On September 12, 2001, a column with the headline "Does U.S. imperialism and international racism justify counter-hegemony and terrorism?" appeared in the student-run newspaper at my university. Given the general conservatism of the region in which I live and teach, I was somewhat surprised that a criticism of American foreign policy should appear so soon in response to the horrific events of the previous day, even though the student writer had, in previous columns, consistently raised critical questions about American society, particularly regarding issues of race. My surprise didn't last long, however: in the days and weeks that followed, the newspaper received so many letters—chiefly critical, even vitriolic—in response to this column that they could not all be printed. Although the student writer did receive some support for his views, most letter writers attacked him, calling him "un-American," and no better than a terrorist himself. While this student had been criticized for previous columns, the response following his commentary on September 11 took on a particularly hateful tone. In fact, to my great shock and disbelief, a graduate student in my own department threatened to bring a lawsuit against the writer for allegedly violating his (the white graduate student's) civil rights—a threat based, apparently, in the fact that the writer was black and dared to suggest that racism infects American foreign and domestic policy.

This chain of reactions was by no means isolated to southern Illinois. The patriotic fervor that swept the nation after September 11 seemed to justify a jingoist racism that didn't stop at attacks on foreigners (or anyone who "looked" foreign). In the wake of the terrorist attacks, it seemed acceptable to be racist; in fact, it seemed downright patriotic. As a result, the student writer could be attacked not just for being (supposedly) anti-American, but also for being anti-white. As a result, my local newspaper could feel free to run a cartoon that caricatured Jesse Jackson in a most racist way after Jackson was invited to lead a peace delegation to Afghanistan.

While overt acts of racism have become perhaps somewhat less socially acceptable now that almost two years have passed (think, for example, of the outrage in response to Trent Lott's recent remarks), the racism that ran amok shortly after September 11 suggests that fear and
hatred of difference continue to simmer in many Americans’ hearts. Indeed, any difference at all—anything that deviates from the white, male norm—seemed a threat after September 11.

I begin with this anecdote because at no other time in my professional life has it been so difficult to imagine how to engage students, colleagues, and the nation at large in productive dialogue and engagement with difference. Although Thomas West’s Signs of Struggle was probably in page proofs on September 11, it came into print in a world that was truly struggling over difference. With his critical vocabulary for this struggle, drawing from postcolonial, critical race, and feminist theories, West provides ways of beginning to think through the difficult and complex politics of our current situation.

Above all, West hopes to move the conversation about cultural difference beyond what he considers to be a liberal, feel-good multiculturalism. While liberalism advocates a tolerance or a celebration of difference, West considers it crucial to do more than “tolerate” difference in order to “create livable, viable . . . futures.” In particular, building on the work of such theorists as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, he advocates the building of communities “grounded on dissimilarity and difference, not always in consensus and conformity.” Moreover, celebrating diversity needs to be tempered with an understanding of alterity—the process by which people are marginalized and made “other” through the historical legacies of capitalistic colonization and exploitation.

According to West, this work of building “compositions of difference” is particularly well-suited for those who profess the study of rhetoric and composition. “Cultural differences,” he explains, “are supremely rhetorical: they are defined in language and have real consequences.” Differences “are ‘composed,’ or inscribed into culture” and thus “can be recomposed.” As a result, rhetoric and composition studies forms a crucial site for the political struggle over the understanding and representation of difference.

One of West’s key strategies for rethinking difference is to radicalize traditional liberal concepts. Like the radicalizing of democracy itself, as theorized by Laclau and Mouffe, this strategy makes use of the material circumstances in which we find ourselves—subjects of a hegemonic modern liberalism—by uncovering the generally dormant radical potential of these circumstances. West begins his own radicalizing project by rethinking the concept and strategy of “negotiation.” According to West, negotiation “has become a code word for liberal aversion to conflict,” so
that participants in political struggle are expected to behave with civility and politeness—and thus can be dismissed if they fail to meet these criteria. Moreover, liberal concepts of negotiation involve a mere “trading of pregiven objects or positions” and tend to favor those with more power. West calls for a theory and practice of “critical negotiation,” one that recognizes the role of emotion in political struggle and that “make[s] clear that the act of negotiation is mutually constitutive and not simply a trading of positions.” In other words, critical negotiation involves an acceptance of change, an awareness that engaging with another person or culture involves rethinking one’s own self and culture.

Clearly, however, in the wake of September 11, the dominant discourse has not been inclined toward critical negotiation of this kind. To the contrary, the American president and the American people have asked, “How could anyone hate us so much?”—a question that expresses incredulity more than it asks for any real answer. Moreover, negotiation for the current administration seems to require a certain kind of behavior, a certain kind of civility that is defined exclusively by the United States, and, moreover, is not even expected. Indeed, the current administration has defined Iraq and North Korea as being beyond civility: they form an “axis of evil,” in the president’s infamous phrase.

Given these circumstances, in which even traditional liberal negotiation seems to be ignored, it is difficult to imagine how to change the conversation, how to engage in hegemonic struggle that would overturn liberal negotiation for a radically critical negotiation. In order to struggle for acts of critical negotiation, it will be essential to engage the affective dimensions of difference—to ask, in all honesty, why America might be hated, for example—and advocating for this engagement is another of West’s central points.

Drawing from Lynn Worsham’s concept of “pedagogic violence,” West argues that “the politics and terms of any engagement cannot be understood fully without taking into account the intensely political and social dimensions of the affective relations of difference.” West focuses in particular on the “politically charged emotions” of hate and anger, pointing out that although they are often confused, they are not the same. He associates “hate” with Mouffe’s concept of “antagonism,” a destructive conflict between enemies bent on destroying each other, while he associates “anger” with Mouffe’s “agonism,” a conflict between adversaries who remain dedicated to a common political goal (equality and justice, for example). Based on this theory of emotion, West advocates recognizing the political efficacy of anger, while formulating “theories
and pedagogies that are able to deal with the material effects of hate speech and not retreat from these issues because they happen to run up against ideals of free expression."

While I appreciate the distinction West makes between emotions that are destructive and emotions that are conducive to positive social change, I am not sure the distinction between hatred and anger is so clear-cut. After all, some people are both angry at America and hate America: the acts of September 11 made that clear. Anger, like power, can be both productive and destructive. What seems crucial, however, is to confront these emotions, to acknowledge their role in "compositions of difference" in order to understand how we are composed by the other as we compose the other. West's focus on affect helps put this necessary confrontation in motion.

A politics of confrontation, one that understands the role of emotion and that depends upon reflexivity and dialogue, is far from the liberal politics of civil negotiation and celebratory diversity, but it is also far from the right-wing politics that refuse negotiation and moralize conflict. As Peter Vandenberg comments in his afterword to West's book, we need to go to work, to find ways of enacting what West calls a "multi-critical rhetoric of difference," a rhetorical strategy that works "against the historical legacies of imperial and elitist enculturation." West provides crucial vocabularies for doing this work: how, though, given the current crises that shape our lives, can we use these vocabularies? How can we use them to understand not only the racialized and gendered other, but also the other whose hegemonic discourse propels the country toward war, the other who fears racialized and gendered others? How can we answer the anger and hate that became so easily expressed in the days that followed September 11? Is it possible to confront those emotions, to engage agonistically (rather than antagonistically) with the very people who seem most unlike our best selves—people who not only are not engaged in a project of multi-criticalism, but also are not particularly keen on multiculturalism, especially if it involves people who can be labeled "evil"? West's insightful book leads to yet more difficult questions; many lives may depend upon the answers. We have work to do.