A Postmodern Critique of the Modern Projects of Fredric Jameson and Patricia Bizzell

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Hail to Thee, Logos,
Thou Vast Almighty Title,
In Whose name we conjure—

................
May we give true voice
To the statements of Thy creatures.
May our spoken words speak for them,
With accuracy

Kenneth Burke

As our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man's place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman.

Anna Julia Cooper

Postmodern critiques of the modern have occasioned a number of academic debates that, according to Stanley Aronowitz, realign ideology (137-38).1 Ironically (and confusingly), those who rally to defend the academic traditions of Western culture against postmodern challenges include the orthodox Marxist or liberal left as well as the neoconservative right. That is, in opposition to postmodernism, the modern (or old) left and the right have closed ranks. What is at stake, of course, is the legitimacy of traditional academic knowledge, content and form or methodology. Postmodernists want to know whose and what kinds of knowledge are represented as neutral and universal, whose interests are served and whose excluded. Aronowitz describes modernist reactions to such challenges as containing all the elements of an elitist sensibility: abhorrence of mass culture; a rejection of experience as the arbiter of taste and pedagogy; and a sweeping attack on what is called “cultural relativism,” especially on those who want to place popular culture, ethnic and racially based cultures, and cultures grounded in sexual communities (either feminist or gay and lesbian) on a par with classical Western traditions. (27)
Indeed, a number of commentators have noted "the often unconscious ethnocentrism and phallocentrism (not to mention heterocentrism) of many in this camp" (Hutcheon 17).

The postmodern challenging of the modern is not just an academic debate. The political and socioeconomic developments or conditions of the late twentieth century (what many call "postmodernity") themselves press upon the traditional or modern systems of thought underlying American institutional life, systems increasingly perceived or felt to be inadequate or limited—incapable of identifying (much less addressing) the kinds of social or cultural concerns aired, for instance, by various activist groups in the U.S. (what I am identifying as the postmodern or new left). What the postmodern left exposes in the modern left—that is, in both liberal democratic and orthodox Marxist thinking—is their universalizing foundations, the totalizing or unifying theories underlying their "emancipatory" programs, a kind of thinking as reductive and exclusive as the thinking embodied in the capitalistic or conservative politics they nominally oppose. The modern or traditional systems of thought underlying our political, social, and cultural institutions—representing the left and the right—function to exclude and oppress (devalue and make invisible) entire groups of people as well as the kinds of knowledge and information that, if legitimized, might really afford us new ways of perceiving/conceiving our political and social relations—ways out of the individual versus social or private versus public dichotomies underwriting the same oppressive system.

The Challenge of the Postmodern Left
Systems or theories I am identifying as modern or traditional rely on universal categories transcending historical and/or geographical differences—they rely on a logic of identity and a politics of equality that effectively function to devalue and erase difference; they rely on the kind of abstract universalizing that, for the left or the right, ignores the specific and concrete, what, for instance, Michael Bérubé describes as "the power relations that shape the most intimate and/or quotidian details of our lives, power relations that are ordinarily no more visible or remarkable to us than oxygen" (10). Systems or theories I am identifying as postmodern and leftist (such as many current feminisms) are admittedly interested and partial, as well as historically and geographically limited; they rely on a logic and politics of difference that, as Iris Young points out, does not categorize or essentialize (thereby enforcing once again an identity that opposes and excludes) but that understands difference as "specificity, variation, heterogeneity" (171)—thinking or valuing difference not in terms of some norm or standard (identity) but simply in terms of itself, what it is in its own right. The influence of Lyotard's "little narrative" instead of the grand or "metanarrative" of the modern (60), and Foucault's "notion of the local and specific intellectual as opposed to the
Fredric Jameson and Patricia Bizzell 331

'universal' intellectual of modernity” (Huyssen 220), are very evident in the kind of postmodern feminist theorizing I am describing.

The modern or traditional notion of leftist politics—whether the liberal valuing of the rights and freedoms of the “individual” or the orthodox Marxist valuing of the “social” collective of the proletariat—is based on the marking out of a “public” or “social” political realm that either protects or disregards and devalues what is considered “individual” or “private.” The concerns and needs of many socially marginalized or oppressed groups are often represented as or relegated to the merely “personal” or “psychological.” Leftist political theories espousing either the “individual” or the “social” are based on the same need to oppose and exclude:

Like most such terms, individualism and community have a common logic underlying their polarity, which makes it possible for them to define each other negatively. Each entails a denial of difference and a desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity, though in opposing ways. (Young 228-29)

The traditions of both liberalism and Marxism, as Andrew Ross explains, are “rooted in the Enlightenment project of social, cultural, and political rationality” and “are also tied to propositions about the universality of that project—as a social logic through which the world ought to transform itself in the image of Western men” (xii). Moreover, as Linda Nicholson points out, orthodox Marxism, if once historically liberatory, was by the middle part of the twentieth century using “the generalizing categories of production and class to delegitimize demands of women, black people, gays, lesbians, and others whose oppression cannot be reduced to economics” (11).

If Marxism is the “chief intellectual tradition” of a postmodern politics, as Bérubé identifies for cultural studies, it is a postmodern marxism(s) represented by “a cast of dozens now looking at race, immigration, sexuality, pop culture, and other anarchies” (11). It is decidedly not traditional or modern, not presuming to speak for all or explain history once and for all:

The current Marxism of cultural studies, it turns out, is a Marxism that stopped believing in historical inevitability long before the Wall came down; it is a Marxism that denies the primacy or unity of “class” (and emphasizes the relevance of race, gender, sexuality, subjectivity), no longer believes in an intellectual vanguard, no longer believes in the centrality of Europe, no longer believes that the base “determines” the superstructure, that the ruling class owns the ruling ideas, that class struggle is inevitable, or that ideology is just “false consciousness.” (11)

This is a marxism(s) that has given up its universal claims and categories, a marxism(s) that claims the materiality of language and the psyche, a marxism(s) and a revolution(s) beginning from the ground up, representing many different cultures or groups and the specific conditions of their everyday lives. This is a marxism(s) so unlike orthodox Marxism that it is often identified as postmarxism(s).
The postmodern redefinition of the political would collapse the modern dichotomies of the social versus the individual and the public versus the private that have excluded/oppressed entire groups of people and excluded/suppressed entire realms of knowledge and experience from political representation or consideration. Young identifies "the male bias implicit in the ideals of rationality, citizenship, and equality central to modern moral and political theory" and proposes a politics that "concerns all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decisionmaking" (7, 9). Ross also claims that "a postmodernist politics must complete the Gramscian move to extend the political into all spheres, domains and practices of our culture," a redefinition that would "for example . . . account for those arrangements of power that devolve upon the body, sexuality, the unconscious, and so on" (xv). The oppression of hegemonic cultural and social forces cannot be understood without understanding how political is the personal—how powerfully social oppression perpetuates itself psychologically (affecting even the formation of character). A postmodern politics would issue from all quarters to identify, study, and address the many different forms of domination and oppression a modern politics cannot or is unwilling to address; would signal the beginning of an era in which (for the first time in history) we begin to acknowledge or understand our own deep implications in perpetuating oppressive relations of power.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle at this time to the envisioning or realizing of a postmodern politics is the resistance of language itself (the "quintessential" modern system) to meaning or functioning in any other way than it has always meant or functioned—not to discount by any means, of course, the resistance of those in whose interests its common meaning and function serve. Language, then, what and who and how it represents and (more importantly) does not represent, becomes the central site of struggle for postmodern theory and practice:

It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. (Owens 59)

What can be and is represented is a particularly Western and masculinist (modern) epistemology—a valuing of reason, presence, mastery (what is visible to "the" mind or eye) that functions to devalue or erase all that is not reasonable, not perfectly understood or knowable, not plainly visible. Underlying such representations is a logic (and rhetoric) of identity, a politics of equality, democracy, and freedom of choice that, as Elizabeth Ellsworth reveals in her critique of critical pedagogy, effectively removes from representation or consideration all those whose cultural and social oppression does not afford such interest-free luxuries as, for example, rational debate.
We have at the moment no language with which to officially or legitimately represent the multifarious forms of oppression that operate invisibly in our institutions and in ourselves. Just as the notion of politics must be redefined, so must our notion of language. We need to open up spaces for the investigation and study of knowledges not currently represented in and through verbalization, to acknowledge and legitimize the "unreal," the unknown, the unspoken, the emotional, the psychological, the body as areas for potential representation.

Academic resistance to the postmodern challenging of (the modern separation of) "high" versus "mass" or "popular" culture is particularly fierce. Andreas Huyssen, in fact, identifies this division (what he calls the "Great Divide") as the central distinction between modernism and postmodernism: "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vii). "Oppositional" modernisms like orthodox Marxism, as Hutcheon makes clear, unlike "resistant" postmodernisms, also subscribe to modernism's "founding notion of formalist autonomy": "Marxist attacks on the postmodern are often in terms of its conflation of high art and mass culture, a conflation modernism rejected with great firmness" (26, 28). The postmodern understanding that there is no autonomous or interest-free position from which to counter the system or culture we inhabit means recognizing our own implications in what we set out to oppose (as this essay perpetuates a modernist discourse in order to oppose modernism). The orthodox Marxist or academic leftist rejection of popular or "consumer" culture is, as Ross claims, "unrealistic... when so much of our social lives is lived as consumers" and a position we "simply cannot afford to take... if our popular culture and everyday life... are to be important sites of contestation" (xv). The failure of the traditional left to gain any kind of political foothold is certainly in part due to its categorical refusal to accord popular culture any political significance (and it's important to remember that many feminist and ethnic concerns are devalued as "popular" or subcultural), or to recognize its own substantial investment in a consumer society. J. Elspeth Stuckey writes that the "sorrow of the left is its inability to examine—if not rid itself of—a deeply embedded trust in middle class values" which results in a "left that sometimes sounds like the right, and a right that can say and do anything that strikes its fancy" (113).

Modernist Reactions of the Academic Left

My own feeling about the recent popularity of traditional leftist or Marxist projects in literary or rhetoric and composition studies is that it represents a kind of last ditch academic effort to legitimize the traditions of Western culture—a way to theoretically oppose the system while maintaining its privileges and exclusions; a concern for social injustice, on the one hand, with a concern for passing down a discourse and culture that are the very definition
of class, race, and gender oppression, on the other. As Huyssen notes, modernism—"its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns" (vii)—is still dominant in the academy, even (or especially) in those whose arguments against postmodernism incorporate an oppositional politics. The dangers of what Wendy Brown describes as "reactionary foundationalism" (although I do not agree with her position on identity politics) also pertain to the kind of academic leftist projects I am describing in this essay:

When these precepts "without which we cannot survive" issue from the intellectual or political Right, they are easy enough to identify as both reactionary and fundamentalist. ... But when they issue from feminists or others on the "Left," they are more slippery, especially insofar as they are posed in the name of caring about political things... and are set out against those who presumably do not or cannot care, given their postmodern entanglements. (68-69)

All of the above represents an (admittedly long) introduction, a sketching out of the context in (and with) which to identify the politics of the academic projects of Fredric Jameson and Patricia Bizzell as modernist and reactionary, and to suggest that the popularity of each in rhetoric and composition theory or pedagogy lies more in their academically conservative appeal than in their Marxist or leftist visions. Both are reacting, along with neo-conservatives of the late 1970s and 1980s, against the postmodern changes in education from the late 1960s and early 1970s, against the postmodern critique of the canon, professorial authority, and the legitimacy of academic knowledge itself. Both reinscribe a traditional politics and language: opposing the "individual" and the "private" and "popular" culture with their binary counterparts, the "social" and the "public" and "high" culture; valuing a universalizing methodology and the carefully circumscribed realm of aesthetic interpretation (for Jameson) or rational debate (for Bizzell). Both are particularly intent, that is, upon preserving the traditions of academic discourse and culture.

The Modern (Reactionary) Politics of Literary Marxism

The Political Unconscious, as Jameson makes clear in his preface, "fails to propose a political or revolutionary aesthetic"; it's not "anything like that exploratory projection of what a vital and emergent political culture should be and do" (11, 10). The reason for this—the failure to carry out "the most urgent task of a Marxist cultural criticism"—Jameson assigns to unavoidable historical situations: the tendency of Marxism to view art as propaganda, the popularity of aesthetic modernisms (experimentations with language and form), the political and economic developments of an age "to which the older Marxist cultural paradigms only imperfectly apply" (10, 11). But I assign this to the nature of his literary project (to reinvest a traditional literature) and
his unwillingness to rehistoricize an orthodox Marxism, to give up its "allegorical master narrative"—the kind of narrative, Jameson maintains, that, like "the interpretation of a particular Old Testament passage in terms of the life of Christ" in the medieval system, "comes less as a technique for closing the text off and for repressing aleatory or aberrant readings and senses, than as a mechanism for preparing such a text for further ideological investment" (28, 30). By proposing an orthodox Marxist narrative as the "absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation," Jameson wishes to preserve the centrality of a canonical literature (against postmodern challenge) for "further ideological investment" (17). That is, by providing a methodology by which a modern or "high" cultural literature may be interpreted in terms of class ideology, Jameson seems to take care of the postmodern concern for the political. The problem is that orthodox Marxism is a modern, not a postmodern, politics.

Jameson's first task is to make possible the notion of a Marxist literary criticism, which, according to the economic determinism (the base determines the superstructure) of his essentially Hegelian Marxism, wouldn't make much sense: art and literature could never be seen as anything more than the "instrument, witting or unwitting, of class domination, legitimation, and social mystification" (282). To accomplish this, Jameson incorporates Althusser's structural Marxism, which, as William Dowling explains,

assigns the economic a place within the system of relations comprising the social totality—that is, makes it a part of the social structure along with law, politics, religion, art, and the rest—and by this means banishes forever any notion of the Economy as a hidden essence or occult cause. (68)

Cultural and social phenomena, then, take on lives of their own—are effects of but also affect the system—which legitimately open the space for a Marxist interpretation of culture. What Jameson strategically does not accept is structural Marxism's repudiation of the "master narrative" (history without a "subject" or "telos"), the very theoretical basis of many contemporary neo- and postmarxisms. Difference, argues Jameson, is only meaningfully understood within the context of some prior identity; Althusser's social totality, viewed historically (or diachronically) by Jameson as only one system in a series of systems, is written back into a Hegelian "master narrative."

Jameson goes much further toward reinvesting a traditional literature by suggesting that it be viewed in the same way Durkheim views religion—that is, "as the symbolic affirmation of the unity of a given tribe, collectivity, or even social formation" (292). In arguing in this way for a positive as well as negative Marxist criticism—the need to identify the Utopian promise as well as the ideological functioning of art—Jameson must contend with the "serious reservations" both poststructuralists and Marxists would raise to such a proposal:
How is it possible for a cultural text which fulfills a demonstrably ideological function, as a hegemonic work whose formal categories as well as its content secure the legitimation of this or that form of class domination—how is it possible for such a text to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the narrower limits of class privilege which inform its more immediate ideological vocation?

Jameson’s answer to this is that ruling class consciousness (which he reminds us only develops to counter a prior working class consciousness) also represents Utopian longings or promise “insofar as all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society” (291). That is, even if such Utopian longings “are in this society false and ideological . . . they will know their truth and come into their own at the end of what Marx calls prehistory” (293). In a postmodern critique of Jameson and neoconservative Daniel Bell, John O’Neill notes how both “are inclined to call for a renewal of religious symbolism to restore the social bond against postmodern values which undermine equally the conservative and Marxist traditions” (139).

What Jameson calls popular and/or marginalized cultural texts are important only insofar as they provide the “other” voice in reconstructing the class dialogue or struggle that (single-voiced) hegemonic texts suppress or reappropriate. Indeed, he suggests that “it may well be more adequate to study contemporary ‘high culture’ (that is to say, modernism) as part of a larger cultural unity in which mass culture stands as its inseparable dialectical counterpole” (288). That texts affirming various non-hegemonic voices might be important in and for themselves and the cultures they represent, that “difference” might be thought differently—that is, liberated from its secondary and devalued status as “other”—Jameson’s “investment in centered dialectic,” which “results in an omniscient single model that takes care of and speaks on behalf of all possible differences and heterogeneities” (Radhakrishnan 319), will not allow. Jameson’s Marxist literary criticism is designed to reconfirm and reestablish the centrality and universality of traditional literature; and his Marxist political stand to reconfirm and reestablish a traditional politics:

This is a classic case of a defensive reaction on the part of Marxism whose monopolistic hold on revolutionary subject formation is being challenged seriously by other discourses based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and the politics of location.

(Radhakrishnan 313)

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson clearly trivializes (by disregarding its political significance and radical potential) what he calls the “self-congratulatory rhetoric of pluralism” (320) or (in an interview) the “supermarket-pluralist basis” (“Regarding” 30) of the “new social movements” (319). Pluralism (what he calls the populist rhetoric or ideology of groups) is a “profoundly postmodern phenomenon,” and
postmodernism itself is nothing more than "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (318, x). In his rewriting of postmodernism into his Marxist metanarrative, Jameson identifies it as the cultural logic or result of a third stage of capitalism, a multinational consumer capitalism in which culture, completely commodified (colonized by capital), is incapable of providing the distance needed for the global political critique and action Marxism advocates. Jameson simply collapses the cultural into the economic, identifying the one with the other:

This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror. (5)

The space Jameson opens up (between cultural production and the economy) to legitimize a Marxist interpretation of modern literature in The Political Unconscious significantly disappears in regard to postmodern cultural production.

At best, Jameson would reduce the various radical politics of the last thirty years to economic explanation, to the yet-to-emerge opposition of an orthodox Marxism, with its universal, rational subject (the future proletariat) and its universal, knowable object (multinational capitalism). In asserting that "production (and what can loosely be called the 'economic') is philosophically prior to power (and what can loosely be called the 'political')," Jameson attributes the powerlessness of oppression—the "loss of interest in the self and the outside world"—to non-productivity, to "what happens to people when their relations to production are blocked, when they no longer have power over productive activity" (316), disregarding the fact that the "concept of oppression has been current among radicals since the 1960s partly in reaction to Marxist attempts to reduce the injustices of racism and sexism, for example, to the effects of class domination or bourgeois ideology" (Young 42).

At worst, Jameson suggests that the "new social movements" may be nothing more than consumer compensation for economic and political impotence:

So many new markets for new products, so many new interpellations for the advertising image itself. Is not the fast-food industry the unexpected solution... to the debate on pay for housework? Are minority quotas not to be understood first and foremost as the allocation of segments of television time, and is not the production of the appropriate new group-specific products the truest recognition a business society can bring to its others? (325)

What he calls neoethnicity (ethnicity in the postmodern), Jameson identifies as a "yuppie phenomenon, and thereby without too many mediations a matter of fashion and the market" (341). In a feminist reading of Jameson's
articles on postmodernism, Jacqueline Rose comments about his treatment of such issues that "There is, at moments, a striking similarity between this critique of the heterogeneity of specific interest groups and some of the discourse of the Right against the demands of feminist and ethnic groups" (250).

Jameson concludes that a "genuine (or 'totalizing') politics" is not possible at this time, which he describes as the period of inevitable "depolitization and withdrawal" and economic bust that follows a period of "intense politization" and economic boom (330-31); but he is confident that "a new international proletariat" will result from this latest stage of capitalism ("the purest form of capital yet to have emerged") (417, 36), as the success of an orthodox Marxism directly depends upon the success of capitalism: "the dimensions attained by capital" are "grasped as the promise, the framework, and the precondition for the achievement of some new and more comprehensive socialism" (50). In the meantime, Jameson's proposal for a postmodern cultural politics—what he calls an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" (an aesthetic he admits is more modern than postmodern) (54, 409)—calls for a pedagogical art and totalizing theory to provide the postmodern subject a way to visualize and (re)conceive its class position in the new "hyper" space of multinational capitalism. What Jameson proposes is that "high" or academic culture take on the pedagogical function of closing "the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated" (415-16). Not only does Jameson's Marxism not accord any significance to the postmodern redefinition of politics (as advocated, for instance, by those representing feminist, black, and gay interests), but his aestheticism—his circumscription of politics to the language and practices of "high" or academic culture—is so powerfully class invested that clearly this is a case of an oppositional politics appropriated for hegemonic use.

The Modern (Reactionary) Politics of "Academic Discourse Community"
I am also suspicious (and confused) by Patricia Bizzell's argument in composition studies for the need to teach a "shared" academic discourse and culture (see "Beyond") as the precondition for addressing "the present, unjust social order" ("Marxist" 55). In fact, it is in her recent article "Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies" that Bizzell (using Jameson's interpretive method) admits to the contradiction of such a position—"between acknowledging our class allegiances [middle class] and imagining a larger social vision"—but quickly backs away from its implications: this is "a contradiction we must learn to live with," and "Marxist thought can help us learn to live with contradictions" (65). Is this not also a case in which orthodox Marxism is appropriated to reassert traditional academic values, values that have been repeatedly and seriously challenged in the last decades? Elizabeth Ellsworth writes,
Literary criticism, cultural studies, poststructuralism, feminist studies, comparative studies, and media studies have by now amassed overwhelming evidence of the extent to which the myths of the ideal rational person and the “universality” of propositions have been oppressive to those who are not European, White, male, middle class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual. (304)

Bizzell’s call for intellectuals to represent and teach a unified academic discourse and culture in order to provide for a shared political discourse at the national level “in view of the gravity of the political problems that confront us: racial injustice, economic inequality, environmental destruction, and the prospect of nuclear war” (“Beyond” 663) represents a strong modernist reaction to postmodern critique, a will to order or unify an academy threatened by the disparate demands and forces of an age no longer content with traditional theories and practices. Like Jameson, in believing that only a totalizing, universalizing, rationalistic (masculinist, Western) politics is “genuine,” Bizzell refuses to regard the historical significance of a postmodern politics, which she writes off as the quietistic liberal or anti-foundational belief in pluralism and difference. That is, like Jameson, she does not want to acknowledge the politics of the postmodern, a politics that seriously challenges traditional political and academic modes of operation.

In order to support her “left-oriented political goals” (“Power” 57), Bizzell proposes returning to (and here she's quoting Eagleton) a “traditionalist” rhetoric: “A return to rhetoric would mean a return to considerations of the civic virtue classical orators once promoted” (“Beyond” 672). Like Jameson, who suggests the return of a classical function of art to address the “crisis” of postmodernism, Bizzell suggests the need for the classical function of rhetoric, a rhetoric that assumes the identity of “the good to be achieved by education” with “the common good, with standards of civic virtue set by the community in which the education was taking place” (“Beyond” 672). Presumably the community here is the academic and not the American community at large, but both (whether left- or right-oriented) are already based on the traditional politics, language, and values of classical or Aristotelian rhetoric, a rhetoric of rational argument and public debate that, as Ellsworth reminds us,

has operated in ways that set up as its opposite an irrational Other, which has been understood historically as the province of women and other exotic Others. In schools, rational deliberation, reflection, and consideration of all viewpoints has become a vehicle for regulating conflict and the power to speak, for transforming “conflict into rational argument by means of universalized capacities for language and reason.” (301)

Although classical rhetoric, unlike the traditional study of literature, provides a forum for the argument of social and political issues, it is a forum constructed upon permanent systems of slavery and the subordination/devaluation of women and others (problems that still plague the American republic), a construction historically and culturally defining the position of the white, male citizen, and a view of human nature and the world to protect
the centrality of that position. Aristotelian rhetoric presumes an audience of like-minded individuals: "The political or deliberative orator's aim is utility: deliberation seeks to determine not ends but the means to ends" (Aristotle 158). The "ends," that is, can be presumed, as the *Rhetoric* itself functions to serve: preservation of the political state. The function of deliberative argument is to decide future action according to past action, and the most persuasive arguments are built upon received or common opinion. Aristotelian rhetoric means and functions to preserve tradition. I don't think it's entirely coincidental that classical rhetoric was revived in American universities during the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, or that its popularity has only increased in the backlash of the neoconservative 1980s and early 1990s.

Conflating Jameson's notion of Utopia and his contention that a postmodern rhetoric of difference is politically inadequate with E.D. Hirsch's proposal for a "cultural literacy" for a more democratic public political discourse ("Comment"; "Beyond"), Bizzell reveals the similarities of orthodox Marxism and neo-conservative educational agendas. Educational reform movements such as Hirsch's, addressing the current "crisis" of Western culture in education, are involved in a textual politics: "the struggle to control the very grounds on which knowledge is produced and legitimated" (Aronowitz and Giroux 26). Orthodox Marxists also have a stake in such a politics, in preserving the academic legacy of Western Enlightenment. Aronowitz points out that they "favored transmitting high culture to the masses as the best guarantee of creating a public sphere that would embrace the hitherto excluded" and that "Western culture was understood to be the highest achievement of humankind, and the left wanted only to extend its many virtues to the subaltern classes" (138). The bourgeois values of what Aronowitz terms "modernity" were shared by both liberals and Marxists; and both liberals and Marxists, along with neo-conservatives, have "erected a cordon around legitimate intellectual knowledge" against the threat of postmodernism, "whose chief characteristic in this context is to deny the idea of sacred, unassailable texts" (137-38).

Arguments for teaching the discourse of the academic community, particularly to those students not deemed prepared for entry-level college coursework, betray this same kind of neo-classical modernist thinking. Traditionalist teaching methods and content are defined as liberatory for the very students stigmatized by their exclusions. The ideal of orthodox Marxism—to create "intellectuals of working-class origins who were familiar with the canon" to educate and thus emancipate the masses (and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* is an account of such an intellectual)—presupposed, as Aronowitz points out, not only leisured free time but "a social context that simply could not be reproduced in industrial or peasant societies" (138). Is it possible that the tenacity of such modernist ideals might not have more to do with preserving the traditions of Western culture than in liberating the excluded?
Aronowitz identifies the neoconservative educational reform movements of the later 1970s and 1980s, a history “told in terms of a student disempowerment,” as reactions against the postmodern educational changes instigated in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

Many colleges reduced the number of so-called breadth requirements, especially languages; students won both the right to initiate new courses and a greater voice in educational governance, and they spurred the formation of a plethora of new programs in black, Latino, and women’s studies. (5)

Postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon also makes clear, derives “its ideological grounding from a general 1960s’ challenging of authority and its historical consciousness (and conscience) from the inscription into history of women and ethnic/racial minorities during those years” (10). Writing as process and expressive rhetorics—although certainly modernized (methodized and depoliticized) by composition pedagogy—are postmodern influences Bizzell and other “hard” social constructionists are reacting against: reading and the product and the public self are now valued over their (what are considered less rigorous or apolitical) counterparts. Along with Hirsch, Bizzell believes process has been stressed at the expense of content, student-centered approaches at the expense of the needed authority of teachers, and “subjective” or personal experience and rhetoric at the expense of “objective” or public experience and rhetoric (“Beyond”; “Power”). Although she seems to admit that the concept of “community” or the “social” represents a collection (a more powerful constituency) of the very “individual(s)” it sets out to oppose—“I suggest that individualism is a key feature of the concept of community considered as a middle-class utterance” (“Marxist” 59)—Bizzell concludes that, since her working class students “yearn only to be assimilated into the academic community” and her middle-class students are the ones who are resentful, teaching the academic discourse community must not, after all, serve only middle-class interests (“Marxist” 60).

Like Jameson, and along with Chester Finn (Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration), with whose proposal (“Why Can’t Colleges Convey Our Diverse Culture’s Unifying Themes?”) she concludes her “Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy” essay, Bizzell argues against a pluralism that emphasizes difference for a unified pluralism “drawn together by the common values Finn confidently hopes to find amid the diversity” (68). This is (a study of) difference as it has been designated by a dominant political and social order, difference as defined by a tradition whose identity excludes and devalues what is “other” (a single category to which the most varied peoples, experiences, and knowledges are reduced), difference as it reinscribes the identity of that tradition. The argument in composition studies for teaching academic discourse is a modernist project whose ends (emancipation, equity) do not match the means (traditional academic language and content; hierarchical teaching methods). That this
argument has been posed in the area of basic writing—an area occasioned by open admissions, which Aronowitz identifies as one of "the most radical of the education reforms" and "the one that is still the chief object of scorn and the main candidate for dismantling" (6)—seems highly strategical: academic conservatism can be repressed or legitimized by a narrative of emancipation for the disfranchised. It is important for those of us teaching composition not to conflate the means and the ends of such proposals, to recognize that the means is (always) already its own ends.

Addressing Difference(s)
Like Elizabeth Ellsworth, I do not think difference(s) can be addressed in the terms of a traditional language or politics. Much in the lives, experiences, and knowledges of those marked by the stigma of such difference(s) is simply not a matter of or for rational argument: this is a language, as Ellsworth asserts, "spoken for survival" that, while not to be "taken up unproblematically," demands primarily to be heard or understood (302). This suggests that difference be taught/learned directly, as a subject in its own right, something to be understood instead of (in the terms of and by those of a dominant culture) argued. When my own students resist understanding the demands or actions of the various activist groups on campus we set out to study, they invariably employ the notions of "equality," "democracy," and "reason." Studying difference(s) may be the most useful way for mainstream students to understand how their responses—beliefs, opinions, language, arguments—reflect their own cultural backgrounds; it may be the most useful way to demystify dominant cultural responses to difference(s). Instead of focusing on argument—and the unitary notions of the individual and the community, of language and knowledge it presupposes and protects—we could focus on understanding and how (different) subjectivities are formed by and form (different) cultures. Instead of dealing with the present in terms of the past, in other words, we could begin to think of the present in terms of the future.

Susan Miller argues that efforts to overcome the devalued status of composition "with male-coded fortitude"—for example, by attempts to equal the status of literary studies or identify with ancient rhetoric or represent its research as empirical or scientific—(although perfectly understandable) only "reproduce the hegemonic superstructure" and are all, as unrelated as they may seem, "politically unified attempts to become equal in, and to sustain, a hierarchy that their supporters often claim to be overturning" (49, 51). These include, as I have been arguing, modernist efforts that issue from the academic left, that are accompanied or identified with social concerns or defined as politically oppositional—reactionary strategies that address the postmodern in order to contain or regulate its threat within traditional structures. Composition need not, however, capitulate to such
compromise, as it has always contained (and could now capitalize on its) “active resistance to the exhausted social situations that produced both its negative feminization and ‘traditions’ that should have become cultural embarrassments long ago” (Miller 52).

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Notes

1 Postmodern Education is coauthored by Aronowitz and Giroux, but, except for one reference (identified in the text) from a chapter they coauthored, I am quoting from the chapters written by Aronowitz. Like Elizabeth Ellsworth, I find Aronowitz’s post modernism more congenial for my purposes than Giroux’s modernism.

2 My own interest in a postmodern politics stems from the very American feminist concern with the physical and sexual violence against women and children engendered by a patriarchal culture, particularly its prevalence in the family itself. Such “personal” or “private” abuses of power, especially as learned or experienced in childhood (and often repressed), no doubt contribute to the perpetuation of the public or officially recognized abuses of power protected or opposed by traditional political systems.

3 Unlike Brown, I am claiming identity politics as the inaugural move of a postmodern politics: political awakening, the recognition of oneself as the “other,” requires the temporary occupation or working through of a (modern) position of identity. As Ross explains, “such moments of ‘identity’ are historically effective (they are the result of a shared material and discursive history) and therefore have a concrete existence even when and where the political consistency of such moments may be theoretically untenable” (xii). In this view, theory succumbs to politics, which really only reinforces the notion of postmodern theory as historical and contingent, partial and interested. It is important to note in this regard that both Ross and Huyssen identify poststructuralist theory as a discourse of late modernism: “Isn’t the “death of the subject/author” position tied by mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius? . . . Doesn’t poststructuralism, where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison the chance of challenging the ideology of the subject (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity?” (Huyssen 213).

Works Cited


