”—if not already contested. Thus, the aim of institutional critique is, first, to determine these spaces of ambiguity where decisions about power and boundaries are made, and, second, to make meaningful interventions in them.

An example of what Samuels calls for and what Porter and his coauthors describe might be the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition. Initiated in the early 1990s, this group, which meets annually at the CCCC convention, began by enacting institutional critique in their discussions of impediments at a local level to developing doctoral programs and at a broader level to developing rhetoric and composition as a field. One issue raised early on was the “recognizability” of research in rhetoric and composition, which included the tendency of research to be pressed into preexisting disciplinary categories. The Library of Congress cataloguing system proved to be both symptom and cause. The absence of a classification appropriate to work in rhetoric and composition caused research to be catalogued across a variety of disciplines in the Library of Congress system. In other words, to find research in rhetoric and composition one had to go to education, history, philosophy, linguistics, and English. Thus, what bore witness to the absence of an institutional space for rhetoric and composition contributed to its homelessness by obscuring its research. Understanding the forces that created this situation was an intellectual task—an important kind of research itself. Efforts to change the situation were both a scholarly and rhetorical challenge. The consortium has also worked to identify what Samuels calls the “particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists” by encouraging interaction among faculty in various doctoral programs and helping to distribute information about courses, requirements, and credentialing processes (350).

**Uncertainty in the Postmodern Academy**

Samuels’ argument reminds us that our ambiguous—and, yes, vulner-
able—position in the academy also affords us a unique perspective on the ways institutions work. Indeed, the extent to which my vision of the field of rhetoric and composition contrasts with Samuels' bears witness to the fact that in many ways we are not afforded the luxury of *illusio* that, according to Bourdieu, generally defines a field—the domain of action in which things are done because they have "always been done that way" (102). Bourdieu and Porter and his coauthors remind us that the uncertainty that brings about contested definitions of the field not only opens spaces for our own institutional invention, but also gives us a critical perspective on the forces that create and limit access to power of all kinds (see also Phelps). In the end, I think this is precisely what "rhetoric" is. Thus, to bring rhetoric together with composition is to attend to the forces of access and limitation in the world that our students face and to teach them arts of inventing alternative worlds.

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**Works Cited**


