The Politics of Resentment

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We in the United States live and work in a time when certain strands of social criticism are deemed unpatriotic or are labeled as detrimental to the aims of the state and the well being of society as a whole. It is a time known for the rise of conservatism, with a consolidation of media that is driven by a political agenda, and an increasing conflation of church and state. This does not mean that social criticism has been silenced, as illustrated by the popularity of Fahrenheit 9/11, The Daily Show, The Al Frankin Show, and a variety of books by left-leaning authors and ex-government officials critiquing the actions of the current administration. It is more a matter of dimension, in which the give and take of social criticism has swung decidedly in one direction, manifested in institutional responses bordering on censorship that are aided by continual media conglomeration across the past two decades.¹

A loathing of the critical is not new to this time but, instead, is cyclical in American public discourse. This loathing rose and fell across the twentieth century and was evident during the Red Scare after World War I, McCarthyism, and the cold war era. During the cold war, as Donald Lazere notes, there was a "virtual moratorium on criticism of the United States and capitalism" (9). This cycle was repeated in the 1980s with "the reheating of the cold war and attendant conservative attempts to stifle or denigrate left criticisms of America and capitalism" (9). Joan Scott reiterates that from the 1980s and forward, conservatives aligned with the "Reagan-Bush revolution" have actively sought "to neutralize the space of ideological and cultural nonconformity by discrediting it" (4). In his confessional autobiography, Blinded by the Right: The Conscience...
of an Ex-Conservative, David Brock further corroborates Scott's observation, stating that members of the conservative movement attempt to discredit by any means available all who do not share their ideology (34–35). And as Alisa Solomon states, "rashes of American conformity and nativism" have repeatedly broken out "during periods of war, social strain and insecurity over national self-definition" (17).

Since 9–11 and the announcement of a "War on Terror," social criticism in U.S. mainstream contemporary political discussion has often been deemed un-American, unsupportive of troops abroad, or as contributing to the failure of present (and past) military ventures. One day of news coverage during 2003 is illustrative. On this day, news coverage included reports that public schools are too critical of America, accounts of Attorney General Ashcroft's tour to rebuff critics of the Patriot Act, and an interview with Henry Kissenger proclaiming the Vietnam War to be a tragic outcome of a divided country. This day and many others before and after have established a national discourse that places critique and public debate on government policy on the margins of what is deemed acceptable.

The public forums upon which the news is based are also changing. It is now public knowledge that the current president holds what the White House terms "town hall meetings" to promote his agenda but to which only his supporters are admitted, and then sometimes only after signing an agreement resembling an oath of allegiance. Those opposing his agenda are denied entrance to the town meetings and are routinely removed if they gain entrance and voice dissent; sometimes they are even arrested. The concept of the town hall meeting as an open forum essential to maintaining the public debate of democracy is emptied of its prior meaning to signify a managed setting in which critical questioning and dissent is closely monitored, controlled—and, when expressed, quashed. Town hall meetings serve as a metonymy for the anticritical moment.

Discourse knows no national or institutional border in an information society, and it transcends the boundaries between
public and private deliberation. The discourses prevalent in the national arena ultimately have an impact on the language, literacy, and rhetoric that circulate in local institutions of work, faith, learning, and civic life. Recently, and closer to my home in Ohio, legislation has been introduced that promulgates national discourses with anticritical sentiments and with particular attention to higher education. Ohio senators in the 2005–06 General Assembly introduced Bill 24, euphemistically titled an “Academic Bill of Rights for Higher Education,” which is supposedly aimed at preventing discrimination against students. Ohio Senate Bill 24 is modeled after neoconservative activist David Horowitz’s “academic bill of rights” and is similar to other bills debated in Congress and by the state legislatures of Indiana and Colorado. This proposed legislation extends the prohibition against critique and dissent in the public sphere to higher education by challenging the authority of faculty and their professions to determine the subject matter and practices in a classroom, specifically listing such key areas to monitor as the “the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts” (Ohio S.B. 24). In particular, the bill states,

Faculty and instructors shall not infringe the academic freedom and quality of education of their students by persistently introducing controversial matter into the classroom or coursework that has no relation to their subject of study and that serves no legitimate pedagogical purpose.

The bill seeks to repeal standards of academic excellence already in place with its concern for faculty introducing “illegitimate, controversial” materials into the classroom. The bill also proposes to shift the responsibility for determining what is deemed “controversial, persistent or legitimate” to a board of trustees or another governing body and thus to remove responsibility for these decisions from faculty with expertise in the area of study under question.

By implication, this bill also targets any pedagogy that identifies itself as critical. Critical pedagogy responds to the dehumanizing relations of society and aspects of public education. A critical turn, however, can be found in a wide array of classes in the humanities,
arts, and social sciences (and in scientific and technical domains as well). A shared premise in such courses is the importance of educating students about relations of inequality in society with the aim of transforming these relations. Pedagogical and curricular stances that are critical in orientation extend beyond my ability to categorize them here and may include African American, Chicano/Chicana, feminist, indigenous, and working class studies; critical discourse analysis and critical race studies; and courses in rhetoric. Pedagogies that are critical may include any course that takes as its topical focus questions of knowledge formation; language and power; and privilege, equity, justice, and social change. All of these kinds of courses are likely to “persistently address controversial issues.”

Thus, courses that present composition as an institutional practice, or that raise the questions of privilege and access to power in literacy practices, or that offer rhetoric as analysis of publics and counter-publics may foment an anticritical sentiment. With the rise of anticritical sentiment in national discourses, I have witnessed a rise of resentment in my classes, across the general tenor of the universities where I have worked and in the publics that I frequent. As I will explain later in this article, resentment—feelings of ill will or anger against others—now percolates through most national debates over social policy. It seeps through national discussions of race, sexual orientation, immigration, and perceptions of inequities along the lines of generation and gender in issues of social welfare. It therefore appears in the classes that I and (I presume) others teach that espouse critical points of view, whether oriented to rhetorical, feminist, or cultural studies. As resentment appears in my classes with critical foci, students also increasingly appear or reappear in my classes because the factory they worked at has closed or because of some other kind of economic and job insecurity, including being called to serve in Iraq or another front on the War on Terror. My motivation for writing this article arises largely from the observation that the material conditions—historic, economic and social—driving students in and out of my classrooms have appeared simultaneously with a rise in
social resentment—a resentment that is expressed by students and that is echoed in a national moratorium on social criticism.

Resentment can be a valid reaction to injustice and undeserved advantage, but when resentment is left unacknowledged, discourses of resentment combine to form a cultural politic that functions to transfer attention and responsibility from one social and economic index to another. In this article, I use the phrase cultural politic to indicate that discourses of resentment do the cultural work of shaping the meaning and value given to issues, and they do the political work of deflecting public attention (and discussion) away from basic political questions such as who receives what goods in society. As I will explain, the cultural politic of resentment that currently circulates in the U.S. is fundamentally premised on the displacement of the ability to speak about or act directly on the original injustice—and in many cases the ability to know from where the injustice was derived—and results in a shift of negatively loaded emotion to other human targets, often in lateral or subordinate positions. The discourses of resentment that help to organize and propel a cultural politic are galvanized and shaped by a prevailing structure of feeling that manipulates the emotions of various publics. Emotions have their personal and local origin, but I am more concerned with emotions that appear as a logic within a cultural politic of resentment, a logic that functions at the level of a code that is left unspoken.

State, media, and related institutional efforts to suppress criticism may not be simply coincidental, I argue, but instead may be linked in oblique ways to the rise of a politic of resentment. My goal is to clarify how the discourses of resentment that compose the politic arise out of increasingly dire material conditions that are shaping the lives of more and more Americans. I argue that the primary function of the cultural politic of resentment is to displace attention away from these material realities defined by job loss, underemployment, and increased greater economic insecurity for more Americans. To these ends, I offer a genealogy of the politic of resentment in the U.S. that suggests how resentment is historically situated within the anticritical moment and that considers the
significance of resentment for composition instruction and, more generally, literacy and rhetorical studies. In making these arguments, I confess to harbor feelings of discomfort about a focus on the decline in material well being for Americans while remaining silent about the relative material comfort and resources that Americans experience in comparison to most people in the rest of the world. For the purposes of understanding the significance of the politic of resentment within the U.S., however, I cannot delve into current developments in foreign policy without pursuing lengthy tangents. U.S. foreign policies are of crucial significance to the waves of resentment being generated against the U.S. across the world; addressing these with the depth they require, however, exceeds the scope of this analysis.

What I do take as my focus and responsibility is the public arenas and the circumstances that bring students to the university, and any social and discursive practice that figures instrumentally in their lives. Since a cultural politic and the discourses that sustain it observe no borders, the manifestations of this politic will interrupt many of our students' analytic, interpretive, reading, and writing practices in ways that are not easily decipherable in a micropedagogical moment. The indecipherability of the politic of resentment and its negative manifestations for everyday and classroom relations make it easy to misread, misdirect, or ignore its implications. If unattended, it is likely that the politic of resentment will increasingly disrupt classroom dialogue and displace discussions of the connections of macropolitical issues to students' lives. Discerning the implications of resentment for literacy instruction in anticritical times is important because this cultural politic performs valuable work, if indirectly, for a variety of elite, corporate, and government interests. Simply ignoring it is unsatisfactory in part because avoidance can signify an uneasy (and most often unrecognized and unacknowledged) alliance with dominant nationalist and transnational capitalist agendas. Students will choose to align themselves with various social and political interests, as all people do across their lives. My goal in this article is to make the structure of emotions in a cultural politic as visible as
possible to all those involved in composition, literacy, rhetoric, and other critical forms of instruction so that the agendas with which the cultural politic are aligned are open for deliberation.

Fertile Grounds: The Roots of Resentment

Ressentiment, as Nietzsche so influentially observed in "Genealogy of Morals," is fundamentally rooted in unequal power relations and an inability to act directly on the conditions of inequality. It is a French word used in common speech in the German language and is distinguished from the English word "resentment" by possessing, as Manfred Frings puts it, "a peculiar strong nuance of lingering hate that [the] English word . . . does not always carry" (5). Nietzsche was unequivocal in his assessment of ressentiment as a self-destructive emotion of the powerless that had no socially redeeming features. While resentment implies a sense of offense and feeling of ill-will toward another, ressentiment carries added connotations of lasting bitterness—a sense of animosity and acrimony of temper, action, or words—that resentment does not necessarily carry, although in some contexts these words are used interchangeably.  

Resentment derives from relations of inequity and will appear in our classrooms and in everyday lives with greater and greater frequency, given our times. For instance, recently I was eating lunch at a local restaurant and I overheard someone in a booth next to mine say, "Remember that flow chart they passed out a couple years ago and bus drivers were right at the bottom? That just sticks in my craw." A bus driver in my town's public transportation system was describing his unwillingness to accept the lowly place assigned to him as a bodily sensation, something that is simply too tough to swallow. Emotions are conventionally conceived of within Western thought as privately experienced internal states that are personal and not public. While resentment and ressentiment are experienced bodily and are potentially interpreted as private feelings, like all emotions they have social roots. The emotions of
resentment are socially constructed and are linked directly to the relations of hierarchically organized societies. Resentment has social roots in oppression, though these roots are typically not highlighted in common sense understandings that circulate in everyday and public discourse. The feeling of resentment, Jack Barbalet suggests, and "its intensity, and the objects toward which it is directed . . . arise from the processes of comparison, frustration, and oppression" in systems in which those placed at the bottom receive less social goods such as income, status, and respect (79). In fact, any "society beset with social discrepancies and competition is a most fertile ground for the psychic venom of reassertment," Frings notes, but especially ones in which groups do not freely accept "different social levels nor individual persons of higher stations" (17). It is unclear to what degree any society freely accepts hierarchical differences; the United States, however, appears to be fertile ground for resentment given the persistent and widespread belief—despite voluminous empirical evidence to the contrary—that the U.S. is a classless society.

Resentment has a contested status among scholars of reassertment and resentment. Max Scheler suggests that reassertment is "a lasting attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such, are normal components of human nature" (29). The specific "emotions and affects primarily concerned" with reassertment, Scheler says, are negatively denoted ones, such as "revenge, hatred, malice, envy, [and] the impulse to detract and spite" (29). Ressentiment is associated with a host of unacceptable emotions that are repressed as taboo; they are "outlaw emotions," emotions that Lynn Worsham suggests can provide "clues to suppressed social relations" ("Going" 223).

While scholars examining reassertment agree with Nietzsche and Scheler on the systematic suppression of resentment, not all agree with their assessment of reassertment as wholly negative. Barbalet, for instance, argues that Nietzsche and scholars such as Scheler who build on Nietzsche's work have invested reassertment—and, by extension, resentment—with a sense of a "self-destructive
form of anger" and impotence that are not necessarily present (63). Instead, he states, the concept of *ressentiment* may be better understood as “the emotional apprehension of undeserved advantage,” as a just and reasonable response to unjust circumstance (63). Other scholars extend this significance of justice in the formation of social relations to *ressentiment* and resentment.

In his analysis of Nietzsche’s and Eugen Durhring’s work on *ressentiment*, for instance, Robin Small suggests that *ressentiment* is wrapped up with our sense of justice, that “our determination of injustice is the expression of our feelings of *ressentiment* against those who do us harm” (172). Robert Solomon adds that “outrage and indignation are our proper reactions to injustices” and “resentment is that sense of injustice as such” (247). But since, as Worsham states, the emotions associated with resentment, such as anger and bitterness, are rarely seen by those in power as “a legitimate response to violation” in conditions of exploitation and domination, the social formation of resentment is predisposed to be an exercise in displacement (“Emotion” 129). *Ressentiment* and resentment are our responses to injustice, forms of knowledge that are felt bodily as they are simultaneously suppressed by the body politic as unacceptable.

In the U.S., a series of changes in material conditions over the past decades have created fertile ground for discourses of resentment. These changes include a restructuring of industry from manufacturing to service that generally has resulted since the early 1970s in wage stagnation, fewer well-paid jobs, and more contingent and lower paying jobs. Wage stagnation in the U.S. is probably due to various intersecting factors. It can be traced to the decline of unions, a decline that, as Lillian Rubin states, is “at least in part attributable to the successful war on unions waged by the Reagan and Bush administrations” (33). The decrease in well-paid jobs and increase in job instability are likely the result of complex influences. Despite the economic boom of the late 1990s, over the past two decades workers in the U.S. repeatedly faced waves of layoffs, under-employment, and unemployment. The pattern of employment that results—referred to as casualization, flexibility,
or informalization—creates a so-called new "flexible labor force" in which "workers must be 'eager to stay,' but also 'ready to leave'" as jobs move offshore or from state to state (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 19).

Movement of jobs offshore—initially mostly in manufacturing—has accelerated since the beginning of the last recession, which some date to 2000 and others to March 2001, resulting in an estimated 995,000 jobs lost (Uchitelle 21). The inability for an array of workers to get jobs—including large numbers of machinists, steelworkers, pipe fitters, autoworkers, carpenters, mill workers, cafeteria workers and others in similar occupations—undeniably leads to anger and frustration. This point is illustrated by Arlie Hochschild through the words of a saw mill worker describing his co-workers' views that while "everyone else—women, kids, minorities—were all moving up... they felt like they were moving down. Even the spotted owl seemed like it was on its way up, while he and his job, were on the way down. And he's angry."

The movement of jobs offshore has disproportionately hurt the working class and working poor, but current trends suggest that the middle class is—and will continue to be—increasingly affected as corporations driven by cost-cutting motives outsource white-collar jobs overseas. Dave Lindorff reports that economists studying workforce issues estimate "as many as a third of the jobs lost since 2000 were white-collar," and the jobs lost include accounting, customer service, computer programming, engineering and legal work. White-collar jobs prove to be much easier than factories to move, so this trend in job exportation will likely continue to have an impact on the working and middle classes.

Job loss in the past few years has been substantial. Since 2000, Hochschild states, "The U.S. has lost 4.9 million jobs (2.5 million net)." Alan Krueger notes that the U.S. Labor Department reported that it took twenty months after the latest recession from March through November 2001 before new jobs were generated. Contemporary print news sources document the trend in job loss with ample examples of laid off white-collar workers, such as David Leonhardt's account of John Petergal, a fifty-two-year-old graphic
designer in Chicago who found only part-time work at Best Buy ten months after being laid off. The situation of a worker that Francis Clines references only as “Richard” is more severe. After losing his job as a set designer, he was living in a homeless shelter and working in a sandwich shop. The jobs these men acquired after being laid off reflect the larger reality that three out of four of the new jobs available are in the low-pay, low-skill service sector. Too often, the jobs are part-time, the working conditions are poor, and they do not include benefits.

This was the case for Carol Johnson, a health care administrator and single mother who had been unemployed for seven months at the time of her interview “despite filling out 500 to 600 applications and attending countless job fairs” (Strom 25). Formerly a health care administrator, Johnson could not afford health insurance for her sixteen-year-old son, who has learning and emotional disabilities, or for herself once she was laid off. One consequence was that she could only afford to have one of five breast cysts examined.

This was the longest jobless recovery ever, nine months longer than the second longest jobless recovery that occurred during the prior Bush administration. To place my concerns in a local context, the recently released seventh annual *The State of Poverty in Ohio* report documents that

Ohio was hit much harder by the recession in 2000 than the rest of the country, levels of poverty and human suffering soared as jobs and paychecks disappeared across the state in massive numbers. Ohio lost 4.2% of its jobs during the recession while the United States was losing less than 1% of its jobs (0.5%). (Ohio)

The local context out of which I work and live, in other words, is an amplification of trends in wage stagnation and job loss, trends publicized by a steady string of news headlines announcing local plant closures and layoffs. For the recently or long-term unemployed and underemployed, the value of a jobless recovery must seem dubious at best.
Economists offer varying explanations for the jobless recovery. Some economists, as Krueger reports, suggest that employers are more cautious about hiring today then even a few years ago because “fiscal, monetary and geopolitical environments are much more uncertain now than they were in the 1990s.” Others economic analysts, such as Geoffrey Colvin, state that employers are not hiring because their businesses have remained highly productive. Instead of hiring new employees and incurring the increased cost of their pay and benefits, employers choose to drive current employees—often salaried rather than hourly workers—to produce more by working longer and harder.

At the same time that laid-off workers are facing economic hardships, federal budgets are being cut that might otherwise be used to retrain and support them. One combined result of the recession—prior state tax cuts, and current federal tax cuts—is that many states are facing their worst financial crises since World War II. The full effects of the states’ financial crises are yet to be manifested, but they will likely continue to have an impact on social services, health benefits, education, work, and life conditions. In the interim, states currently are implementing various solutions that transfer hardship and cost to their constituents. Oklahoma, for example, is asking teachers to double as janitors, and Oregon is asking teachers to work two weeks without pay. In Texas, a state already ranked first in the number of children without medical coverage, the financial crisis means that 275,000 fewer children will receive health care. In my state, Ohio, Timothy Egan reports there are plans to cut 50,000 people from health coverage, which would result in the largest increase of uninsured Ohioans in history. Already, there are roughly forty-four million people in the U.S. who work but have no health insurance. Large numbers of Americans who have lost their pensions worry about the future, as new allegations of corporate corruption are revealed daily. Downward mobility, of course, is not a homogenous experience that all members within a class experience at the same time or to the same degree. Instead, as Barbalet demonstrates, downward mobility is affected by trade-cycle considerations, as in when some members
within a class ascend in terms of real-income and others descend. What these figures and examples attempt is to represent with broad strokes large-scale trends occurring in the country and establish that real material changes are contributing to greater instability in the lives of growing numbers of people across the U.S. Quite understandably, these changes also contribute to a heightened sense of fear, loss, anger, and uncertainty.

Arguably, the central dynamic behind these changes is the increased concentration of wealth and growing disparity in the U.S. and world. The "pattern of concentrated income" that has accelerated in the past few decades, Katherine Newman states, has "left the wealthiest Americans—again, the top 1 percent—owning more than the bottom 90 percent of the nation's households" (41). It is crucial to understand what the consequences are of the concentration of wealth for shaping the material conditions that have given rise to growing tides of resentment in this country and, increasingly, in the world. Due to international trade and finance arrangements, transnational corporations and the elite class that owns and runs these corporations have consolidated their considerable influence over governmental policies that impact labor, environmental, and social welfare in the U.S. and the various countries in which they do business. As a result, the very rich and the corporate elite simultaneously are far less beholden to the people of any nation, breaking what prior bonds existed between classes. Corporations today can simply move operations to other states and nations if they do not want to pay local labor costs and taxes or comply with environment or labor regulations. Corporations are far less beholden to any nation's people for the human costs involved in supporting workers and their families, including the provision of services such as education, medical care, and other costs related to the care of a populace. Put simply, the corporate class and the very rich have decidedly more sway over the highest levels of government than in the past. This sway is exerted through a multiplicity of avenues—direct and indirect—that include campaign contributions; media consolidation, consolidation and control; membership in ideological and political organizations; and
personal relationships and affinities. To indicate one rather direct avenue of influence over government policy, as Robert McChesney notes, in the U.S., the richest one-quarter of 1 percent of Americans make 80% of the individual campaign contributions” (261).

In contemporary U.S. cultural politics, however, anyone who questions the influence of the rich and corporate class over society will likely be labeled with the “politics of envy” or “class warfare” by factions in the ultra-right wing of the GOP, conservative action groups, and the many conservative ideologues employed by mainstream media. Questioning the current Bush administration’s federal tax cuts, for example, which disproportionately benefits the very rich—not the majority of working Americans—and which figure centrally in the financial crises that the states face, is likely to result in dismissal with these labels or the term “partisan.” These now familiar terms of dismissal within criticism of critique—“class warfare,” the “politics of envy” and partisan labeling—are used in a relative knee-jerk and simplistic manner to dismiss further questioning and silence legitimate public deliberation about matters of serious consequence to U.S. society as a whole.

One result of this displacement—when questions about the common good can no longer be legitimately addressed and openly deliberated—is that the feelings of insecurity, fear, anger, and loss incurred in response to changing material conditions are displaced and diverted laterally onto other groups, social beliefs, and practices. When this discursive shift takes place—and discussions that involve questions of social justice and injustice are submerged or suffocated in public discourse—then various discourses of resentment become significant in public discourse and the cultural politic, even if the underlying sources or the significance of these discourses and cultural politic are not immediately evident or manifested overtly.

The Cultural Politic of Resentment

Fueled by high emotions and a sense of vulnerability and loss, discourses of resentment target those in close proximity—often in
lateral or subordinate positions—while diverting attention away from and displacing debate about economic, political, and social policies with serious consequences for a vast majority of citizens. This is the central function of the cultural politic of resentment: to displace attention from a host of material changes within the U.S. that are eroding the social contract. A pivotal way in which this politic has been repeatedly deployed in public discourse appears under the umbrella of identity politics.

While questions of subjectivity coded as "identity politics" have gained currency and at times have been fetishized within academia, all too often issues associated with identity politics are appropriated in public discourse to stoke resentment. Simultaneously, public debate over issues broadly situated under "class" (which are often inextricably linked with issues of race and gender) and that include job loss, economic disparity (and despair), poverty, and hunger, have become increasingly rare, if not taboo. Identity politics, as Cameron McCarthy states, involves the "strategic deployment of the discourse of group distinctiveness in everyday struggles over political representation and scarce resources (the distribution of goods and services)” (136). Distinctiveness is defined in this case by any group's distance from those in power; the power elite is still disproportionately represented by white, heterosexual, Western males of a privileged class. McCarthy notes that all too often "the production of crass identity politics" crucial to a politic of resentment are "discussed in ways that suggest that only minority groups—particularly African Americans and Latinos—practice, promote, and benefit from identity politics" (136). It would be far more accurate to describe the conflicts labeled as identity politics as "distorting and conservative energies and drives [and I would add, elite energies, that] have taken over the body politics, displacing concerns about inequality and poverty” (139).

Identity politics galvanize attention toward identity markers and away from material conditions and the people most impacted by the material changes occurring, including the working class, the working poor, the poor and, increasingly, the middle class. What is now widely understood and loosely labeled as identity politics is
coded and conveyed by equally loaded and negative key words such as “political correctness” and “reverse discrimination,” and can be seen in efforts to re-label affirmative action as “preference quotas” (see, for instance, Banning “Limits”). What “we have come to call identity politics,” Wendy Brown elaborates, “is partly dependent upon the demise of a critique of capitalism and of bourgeois cultural and economic values” (206). This point is crucial to understanding the politic of resentment. To restate this from the perspective of conventional wisdom, major world events have transpired, including the demolition of the Berlin Wall and demise of the former Soviet Union, which have been coded within dominant U.S. discourses on capitalism as capitalism “winning” in the cold war against communism. Within the prevailing sociopolitical context of American popular opinion and mainstream public discourse, it is almost unspeakable to oppose the excesses of late capitalism. One does so at the risk of being seen as fringe, Marxist, communist, socialist, and a historical “loser” within dominant narratives on nation, capitalism, and democracy.

The unassailable status of capitalism has made it extremely difficult to speak against its hegemony or question the positive connotations of the free market, the implications of the liberalization of trade, the decimation of the welfare state, the risks of privatization, or the increasing numbers of vulnerable, poor, and homeless. Those who do protest the consolidation of transnational corporate wealth and control and other aspects of globalized capitalism, such as in the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization, are often depicted by the media as anarchists and marginal, even though protestors actually included people from all walks of life. These responses to critiques of the excesses of capitalism are likely to be present whether or not the speaker personally identifies with Marxism or democratic socialism, or is motivated by anything other than relatively vague democratic and liberal notions of a common good. The attempts within national public discourses to demonize dissent and dismiss discussion of the material differences organized by the logic of late capitalism, and the rise in the politic of resentment are related
occurrences. They are both symptoms of repressed injustice and signal a decline in debate over issues related to class. As a consequence, the word "class" appears to be joining the ranks of "four-letter words," and discussion of the implications of the changing class formation in the U.S. (and world) is largely silenced.

Discourses of resentment encode reactions to a sense of loss, powerlessness, and disenfranchisement; they consolidate feelings of fear, anger, bitterness, and shame. Instead of targeting the institutions, policies and actors at the heart of the economic and social problems, however, discourses of resentment target groups who appear to have risen—including feminists and various other "minority" groups such as people of color, immigrants, and lesbians and gays—when others have fallen. As a result, the U.S. context currently configures "a whole array of resentments among non-elite whites that have roots in loss of income and status," according to Doug Henwood, "and the transformation of American mobility from the upward to the downward kind," resentments prey to manipulation by identity politics ("Trash-o-nomics" 190). This was the central dynamic in and "paradox of blue-collar conservatives" in the 1980s, according to John Fiske: that "Reaganomics destroyed their economic security by exporting their jobs and dismantling their unions while Reaganism, especially through 'family values,' offered them a compensatory illusion of gender and racial power" (32). Discourses of resentment—such as backlashes against feminism and civil and racial rights—direct attention away from root, material causes of anxiety and distress and toward others construed as advantaged, as getting something for nothing. All experiences that include loss of income, status, power, privilege, and respect can fuel shame, anger, and resentment.

Shame, Thomas Scheff states, arises from such experiences as being rejected, and when left unacknowledged, shame can lead to anger. In her now classic study *Backlash*, Susan Faludi elaborated on the significance of the economic context and its intersection with identity formation in the backlash against feminism. When a large nationwide poll tracking social attitudes for over two
decades asked its subjects to define masculinity, she notes, they consistently offered “being a ‘good provider for his family’” as the leading definition of masculinity (65). Yet in the 1980s, “the ‘traditional’ man’s real wages shrank dramatically (a 22 percent free-fall in households where white men were the sole breadwinners), and the traditional male breadwinner himself became an endangered species (representing less than 8 percent of all households)” (65). The economic base of the prevailing definition of masculinity,

helps to explain, too, why the backlash has been voiced most bitterly by two groups of men: blue-collar workers, devastated by the shift to a service economy, and younger baby boomers, denied the comparative riches their fathers and elder brothers enjoyed. The 80s was the decade in which plant closings put blue-collar men out of work by the millions, and only 60% found new jobs—about half at lower pay. (65)

Not surprising, these newly unemployed and underemployed men are likely to feel shame along with fear, anger, and resentment and to give expression to some of these emotions.

The recently or long-term unemployed, reemployed, and underemployed men, however, are not the pivotal agents framing the public agenda and are not even key players in promulgating discourses of resentment. This agenda is promoted now, as it was in the 1980s, by men (mostly) in key positions in the government, media, and business. Reagan, as Faludi notes, fueled the backlash agenda with statements such as, “Unemployment is not as much [due to] recession” as it is “the great increase of the people going into the job market, and—ladies, I’m not picking on anyone but—because of the increase in women who are working today” (67). In actuality, however, as the effects of globalization⁹ are made apparent in both the U.S. and the world, it is women who disproportionately experience hardship in times of economic downturn.¹⁰ Whether invoked by pivotal public figures such as the president or persons of lesser stature, attempts to use identity politics to manipulate the emotions of one social group in order to pit them
against another group draws attention away from fundamental reasons for changes in economic security.

Discourses of resentment are useful to elite interests—conservative or otherwise—because they focus various publics’ attention laterally or subordinately on racial, gender, generation, sexual, ethnic and other tensions, and away from large scale social and economic changes in which all but the very elite are negatively affected. Thus, discourses of resentment target issues such as affirmative action and groups such as lesbians and gays, immigrants, people of color, feminists, and the poor—the “wedge” issues and groups that divide votes during election years—and not the institutions, policies, and people at the root of the problem. Discourses of resentment coalesce into a cultural politic legitimized by a social milieu defined by the critique of social criticism; the emotions that Americans experience as they are increasingly economically insecure are displaced and redirected toward other targets, including the most vulnerable in society. In this way, the cultural politic of resentment aids in maintaining current economic and social trends and averting widespread objections to the practices, people, policies, and institutions responsible for these changes.

The cultural politic of resentment is particularly well suited to corporate, state, media, and related institutional efforts to suppress social criticism. This is because anger, fear, shame, and bitterness—the central emotions associated with resentment—are rarely welcomed or identified as legitimate responses to injustice, particularly by those perpetuating the injustice. Unlike emotions that are likely to be celebrated as socially appropriate and typically assigned to women—such as care, love, and kindness—resentment, anger, and bitterness are deemed inappropriate and dangerous emotions in need of control.

As I stated earlier, emotions are conventionally conceived within Western thought as privately experienced internal states that are personal, not public. In terms traceable to Aristotle, they are seen as distinct from reason, if not in opposition to it. Emotions are entangled with reason, however, and what we take as reason-
able; they are derived from the cultural, economic, symbolic, social, and political orders in which we exist. The common language of emotion shared in Western societies, Megan Boler suggests, conceives of emotions as natural phenomena located in the individual that individuals must learn to control; they should be expressed privately and not publicly. But even the belief that emotions are only individually experienced and are natural phenomena only make sense within an individualistic worldview that constructs them as such. As Dale Jacobs and Laura Michiche suggest in *A Way to Move*, emotions are "social experienced and constructed" (4). The socially constructed nature of emotion is more easily apparent when feelings are studied across cultural contexts, such as anthropologist Michael Jackson does in *Paths Toward a Clearing*, as Paul Stoller does in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, and as journalist Anne Fadiman does by studying different cultural groups in the same context in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. In *Changing the Subject in English Class*, Marshall Alcorn also illustrates the ideological component of emotions with an example of eating cow meat while serving in the Peace Corps in India, and seeing a native colleague get sick to her stomach at the thought (24-26). What we believe to be true profoundly shapes our emotional responses, and what we learn about emotions almost universally begins in training at home. As Lynn Worsham elaborates in "Emotion and Pedagogical Violence," a pedagogy of emotion begins at home where the principal work is "to transmit an affective orientation to authority, an orientation that changes with changes in the economic realm" (130). In the broadest sense of pedagogy, Worsham notes—in what the Greeks called *paideia*—education is not confined to school but begins at home and reaches beyond to work, church, temple, synagogue or mosque; and the neighborhoods in which we live, play and work. Education of the emotions occurs in all of these arenas as well as through the mediated representations and stories that proliferate in the world.

The dominant discourse on emotion that is taken for granted, seen as common sense, and shapes personal narratives of feeling
is based on the premise that emotion is internal to the individual and controlled through rational choice. To be able to understand the political component of emotions, it is necessary to reframe emotions not as private, individual states but as sociocultural phenomena that structure feeling in discourse. In other words, to consider the reach of emotion in constituting subjectivity and situating subjects within fields of discourse—to investigate the disciplinary action of emotion through discourse—it is necessary to move beyond notions of liberal individualism to sociocultural perspectives on emotions. As subjects, we speak with and are spoken through the discourses available to us; we both strategically appropriate discourses and are constituted by the discourses to which we have particular attachments. Though discourses on emotion may be experienced and interpreted as private and individual, as Lila Abu-Lughold and Catherine Lutz state, “emotional discourses are commentaries on the practices essential to social relations”; they are derived from social institutions, politics, history, and education (18–19). In other words, Laura Micciche elaborates, the “expression of emotion is very much an expression schooled by one’s location in the social hierarchy” and reflects class positioning and values (33). When emotion is viewed in this way—as derived from culture, history, politics, and one’s location in the social hierarchy—it becomes clear, Barbalet adds, that an emotion “inheres simultaneously in individuals and in the social structures and relationships in which individuals are embedded” (65). The sociocultural view of emotion counters dominant perspectives on emotion that present feelings as primarily idiosyncratic states, privately experienced and expressed by individuals, and reveals the political dimensions of emotion.

Emotions are intertwined with human perceptions, values, reasoning processes, and meanings and are recursively influenced by the socially produced assumptions of ideology that circulate in discourse, constitute the subject, and that shape and are shaped by the interactions, practices, policies, and institutions of society. Whenever emotions are seen as needing to be controlled, as in the case of anger, bitterness, and resentment Catherine
Lutz notes, "the view of emotions as natural, dangerous, irrational and physical" is reproduced (72). The feelings and thoughts entangled in the cultural politic of resentment are viewed as natural, dangerous, and illogical. Emerging, illicit, and not fully articulated, the cultural politic of resentment is structured by feeling so tightly interwoven with thought as to make these indistinguishable from each other.

Structures of feeling, Raymond Williams articulates, are expressed in dispersed discourses with no "apparent relation of content" yet demonstrate "the organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group which maintains it, really operates in consciousness" (Problems 23). What is key to structures of emotion is that these "structures are not individually but collectively created" in "an attempt to make a significant response to a particular objective situation," a significant response that results in "a particular view of the world: an organizing view" (23). The structure of feeling that organizes the cultural politic of resentment reinforces not only an organizing view of the world, but one that is dominant. Structures of feeling, in other words, inscribe a logic that shape disparate discourses circulating widely in various public arenas and that comprise cultural politics such as resentment. The structure of feeling that makes a cultural politic such as resentment coherent is public and political. A structure of feeling, Williams continues, constitutes a "practical consciousness of a present kind" that shapes our bodily felt and evaluative response to events and outlooks on the world (Marxism 132). A structure of feeling, in other words, is "a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" and this implicit quality makes it less than apparent (132).

Williams elaborates on the concept of structures of feeling to indicate links between literary and social studies, but I am extending the term to indicate the relations between all forms of mediated representations and social "facts." According to Williams, structures of feeling refer to "certain common characteristics in a group
of writers but also of others, in a particular historical situation" and indicate "a relation between social and literary facts" (22). The relations created by structures of feeling are "not a matter of content, but of mental structures: 'the categories which simultaneously organize the empirical consciousness of a particular social group and the imaginative world created by the writer'" (quoting Lucien Goldmann 23). And, I would add, the empirical consciousness and the imaginative world consisting of and constituted by film, television, advertising and news producers (Banning, "Truth"). The social group in question primarily consists of those more privileged in society and is not likely to include many of the working class, working poor, or poor. The feelings that structure the cultural politic of resentment, in other words, compliment and coordinate with hegemonic perspectives and interests. Since the ideology of emotions that adhere in a structure of feeling inhabits the terrain of common sense, it escapes scrutiny. Outlawed, the feelings that structure resentment and reroute attention away from issues that are likely to unite a majority of Americans end up dividing us.

Resentment as a structuring emotion invites multiple misreadings. When essentialized as natural, for instance, resentment is dismissed as a self-destructive feeling. Rereading resentment as a politically justified social response to conditions of exploitation and subordination advances a political and social view of emotion. This reading, however, does not clarify how resentment as a structure of emotion becomes co-opted by elite interests and functions within a cultural politic to displace attention from the material conditions that foment resentment. A structure of feeling, in other words, helps to explain why there can be a trajectory and coherence to the disparate discourses that comprise a cultural politic such as resentment.

The rise in a politic of resentment is tied to structural changes, both discursive and material; the emotions associated with resentment are a felt response to systematic actions, practices, and policies. Particularly in times of social strain, war, and economic insecurity such as experienced in the U.S. today, resentment will rise, just as national discourses will rise that attempt to constrain
criticism. The cultural politic of resentment displaces attention away from changing material conditions, including the new economy and the work order attending changing national and global conditions that increasingly are having an impact on the lives of more Americans, and diverts attention toward other agents and groups.

Since a cultural politic observes no borders, resentment is likely to be expressed with continued velocity and frequency in the range of classrooms deemed, for one reason or another, critical. The politic of resentment is often expressed as racism, sexism, and homophobia and is not easily traced to the fear, loss, uncertainty, or anger originating it. This is its success: to displace attention from material conditions that are likely to have an impact on many of our students and our lives. Because the cultural politics of resentment will likely continue to define the social landscape and structures of emotions through which students read texts and the world, these discourses must be addressed, somehow, in literacy and rhetorical instruction. The qualifier somehow, however, is key.

**Addressing the Politics of Emotion: Pedagogy of Emotion**

I have offered a genealogy of the politic of resentment primarily to establish the value of articulating how a cultural politic structured by emotion is rooted in material conditions occurring in the U.S. and how it is complicit with a mood defined by a larger moment. My goal in offering this genealogy has been to make the structure of feeling that shapes the politic as traceable and palpable as possible. Any pedagogy of emotion that attempts to address the politics of emotions in these anticritical times would, I think, require as prerequisite an understanding of a structure of emotion as an analytic and theoretical apparatus. By pedagogy of emotion, I mean to suggest the emergence of alternative curricula and classroom practices that address the affective component of experience, situate emotion historically, and account for emotions both as sites of social control and of political resistance.
There are various pedagogical approaches to emotion that are relevant to the displays of resentment that I have referenced in this article. These include approaches defined by psychoanalytic perspectives, deliberative knowledge, a reliance on authority, and the validation of student beliefs, but all of these will confront hegemonic perspectives on emotion in order to address the affective. As a result, it seems to me that any pedagogy of emotion that presents feeling as political, social, cultural, and historical phenomena will inescapably be critical.

Education as a site of social control has perpetuated views of emotions as private, discrete, and disparate natural phenomena; has entrained compliance; and has taught students to suppress and control various outlaw emotions. Thus, any pedagogy of emotion taking an alternative, historical, and critical approach to the schooling of emotion will predictably collide with hegemony, as Williams suggests,

as whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of our living: our senses and our assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society . . . [an] experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. (*Marxism* 110)

The pedagogical stakes to intervening in the meaning of emotion are high. Pedagogies that introduce the politics of emotion or attempts to shift the emotions of students face troubled terrain bound in part by the perception of feelings as private and in part by commitments to the cultural politic that circulates as reality.

Approaches defined by psychoanalytic perspectives, deliberative knowledge, reliance on authority, and student validation each address some aspect of the affective; some of these approaches challenge the binary notions of emotion and reason. All these approaches, however, face the limits that are inscribed by the
common sense and hegemonic understandings of feelings and reality that circulate in everyday life. Psychoanalytic approaches, for instance, such as those that Mark Bracher offers in "Healing Trauma, Preventing Violence" and Jeffrey Berman offers in *Diaries to an English Professor*, advocate supporting student identity formation through pedagogical practices of non-judgmental responses in literature and psychoanalysis courses. This pedagogy aims to recognize students on multiple levels in order to validate student identity, and Bracher's work in particular traces violence to its roots in trauma, thus pointing to the social construction, proliferation, and nature of emotion. Berman's *Diaries to an English Professor* offers credible testimony to the healing practice of private journal writing as functioning to move students emotionally from their prior commitments and worldviews to more personally and socially productive positions. These kinds of approaches, however, are unlikely to reveal the double displacement of a cultural politic such as resentment. This is in part because the emotions that shape a cultural politic such as resentment are not easily linked to an emergent, implicit, and not fully vocalized structure of feeling, and in other part because psychoanalytic perspectives still tend to frame emotions as individual. While these approaches suggest productive ways to move the emotions, the framework itself may, to echo the words of Worsham, continue to "mystify emotions by making them purely a matter of personal psychology and private psychopathology" ("Afterword" 162).

Pedagogies that stress rational deliberation and evidential reasoning and that examine multiple and contending perspectives on emotion will be essential in any historically situated study of feeling. Attempts to address the emotions primarily through mechanisms of reasoned discourse or debate, or through the use of one's institutional authority in the classroom are likely to be incomplete, if not troubled, as Alcorn has demonstrated in *Changing the Subject in English Studies*. Rational deliberation and debate of the politic does not mean that students (or any persons) will change their commitments to particular discourses or feel any differently.
This is because beliefs structured by feelings are likely to be the ones to which we have the strongest attachments. The particular attachments and commitments that feelings signify, as Alcorn succinctly states, suggest that while “[r]ational truth claims can be changed by knowledge . . . symptomatic beliefs cannot” (39). Relying on one’s authority to demand that students rationally know about the politic—to accept the master discourse on it—is equally insufficient, and perhaps even dangerous. This latter approach is likely to fuel an old resentment, that of professorial and institutional authority and control over students. Both strategies—of relying on reasoned discourse or on one’s institutional authority to intervene in the cultural politic of resentment—raise questions of efficacy and elude the role of emotion in pedagogy.

There are pedagogical approaches that recognize the presence of resentment but advocate validation of a social group that has recently lost economic standing, social cachet, or a privileged position within the shifting structures of late twentieth century U.S. democracy. Resentment between social classes, particularly between working and middle classes, has increasingly been written about in commentary on critical pedagogy in English studies and in the humanities, and this scholarly attention to resentment is a welcome addition. Rather than address resentment, however, scholars such as Sharon O’Dair in “Class Work,” David Seitz in “Keeping Honest,” and Russell Durst in Collision Course—all of whom focus on working class culture—and Jennifer Trainor, who focuses on white students in “Critical Pedagogy’s ‘Other’” all propose pedagogies that validate students. Affirmation of student identities is generally considered to be a cornerstone of successful teaching, but its efficacy in addressing resentment is questionable. When resentment is voiced in the polyvocal and dialogic relations of classrooms, one possibility is that a subject targeted by the resentment may be present. And, whenever one student is pitted against another in the dialogic terrain of the classroom, it is rarely a beneficial educational experience. Pedagogical prescriptions to validate student culture and identity can be summarized as a curious choice: affirm or ignore discourses of resentment. When
expressed resentment is part of the cultural politic, however, simple validation will be inadequate. Affirmation of the discourses of resentment translate too readily into an endorsement of them and constitute a professorial breach of faith toward those—designated as others by these discourses and targeted by their resentment—who may be literally or figuratively present.

**Evasion Silently Endorses the Politic**

My brief outline of these various pedagogies of emotion underscores the tentative nature of any pedagogy of emotion and the difficulties in addressing emotion as a political and discursive category. Understanding the emotional force and coherence of a structure of feeling that underpins a cultural politic such as resentment, I would argue, is a key element in educating the emotions. If, as Worsham states, “our commitment is to real individual and social change . . . then the work of decolonizing must occur at the affective level, not only to reconstitute the emotional life of the individual, but also, and more importantly, to restructure the feeling or mood that characterizes an age” ("Emotion" 122). Any attempt to intervene in the current anticritical moment and to structure its relations of domination requires exposing the political subterfuge of politics like resentment. The instructional ground for rhetoric, literacy, and composition in the twenty-first century involves this epistemological work, and the elaboration of a pedagogy of emotion that forwards understanding of a structure of emotion as a lived phenomenon.

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**Notes**

1. For works documenting the effects of media consolidation on social and dissent, see Bagdikian, Alterman, and McChesney.

2. On September 9, 2003, CNN’s online article “Report Says Schools are Unfair to America” announced the Albert Shanker Institute report.
There were multiple local and national newspapers that reported on Ashcroft's road trip, which the Cleveland paper, The Plain Dealer, among other papers, characterized as taken to counter critics. In Kissenger's appearance on The Newshour to promote his book, Crisis, he stated that the Vietnam was an American tragedy that was the outcome of "divisions within our own country."

3. While dictionaries are not necessarily adequate to the task of capturing key differences and nuances in cultural, disciplinary, and regional usage (as many composition teachers have told students over the decades), the Oxford English Dictionary presents resentment as being interchangeable with the French word ressentiment.

4. Uchitelle notes, however, that "estimates of job loss from offshoring are all over the lot. They are back-of-the-envelope calculations at best, inferred from trade data and mathematical models that makes assumptions about the number of American workers needed to produce goods and services now coming from abroad, or no longer exported from the United States to a growing consumer market in, say China" (21).

5. In a November 7, 2003 interview with Brian Williams on CNBC, Paul Krugman, Princeton economics professor and New York Times op-ed writer, noted that roughly 150,000 new jobs per month are necessary to keep up with the growing number of people looking for jobs. The creation of 126,000 new jobs in October 2003 (primarily in hospitals, banks and restaurants), he added, signals a potential stabilization of the economy, but not a turnaround.

6. As I revise this article, the headlines of a local paper, The Plain Dealer, announce that 500 teachers will be laid off in Cleveland and that a Maytag plant is closing in Canton, a nearby town from which a number of my students hail.

7. Census Bureau figures for 2002 show that the largest percentage of those without health insurance for the entire year were Hispanics, at 32.4%, followed by Blacks at 20.2%, Asians at 18.4, and whites at 14.2%. No statistics are listed for the Native population, which reflects an interesting erasure (see Strom).

8. Given the current economic situation in the U.S. and coverage of current Bush administration tax reforms, there is rarely a week that passes without U.S. news coverage or another report documenting the increased concentration of wealth and growing disparity in the U.S. and world. The reasons for the vast changes in class formation in the U.S. are debated. The most neutral explanation—not one I find particularly compelling—is that U.S. industry has been restructured in response to technological advances and global competition.

9. Doug Henwood offers one caveat in After the New Economy when...
he suggests that those in the so-called "First World" might practice caution in complaining about the impact of globalization on its citizens. After all, he notes, the collective rise to wealth of First World nations is due to a history of colonization that has greatly advantaged these nations, a history from which many in these nations continue to derive benefits in terms of cheap labor and resources from former colonies.

10. As the 1999 United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women's World Survey on the Role of Women in Development reports, the "economic forces associated with globalization have had strongly gendered employment effects. With few exceptions, the female share of employment has steadily increased during the last two decades around the world. Much of this increase has resulted from a movement of female labour from the unpaid household and subsistence (agriculture) sector, to the paid economy" (xvii). The report adds though, that "throughout the world, regular, full-time wage employment has given way to a more diverse pattern, characterized by the 'flexibilization' and casualization of employment through outworking, contract labour, part-time labour, homework and other forms of labour that are unprotected by standard labour legislation" (xvii). This "flexibilization' of employment shifts many of the costs of market volatility to workers, making them more vulnerable to recessions and threatening their job and income security" (xviii). Women have become the "preferred labour supply during this process, the report states, "because they can be hired for lower pay and under less than desirable working conditions, in comparison with men. Even though some women have been able to break into better jobs that were previously male-dominated, the majority of women are still in low-paying irregular jobs with little training or promotion prospects" (xvii). Ultimately, "women are often more vulnerable than men to economic downturns" (xvii). This is because they are more likely to be excluded from labor regulations and collective bargaining, and because in "most regions of the world, women's primary responsibility for household labour and childcare show little signs of diminishing with their increased participation in paid work" (xvii).

Works Cited


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