

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Writing Program Administrator as Interstitial Radical

by Frank Farmer



ASSORTED ZINES, IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

From the summer of 2013 through the summer of 2016, I served as our English Department's Writing Program Administrator (WPA), a position that bears the local title Director of First and Second Year English (FSE). This title is an inheritance of sorts, since historically our department has had a three-course writing requirement—English 101 and 102 for first-year students, plus one of several literary genre course options for students at the second-year level. Until recently, this model has been remarkably stable, changing very little over the last three decades. But in the aftermath of the economic collapse of 2008-2009, and the university's decision to revise curricular requirements ("The KU Core"), our program was fundamentally restructured. Moreover, the lengthening shadow of curtailed state funding for public education, along with decreasing enrollments in English and the Humanities, as well as the concerted push for students to enter the STEM disciplines—in the context of all these factors, and more, I began my tenure as WPA at the University of Kansas.

To be clear, I do not claim that my predicament was in any way unique or unusual. Many of my colleagues at other institutions were working within the same dire circumstances and were also faced with the task of designing and administering their own writing programs in the midst of less than fortuitous conditions. But I do want to share how, in an admittedly prosaic way, I tried to oppose what I saw as the increasing corporatization of the academy, and the fostering of values in students that were meant to serve the interests of neoliberal orthodoxies. Though my efforts were hardly earth shattering, I offer here a curricular tactic by which I hoped to acquaint students with the sorts of writing that may have little to do with their future careers, but, in my view, a great deal to do with their participation in a fuller democratic life. To be precise, I sought to introduce them to what was, for most, an unfamiliar discourse—an unofficial, extracurricular, discourse—that stood (and stands) foursquare against the commonplace politics and norms of our times, but which, I believe, offers a needed perspective on how some writing can dispute routinized, settled points of view. In a word, I introduced them to the outsider discourse of *zines*.

I will explain my reasons for doing so a bit later. But for now, I wish to acknowledge an obvious reality faced by WPAs as we perform our duties—namely, that trying to get outside of, or beyond, the institutional demands of WPA work so as to obtain a larger perspective on what we do is a daunting aspiration at best. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that it is both possible and necessary to achieve this larger perspective, especially if we hope to foster the values of critical citizenship and social justice for our students, even as such virtues are increasingly discredited by our institutions and the culture at large. One of the ways we can do so is by adopting certain extracurricular genres into our standard curricula—specifically, and by design, genres that offer alternative perspectives and values, "slants on the world," that question the reigning orthodoxies of our day, the most disturbing of which, in my view, is the, systemic privatization of higher education. To oppose the inexorable trend of what has been called neoliberal "creep" seems quixotic at best and hopeless at

worst. As the collective authors of the recent *Indianapolis Resolution* observed, while "faculty have long lamented the effects of neoliberal ideology," we have "offered little more than handwringing as we witness its direct effects" (Cox, Dougherty, et al., 41). Therefore, to stand opposed to the neoliberal "drift of things," we will likely find ourselves having to cultivate democratic opposition in unexpected, innocuous, and often unnoticed ways.¹

The Quietly Resistant Among Us

Those who direct or administer writing programs know all too well that their decisions, their policies, their initiatives, as well as the everyday, routine duties they perform must, of necessity, occur within the context of institutional values already decided by a campus office or committee, a department or college, a dean or provost, an existing policy or directive, and, most intimidating perhaps, a body of institutional traditions. Into this mix of competing values, many WPAs must try to locate their own agency, aware that the values that best express their social commitments, as well as their personal and professional judgments, will likely chafe with the values that were firmly in place before the individual WPA arrived. And implied by that challenge is the related but far more profound question of whose values shall prevail.

In her much noted organizational study, *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work*, Debra Myerson investigates how workplace employees oppose "top down" values occurring within institutional structures that are not particularly hospitable to alternate or "bottom up" points of view. Those employees who challenge "top down" values do so at some risk, and the more radically inclined, in fact, may find themselves having to temper their activities, silence their voices. Elaborating upon the work of Myerson, three educational researchers—Adrianna Kezar, Tricia Bertram Gallant, and Jaime Lester conducted a recent study of how faculty and staff at "five typical institutions of higher education" initiated grassroots changes at their schools (135). Like Myerson, the researchers conducted structured interviews with faculty and staff to determine, among other things, the "tactics and strategies for creating change," as well as how participants enacted strategies for "navigating power and internal conflicts" (136). What the authors found was that while administrators and other "top-down leaders tend to focus on revenue generation, accountability, and prestige seeking," those who work from the bottom up tend to "focus more on pedagogical changes, access, and student support." Those who work at the grassroots level usually "act as the conscience of the organization," lending needed balance to the "corporate, revenue/prestige seeking model of top-down leadership" (131). The authors make a distinction, however, between "grassroots leaders" and "tempered radicals," claiming that tempered radicals have a wider range of options available to them, options that "fall on a continuum from [individuals] resisting quietly . . . to organizing collective action" (134). Regardless, it should come as no surprise that the *most* "tempered" radicals are those whose actions are the *least* visible, and intentionally

so, because they fear “backlash” and the possible loss of their jobs.

What remains unaddressed in this discussion is the ambiguous position of certain lower echelon administrators—i.e., the many writing program administrators occupying managerial positions, who not only administer writing programs, but also train and supervise new teachers, teach their own classes, and, in most cases, are expected to turn out publishable research and scholarship. The scholars mentioned above—Myerson, Kezar, et al—make a fairly strict division between rank and file faculty and administration, but where WPAs are concerned, that division may not be so well defined. Indeed, the liminal situation of most writing program administrators raises the question of whether WPAs could legitimately qualify as tempered radicals too.

Casey Fedukovich believes they can. Taking as her starting point Henry Giroux’s 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication (4Cs) address, Fedukovich thinks that WPAs can, in some measure, answer Giroux’s call to oppose the “neoliberal takeover of higher education” and the Academy’s unabashed promotion of such capitalist values as “efficiency, bottom line profit, and top-down decision making,” all of which have a determinative effect on the issue of central importance to Fedukovich, the hiring and working conditions of contingent faculty. On this issue especially, “WPAs are often caught in a middle managerial double bind. Charged as resource managers and responsive to top-down demands,” Fedukovich argues, “they are both powerless against and definitionally complicit in unethical hiring practices” (112-13). In light of such a double bind, how could WPAs possibly exercise the kind of resistance that Giroux and others have called for? How could they possibly be “tempered radicals” given their institutional placement and the demands of their job duties?

Fedukovich’s answer to this dilemma is to find a model for “programmatic resistance” in the actions of Occupy Wall Street. What she finds most hopeful in the Occupy movement is that its participants embodied “prefigurative practices” (113), practices which, in the words of David Graeber, aspired to “build a new society in the shell of the old” (qtd. in Fedukovich, 113). After reviewing our discipline’s historical efforts to remedy the exploitive labor practices upon which composition instruction has depended, she concludes, “WPAs should approach prefiguration cautiously” (123). Among other things, she argues for a rejection of the “culture of oversight (shared syllabi, common texts, and occluded or top-down review and appeals processes)” for a model that favors an emphasis on scholarly production—this, as but one way to model the kind of inclusive professionalism that might encourage others to see non-tenure track faculty as actual colleagues in the same profession, rather than mere staff (128). The author ends with one final suggestion, namely, that WPAs ought to encourage networks of peer mentors, even if those networks are organized outside the university or operate as an underground affiliation within it. Even though she concedes, “WPAs cannot change national trends in contingent labor,” she does maintain that they can still effect piecemeal changes that anticipate (or

prefigure) more just arrangements within our programs, our departments, our universities (129). The WPA as tempered radical is a figure who, despite formidable limits and restraints, can make modest but important changes in the “business as usual” routines of writing program administration.

I look upon my WPA experience as one where I performed quietly resistant work, where, in a variety of benign and mostly unnoticed ways, I challenged the tacitly endorsed orthodoxies of the neoliberal academy. In other words, following Fedukovich, I thought of myself as a tempered radical. But that title seems, in some ways, incomplete. I therefore wish to extend Fedukovich by suggesting that WPAs ought to be regarded not merely as tempered radicals, but as *interstitial radicals* as well. Fedukovich’s term names a condition WPAs face resulting from the constraints upon the nature of the work they are required to do. My elaboration of her term identifies, in a general way, the potential spaces where tempered radicals might best perform acts of resistance. What, then, does it mean to do work in the interstices?

Ruptural, Symbiotic, Interstitial: Three Models for Institutional Change

In his comprehensive study of present-day capitalism, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright advances three frameworks for understanding social change—or more exactly, three models for transforming currently oppressive conditions into something better than what we now have. The first is what he calls *ruptural transformation*. This might also be called the “clean break” model, a tactic that argues for a complete structural overhaul of the way things presently are. For obvious reasons, this model is closely aligned with traditions of revolutionary change (Marxist or not), and its method is usually one of direct confrontation, though it can accommodate more surreptitious forms of actions as well. For academics to choose this model is to imagine, and to work for, a fundamentally different university than the one we now have—and by implication, a fundamentally different conception of writing programs than the ones presently available. The most glaring drawback of this model is its utter improbability. Just as it is hard to imagine a widespread socialist uprising against the neoliberal policies that currently define American democracy, it is likewise hard to imagine a completely new academy (or writing program) realized through collective action. Or perhaps I should qualify my claim by adding that such a possibility is far easier to imagine than to realize.

But a second model is proffered as well. Wright calls this framework one of *symbiotic transformation*. This is the “working within the system” strategy, and it is a familiar one because it best aligns with the give and take of liberal democracies. Needless to say, such a model would reject as completely unrealistic the wholesale revamping of the neoliberal university and instead would seek to alter the neoliberal university by advocating for incremental gains and piecemeal reforms when and where possible. It embraces an unabashedly gradualist model, and it is one that most WPAs are familiar with, since the practices and

circumstances of our duties require that we work within this model, that is to say, that we “work within the system.” No doubt, some of us are quite comfortable performing our tasks within a symbiotic framework, since many of us are already used to doing so. But for many others, subscribing to this model is deeply troubling and unsatisfying since it renders us complicit in exploitive practices and, more generally, implies an endorsement of the neoliberal practices that guide the present-day university.

In a larger sense, the symbiotic model is certainly vulnerable to other criticisms. There are no assurances, for example, that progressive victories once achieved will last. The neoliberal rollback of social “safety net” programs, here and elsewhere, is a reminder of the effacing power of global capitalism, what David Harvey refers to as “accumulation by dispossession” (159-65). A second criticism is that negotiated, “marginal victories” do little to “fundamentally challenge elite domination,” and thus end up perpetuating systemic inequities, even while altering this or that injustice in piecemeal fashion (Mattern 4). Finally, to work within a symbiotic model of change may come at a very high price. Even a casual observer of our current political scene is aware that seldom do good arguments win the day, seldom are enlightened policies the result of rational debate and deliberation. Rather, as Mark Mattern points out, efficacy within our liberal democratic system more typically requires “negative campaigning, dissimulation, lies, half-truths, and pandering . . . resulting in widespread cynicism, distrust and enmity against public leaders, and deep, often hostile fractures separating members of the public from each other” (4). Mattern’s observation may be overstated, but it would be hard to deny that these features are not only characteristic of American politics, but, to some extent, are discernible in university politics too.

What then can be done? Are there any other options available by which to resist what seems to be the overwhelming hegemony of neoliberal orthodoxies that presently shape political and institutional life?

Interstitial work can thus easily go unnoticed because interstitial tactics frequently (though not always) happen in “out of the way” spaces and moments, any of which might sow the seeds for emancipatory change in the future.

Wright mentions a third model of change, what he names *interstitial transformation*. This “tactical” model occurs in the nooks and crannies, the breaks and cracks of the dominant order, since, as Wright maintains, every dominant order, every regime, will have its existing gaps, as well as its opportunities to create new ones. It is within such openings, whether found or made, that the interstitial activist seeks to discover new forms of relations, new possibilities distinct from the ones imposed on society and its institutions by neoliberalism. Interstitial work can

thus easily go unnoticed because interstitial tactics frequently (though not always) happen in “out of the way” spaces and moments, any of which might sow the seeds for emancipatory change in the future. In its more visible manifestations, Wright lists worker and consumer co-ops, battered women’s shelters, intentional communities, communes, civic environmental councils, and so on as illustrations of interstitial alternatives. (324). And while Wright does not discuss less public interstitial work, he does seem to allow that interstitial work could assume various forms and modes of expression. As Mattern points out, interstitial work might include DIY Punk music, poetry slams, graffiti and street art, and flash mobs. (To such forms, of course, it would be easy to add other modes of semiotic reappropriation, modes such as *dérive*, culture jamming, hacking, guerilla art, etc.) Ultimately, though, what all forms of interstitial activity have in common, according to Wright, is the “idea of building alternative institutions and deliberately fostering new forms of social relations that embody emancipatory ideals and that are created primarily through direct action . . . rather than through the state” (324). Such is why the politics of interstitial activity is, as noted above, typically referred to as *prefigurative*—idealistic, rooted in social hope, anticipating a future when interstitial activities would not be needed in the first place.

As with ruptural and symbiotic models, the interstitial transformation is vulnerable to criticism as well. Traditional Marxist critics see it as a retreat or abdication of sorts, posing “no serious challenge to existing relations of power and domination (326).” Rather, Marxist critics would argue, it tends to “siphon” off radical “discontent,” converting otherwise revolutionary energies into niches, lifestyles, and alternative communities (326). Wright notes that this Marxist argument would be compelling were it not for the fact that “capitalism is sufficiently secure and flexible in its structures that there is no strategy possible that immediately threatens it” (327). It cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the question, “What can be done here and now?”—a question I often asked myself as a new WPA.²

In the section to follow, I will describe my efforts as a tempered, interstitial radical to acquaint several hundred incoming students with an avowedly oppositional discourse—the self-published, contentious, quirky, unprofessional, and provocative genre of the *zine*, and the DIY politics that finds expression in zine texts. To be sure, not all zines are explicitly political in their themes and content, though some are socialist in outlook, and many more promote an anarchist ethos that is reflective of their DIY inheritance. Other zines deal with issues related to gender, mental illness, transgender identity, economic justice, Black Lives Matter, while still others are highly personal, artistic, or simply whimsical. But is important to understand that zine politics can never be reduced to the content of any particular zine. Because zines emerged out of underground or alternative subcultures, they express a certain politics even when they seem not to. And the politics they express is one decidedly at odds with officialdom and its institutions, including the university.

Local WPA Goes DIY

What happens when a writing program administrator decides to incorporate a unit on zine making in a common syllabus for new teachers? Where are the challenges to be overcome if such a unit is to be successful? Where does the WPA go to provide resources for new teachers, as well as resources for those teachers' students? In the following pages, I want to address the problems encountered when, as a new WPA, I designed a common syllabus for a class of new teachers at the University of Kansas, a public institution, like many others, struggling to weather the realities of decreased state funding and decreased



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enrollments, especially in the Humanities. The syllabus I designed was composed of four units. The first unit asked our English 101 students to make their own zines, and then to provide an accompanying rationale for the choices that went into their zines; the second unit asked students to perform a rhetorical analysis of a visual text; a third unit asked students to compose a multimodal project of their choice—a podcast, video, poster, brochure, in-class performance, public service announcement, etc.; and a final unit asked them to revise what they produced in one of the three previous units.

But an obvious question immediately presents itself: How is it that I would need to design a common syllabus in the first place? A little background might be instructive at this point.

When I assumed the leadership of our department's composition program, I was charged with a number of varied responsibilities, foremost among which was the training and preparation of new graduate teaching assistants. While some of our new teaching assistants bring with them Writing Center experience, and while some arrive having had coursework in composition theory and research, very few have any actual experience in the teaching of writing. Thus, to prepare new teachers to teach, we require them to attend a four-day orientation session occurring in the week immediately prior to the beginning of the semester, after which they are required to attend a once-weekly practicum wherein they discuss shared challenges, problems, occasional crises, successes, and "teachable moments" as the semester proceeds. Moreover, new teachers who have no prior familiarity with composition studies are required to take our English 801 course, a broad introduction to the field and its best instructional practices.

Our program requires a common syllabus, then, because we want to insure that course goals are reflected in what actually occurs in our classrooms. But on a more practical level, we want to relieve new teachers of the burden of having to author their own syllabus—a reasonable accommodation, we think, especially when so few have had previous experience in composing *any* syllabus. If I may hazard a broad observation, it is usually the case that our new teachers are extremely grateful that someone else is providing them with a common syllabus from which to teach. As the semester proceeds, though, they become less enamored of the common syllabus, and often express the wish to design their own class. This, we think, is as it should be, and in subsequent semesters, they do indeed write their own syllabi.

How was it, then, that I decided to include an opening unit on zines? The answer to that question should not really be all that surprising. Because zines originate in subcultural milieus, and because alternative communities form around zines, it seemed obvious to me zines embodied a critical literacy of a particular sort—to be sure, a literacy that is not always acknowledged or esteemed by others as a literacy, but a critical literacy nonetheless. Additionally, since my own scholarship had taken a public turn, I became very interested in looking upon zine cultures and communities as a kind of public—to be exact, an exemplary *counterpublic*, at least in the ways that term gets defined by Nancy Fraser and later redefined by Michael Warner. Not that this was an original insight. Michelle Comstock and a few other scholars had previously alluded to zines as a counterpublic, but none had spent much time developing that idea. Nonetheless, at the time I became the WPA for our program, I had already been immersed in zine writing and zine culture. I read zines and zine scholarship; I became friends with local and regional zinesters; I attended zine festivals; I gave a talk at the christening of our local "zinemobile," and I made my own zine. And since I take seriously the venerable injunction that our research should inform our teaching, I took this directive one step further, and extended it to say that not only should our research inform our teaching, but it should also inform the ways we administer our writing programs.

grades? For my teachers, and for myself, these issues remained unresolved.

And how, then, did those 800 or so first-year students react to this assignment? Without a direct survey of student opinion on this specific unit, I only have two ways of answering this question—first, by what teachers anecdotally tell me and each other, and second, by what their students tell us in their end of semester course evaluations. As to the first, our teachers reported some resistance to this unit. Generally speaking, teachers believed that this resistance arose because the zine unit undercut expectations of a university writing course, and thus it was the source of considerable anxiety for some students. This resistance was often expressed by direct questions put to the teacher: “Why are you making us do these things?” “How will making a zine help my writing in my other classes?” “Couldn’t you ask us to do something more relevant to my generation?” Occasionally, students were more dismissive: “I did this in junior high; why am I doing it in college?” A few students seemed to be insulted by the assignment, but most, according to new teachers, did their best to do the assignment and to do it well. Predictably, some students did better work on their zines than their accompanying rationales, and vice versa. But a surprising number of students turned in projects where both their zines and rationales worked together effectively, in the ways that we had hoped for in our practicum. Among popular topics were the following: guides to the student’s hometown, favorite personal hobbies, profiles of best friends, “shitty roommates,” and assorted pet peeves. Some were issue oriented, some were identity oriented, and some were even a little snarky, with a healthy dose of attitude about something that mattered to the student. I liked those the best, though I can’t say our new teachers would say the same.

While the early anecdotal reports about the zine unit were not always encouraging, a somewhat different picture emerges when I looked at all end of term instructor evaluations from those who taught our 101, especially the written comments sections. Generally, as it turns out, students said they liked the zine unit and appreciated the opportunity to write in a different genre, one that asked them to take into account things they did not believe they would have to consider in their 101 course—layout and design, presentational effects, cut and paste aesthetics, multiple vocabularies within the same assignment, and so on. One reason for the more positive judgments about the zine unit, I think, is that because, at the end of the semester, students had the benefit of retrospection. Looking back on the entire course, they eventually realized how a beginning unit on zines fit well in a multimodal writing course, one that made ample use of digital texts as well as traditional ones. I like to think that anyway.

What, then, were the results of three years of teaching zines and zine making as part of a standard writing curriculum?

First, we emphasized to students that it is possible and, indeed, timely, to think of writing as making, a change in perspective appropriate not only to zines, but also to the sorts of digital texts we now routinely ask

students to make in multimodal writing courses. Because zines must be constructed, because they draw upon a variety of communicative modes, because zines force students to consider design, format, and layout as *writerly* concerns, zines hold the potential to help all of our students to see writing, at least in some aspects, as making. As writing teachers, we also discussed the scholarly relevance of zines, as evidenced by the fact that DIY is presently being reconceived through digital technologies, as evidenced by recent inquiries that explore various forms of making—craftivism, maktivism, remix, assemblage, bricolage, tinkering, and coding, in addition to widespread interest in the Maker Movement, both inside and outside of composition.

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Making, in other words, is valuable to composition instruction because it complements the recent interest in multimodal pedagogies, in writing that blends verbal, visual, sonic, tactile, gestural, sculptural, and performative expressions in any combination of two or more. Making is valuable to composition because it calls attention to writerly features that are often overlooked in traditional classrooms, especially craft, design, and format. Making is valuable to composition because it requires students to reflect upon the myriad decisions they made in composing their multimodal projects. And making is important, too, because it allows us to ask *what else gets made* when we make something? In the case of zines, we can answer that question by suggesting the obvious: that an identity gets made, a community gets made, a public (or counterpublic) gets made, and a culture (or subculture) gets made. And if those social formations don’t exactly get made from scratch, they are certainly sustained by the ongoing efforts of zine makers, students or not.

Second, by using zines in our writing classrooms, we created opportunities to raise questions about materiality, about how and in what ways materiality matters in the texts we ask our students to write. Of course, we can raise these questions without zines, but zines make such questions hard to avoid, especially when students ask such questions as, “You mean people really make these things?” As a form of semiotic remediation, the durability of zines has a great deal to do with their materiality and, in fact, some argue that the resurgence of interest in zines is a paradoxical effect of the ubiquity of digital media.

Among zine scholars, Alison Piepmeier, in particular, has written most compellingly on why zine materiality matters. Piepmeier observes that unlike blogs and other digital genres of self-publication, zines “instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and

readers." Zines evoke "not just communities but *embodied* communities that are made possible by the materiality of the zine medium" (214). They willfully cultivate "vulnerability, affection, and pleasure" as desirable human qualities and thus "leverage their materiality into a kind of surrogate physical interaction" (215). One of the ways they do this is by rejecting the "slickness of the commercial mass media." On the whole, zine makers refuse to position their readers as mere "consumers, as a marketplace," opting instead to invoke them as "friends, equals, members of an embodied community . . . part of a conversation with the zine maker" (227). Such is why zines inspire what Piepmeier calls a "reciprocal materiality" (230). Readers of zines frequently (hand)write letters and notes of appreciation to their favorite zine authors, sometimes sharing their own zines with the authors they admire.

Finally, I have alluded to zines as a radical discourse, and that claim may need to be further explained. To be sure, there are plenty of zines whose pages express an anarchist, or socialist, or revolutionary point of view. Still other zines address the injustices experienced by those who inhabit racial, sexual, class, and intersectional identities. And still others, thematize the everyday and the prosaic—hometowns, favorite billboards, recipes, permaculture, musical enthusiasms, etc. The point here is that the significance of zines *cannot be reduced to the content of their pages*. All of the zines I allude to here are political. Why? Because whether any particular zine is about organized resistance, or making your own paper, or bicycle repair, or ukulele tuning, or drying your socks, it is reasonable to assert that pretty much "everything about these publications stands in material and symbolic opposition to corporate media's ownership of ideas, information and informational resources" (Farmer 49). This is why zine authors want readers, of course, but they also want readers who will, in turn, become writers, self-publishers of their own work. As zine scholar Stephen Duncombe observes, making a zine "is at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture" (117). While I did not ask our new teachers or their students to embrace the vernacular radicalism of zine culture as such, I did want to acquaint them with the fact that such a culture exists, and that there may be a different way of looking at the world than they ordinarily do, that there may be educational goals that surpass career training. I think it safe to say that zines offer a worldview dramatically at odds with the one cultivated and reinforced by institutions of higher education. I hoped to demonstrate that it is within the interstices of such institutions that a different kind of radicalism may be found.

The WPA as Interstitial Radical

What conclusions might be drawn from this example? Readers would be mistaken if my example were interpreted primarily as an argument to include zines in the first year curriculum. I obviously value zines in our classrooms because they allow writing teachers to raise the kinds of

interesting questions noted above, and they encourage students to experiment with different styles, visual and textual, and allow students to write in non-academic registers that frequently reject Standard Edited English, not to mention polite word choices.

But my real purpose here is to encourage other WPAs, as well as writing scholars and teachers, to look for, and possibly create, their own nooks and crannies, their own interstices where they can oppose, however cautiously, the relentless insinuations (but unnoticed effects) of neoliberal "creep" or "drift," as universities try to grapple with the many changes foisted upon them by neoliberal ideology. A catalogue of such changes would, no doubt, include the shift from public to private funding of universities (and the tuition increases that result from legislative retrenchment); the ongoing exploitation of contingent labor; the student debt crisis; the technological "outsourcing" of the curriculum; a rapacious testing industry (and the textbook publishers that profit from it); the increasing enthusiasm for competency-based education (Gallagher); and, in the midst of our austerity, the swelling of administrative ranks even as we curtail the employment of adjunct faculty, what Benjamin Ginsberg calls the "administrative blight" of the university (2).

Who, then, could dispute the fact that insofar as WPA work goes, "neoliberal values encroach upon writing instruction." As Sheri Stenberg observes, "once we endorse a "view of education as job training, writing becomes a masterable, commodified skill whose purpose is deployment in the workplace" (8). To be sure, it would be hard to fault students, parents, and our institutions for wanting to help our students find "good jobs" or "satisfying careers" once they graduate. But we can (and I obviously think we must) oppose the view that this is the *sole* (and only legitimate) reason for acquiring an education. For in endorsing that view, we do a terrible disservice to our students. We abdicate what we know to be true, namely that writing can (and must) change the world. By limiting our understanding of what we do, or what we are expected to do, we do not acquaint our students with all of those "other purposes for writing—civic engagement, personal inquiry, exploration of other perspectives," to name just a few (8).

The zine unit I describe above tries to encompass some of these "other purposes." To be clear, I did not desire all first year students to become zinesters, or to join DIY communities, or to subscribe to radical views about politics, economics, art, education, and so on. But I did want them to ask questions about the kinds of communities that embrace an oppositional identity, that resist conventional versions of what defines "success" or "the good life," and that make zines to express a worldview not typically found in university curricula.

Thus, by introducing students to such zines as Alex Wreck's classic, *Stolen Sharpie Revolution*, students receive a comprehensive overview of zine culture, zine politics, and zine making. By introducing them to Ayun Halliday's *East Village Inky*, students witness how the "scrappy messiness" of zine design complements the "wandering, digressive narrative" of Halliday's trademark

style (Piepmeier 222). By introducing them to Cindy Crabb's, *Doris*, students glimpse how the intimate, the personal can be melded with an issue-oriented politics of gender roles, sexuality, anarchism, and mental health. By asking students to make their own zines, then, I hoped I might provide an occasion for students to come to know a kind of writing very different than the formal, academic writing they would do later in this course and, quite likely, in all of their other courses.⁴

But was this curricular innovation a revolutionary act? No—or rather at best, only incipiently so. I did not urge others to organize or take collective action as either a pre-condition or desired effect of my zine unit. Moreover, I did not seek a confrontational politics, nor did I assume one would be needed to teach this unit. I simply wanted to introduce a large number of first year students to a culture, a worldview, a politics, as well as an ensemble of perspectives that they would not encounter otherwise. It was (and remains) important to me that students be exposed to values that run counter to the ubiquitous, institutionally endorsed values that routinely go unchallenged. It was (and remains) important to me to heed Henry Giroux's call to oppose, wherever and whenever we might, the "neoliberal takeover of higher education," even if doing so means working in the cracks and fissures, in the interstices of the writing programs whose leadership we assume.

Roots and Rhizomes: A Concluding Suggestion

If I have characterized zines an example of interstitial radicalism, it is fair to ask what sort of radicalism is this? How could "interstitial radicalism" be anything more than an oxymoron? After all, what, to be precise, is so radical about actions performed in the cracks and fissures, in the gaps and breaks of a dominant order?

In discussions that aim to define radicalism, it is often the case that the etymology of the word *radical* is set forth, referencing the origins of that word from the medieval Latin meaning "having roots" or "going to the origin."⁵ The root metaphor suggests a number of resonances that complement our present understanding of radicalism. The root metaphor, for example, points to an origin that "lies beneath," and thus suggests that to find the authentic source of something (or anything, or everything), we must always "dig deeper." We must turn the ground to reveal the unseen so that we may apprehend something more fundamental than that which is immediately apparent before us. When we do this, we will see how roots and their outgrowths—trees, vegetation, flora, etc.—make up a highly complex system, only a portion of which is visible to us at any given time or in any given place. By elaborating this metaphor, it becomes apparent why the root metaphor is a congenial and useful one to invoke when describing political radicalism.

But all metaphors have limits and possibilities, and this one is no exception. In some recent critical theory—most

famously, Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*—the root metaphor is disputed by a rhizomatic one. The authors argue that so much of received thought, especially Western thought, ensues from assumptions discovered in what they call "arborescent culture" (15), with the tree as its central and dominant symbol. Distinct from rhizomatic growth, with its tubers and bulbs, its lateral offshoots and unpredictable new starts, its emergent "stems and filaments" (15), the tree remains the dominant emblem of hierarchy, stability, continuity, and the eschewal of multiplicities. Not surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the social and political meanings of tree culture. "It is odd," the authors observe, "how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy . . ." (18). In keeping with this claim, I want to suggest that the tree metaphor has had a determinative effect on radical theory as well, especially in radical theory's ritual invocation of an etymology derived from the root metaphor. Radical thought is, and has been, thoroughly implicated in the workings of arborescent culture.

What would happen, though, if radical theory were rethought from a rhizomatic point of view? Would it not resemble the interstitial radicalism that I have argued for here? Would it not appear sometimes fortuitously,



spontaneously, in all directions and out of the way places, in the cracks and fissures, much like grasses sprouting through a broken sidewalk? To be clear, I am not saying that a rhizomatic perspective ought to *replace* an arborescent one. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari reject this binary, pointing out that "there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes and rhizomatic offshoots in roots" (20). We need both and more. If organic metaphors are to remain useful in describing political and economic radicalism, they should be more inclusive, not less, and for this reason, they ought not to be limited to arborescent thought. In other words, there ought to be room for a rhizomatic, interstitial radicalism too, one that compliments, and lends force to, our traditional understandings of radicalism.

I do not have space to undertake that project here. I can only suggest what I believe to be its promise and its possibilities. But I want to suggest that such a radicalism may already be occurring— here, in the interstices of our political economy, in institutions of higher learning, and in writing classrooms too. Interstitial work, though, may be hard to find because it is not especially conspicuous or public. Such is why, in his study of interstitial acts, *Crack Capitalism*, John Holloway emphasizes the everyday quality, the ordinariness of radical change. Interstitial resistance, according to Holloway, “is the story of many, many people”:

It is the story of the composer in London who expresses his anger and his dream of a better society through the music he composes Of the university professor in Athens who creates a seminar outside the university framework for the promotion of critical thought Of the old man living on the outskirts of Beirut who cultivates plants on his windowsill as a revolt against the concrete that surrounds him Of the peasant in Huejotzingo who refuses to allow his small orchard to be annexed to a massive park of unsold cars Of the group of homeless friends in Rome who occupy a vacant house and refuse to pay rent (4-5).

I want to suggest that it may also be possible for WPAs, writing program administrators, as well as compositionists and all other teachers and scholars, to contribute to Holloway’s catalogue, and I would like to urge my colleagues to seek, imagine, and create such openings in the programs they direct or administer. For it is within these overlooked spaces that alternative points of view might be found, modest transformations might be wrought, and new awarenesses might be cultivated. In the words of cultural historian George McKay, here, in the interstices, is where “small wonders have grand repercussions” (101). And while those “grand repercussions” are hardly guaranteed, it may still be possible to chip away at the monument to neoliberal capitalism that the university has become.

Notes

¹ Neoliberalism has proven itself to be an exceptionally slippery and challenging term to define, but the conception put forth here owes much to two works in particular: David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Henry Giroux’s *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*. Unlike classical liberal economic theory (a la Adam Smith), neoliberalism does not assume that the state ought to remain separate from the free market, but rather ought to be thoroughly committed to promoting market ideology *in all democratic institutions*, including universities, and in all global contexts as well. While it is tempting, for example, to look upon the Koch brothers’ insinuations into university hiring practices and curriculum as a privilege of extraordinary wealth, it should also be noted that these insinuations are an effect of a neoliberal ideology which authorizes such colonizing intrusions into public institutions, educational or otherwise, in the first place. The withdrawal of public funding for universities obviously creates opportunities for those, like

the Koch brothers, who wish to privatize such institutions for personal gain, but it also guarantees the furtherance of a neoliberal worldview that sees the university as subsumed, in all its aspects, to the imperatives of neoliberalism.

² It might be argued that the symbiotic and interstitial models are similar in at least one respect: both posit an incremental vision of social change. While on the surface that observation might be true, it ignores one key difference. The symbiotic model seems to assume that rational debate is the sole source of (negotiated) social change. The interstitial model, on the other hand, assumes that social change can be initiated in less visible, unnoticed, out of the way places—sites and moments that offer the opportunity for tactical activity and resistance. Because the interstitial model is oriented toward systemic change, it agrees with the revolutionary goals of the ruptural model, but differs in approach. In contrast, and generally speaking, the symbiotic model regards itself as opposed to the ruptural model, that is, understands itself to be the sensible option to revolutionary change.

³ In the past decade or so, a number of mainstream newspapers, and other media outlets, have published feature articles on the resurgent interest in zines and zine making. Most notably, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and lesser known media have all reported on the phenomena of zines. In addition, zine festivals have sprung up in most major U. S. cities—Chicago being perhaps the most famous, but Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Portland, Olympia, Kansas City, and others also hosting these events where zinesters trade, sell, purchase, and read from their work. Finally, a number of major research libraries are currently archiving zines, including special collections now housed at Duke University, Barnard College, Yale, Harvard, and the Universities of Iowa and Kansas, to name just a few.

But why this renascent interest in zines? It was generally believed that with the arrival of the internet, the traditional zine would be replaced by blogs and other expressions of digital self-publishing, or that we would witness the emergence of e-zines. And yes, to some extent, blogs, e-zines, and other internet genres have established an undeniable presence for those who wish to voice an unconventional viewpoint, or to critique mainstream culture. What was not anticipated, however, was that the internet could actually provoke a return to the traditional paper zine. While the reasons for this return are multiple and complex, zinesters often point to the materiality of the paper zine, and what might be called the aesthetics of the tactile, that is, of being able to make something that can actually be held in one’s hand. Others point to the freedom that comes with being able to control every facet of production, “from design to distribution.” Jenna Wortham, writing in *The New York Times*, notes that people who make zines do so, in some measure, to escape the necessity of having to meet the requirements, implicit or otherwise, of social media platforms. Wortham also notes what many others have as well—namely, the sheer toxicity of much internet discourse, a toxicity that zines largely evade because of the manner in which they circulate, as

well as the intimate, embodied communities that form around them.

⁴ For a fuller description of these zines (and many others), please see zinewiki.com.

⁵ Please consult the entry for "radical" at *The Online Etymological Dictionary*, available at <https://www.etymonline.com/word/radical>.

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