

Emancipatory Movements in Composition



THE RHETORIC OF POSSIBILITY

Andrea Greenbaum

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*In memory of my mother,
Elizabeth Greenbaum,
who taught me to love books*

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PREFACE

Once we were slaves עבדים היינו
Now we are free עתה בני חורין

—“*Avadim Hayenu*,” A Passover Song

For two nights during the Hebrew month of *Nisan*, Jews celebrate the holiday of Passover by conducting a Seder. This ritualized ceremony is organized by a *Haggadah*, the text used to narrate the story of Exodus. Since childhood, Passover has remained my favorite holiday—which should not be surprising, since this holiday is strongly pedagogical, rhetorically designed to have its participants engage in dialogical discussions about ethics, history, culture, and theology. Even as an adult, I am drawn to the rich narrative—the dramatic reenactment of slavery, the gripping tale of a close escape, the celebration of long-awaited freedom—demonstrated through two nights of ritualized eating, storytelling, and song. I am also captivated by Passover’s metaphoric quality, Passover as the synecdoche for *freedom*, a yearly tale about the *possibilities* of resistance, a narrative of emancipation.

The Passover narrative suggests that human beings need to experience oppression—even if it is only relived mythically—in order to understand our social responsibility to counter and resist those forces that seek to dominate, repress, and disempower individuals. Further, such storytelling aids us in recognizing that

oppression is protean, taking shape in myriad forms, but most commonly recognizable as poverty and illiteracy. For those of us who teach writing, identification with the oppressed, the powerless, has become a pervasive concern, and such empathy has taken on its own narrative quality within the disciplinary boundaries of rhetoric and composition.

While there are numerous conversations—scholarly critiques and public debates—about the continually evolving discipline of rhetoric and writing instruction, it seems to me that recent conversations in the field regarding the inclusion of emancipatory politics and pedagogy have coalesced around four key areas: neosophistic rhetoric, cultural studies, feminist studies, and post-colonial studies. These categories are by no means exclusive, and composition has come to embrace multitudinous perspectives, ranging from queer and film studies, to eco-composition, business, and technology. I am suggesting that it is, in fact, these subject areas that have, for the past ten years, dominated and influenced both the theoretical and pedagogical perspectives of rhetoric and composition.

The purpose of *Emancipatory Movements in Composition: The Rhetoric of Possibility* is to explore these four approaches by examining each of them as influenced by independent disciplines possessing unique theoretical and pedagogical objectives, and to consider the historical infusion of these disciplines into rhetoric and composition. Simply, this book has three objectives. The first is to critique the interdisciplinary roots of rhetoric and composition (which absorbs and reconfigures these other disciplines within the environment of the composition classroom), and to study how these disciplines are shaded by the umbrella of critical pedagogy. Second, this investigation explores the emancipatory objectives of these four other disciplines and their influence in shifting the current of rhetoric and composition theory and pedagogy. Third, this project analyzes the research on and pedagogical ethics of including emancipatory politics in the classroom, particularly as manifested, most recently, through service-learning and ethnographic research.

Chapter One, “*Dissoi Logoi*: Neosophistic Rhetoric and the Possibility of Critical Pedagogy,” addresses how, in the past ten years, rhetoric and composition has devised pedagogical and the-

oretical models based on reconfiguring sophistic rhetoric. Scholars such as Susan Jarratt, Thomas Kent, Jasper Neel, and Sharon Crowley have argued that sophistic rhetoric may be a useful pedagogical tool for helping students understand the nature of argumentation and the indeterminacy of language. This neosophistic rhetoric, many suggest, may offer contemporary compositionists a more fluid and malleable way to teach writing. Sophistic rhetoric takes into account notions of *dissoi logoi*, contradictory positions, and the use of *mythos*, or narration, as formidable rhetorical strategies.

Furthermore, the pedagogical revival of sophistic rhetoric appears to be a useful paradigm shift for theorizing the emancipatory objectives of cultural critique. Feminist composition scholars (Susan Jarratt and Dale Bauer) contend that sophistic rhetoric augments feminist rhetorical strategies, since the sophists had a keen understanding that in order for persuasion to be effective, the rhetor needs to consider historical position and *antilogike*, an emphasis on contradictory positions.

Chapter Two, “Cultural Studies and Composition: Ethnographic Research as Cultural Critique,” provides an historical overview of the field of cultural studies as it emerged in Britain during the 1950s and examines how the initial ethnographic studies which emerged from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies converged around notions of class (Paul Willis), media (David Morley), and gender (Angela McRobbie)—the thematic *sine qua non* in composition research. Cultural studies remains, for many compositionists and educators (Joseph Harris, Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, and the late James Berlin), an intriguing and applicable discipline, primarily because it addresses several confluent concerns—specifically, constitutions of “literacy”—who has it, who wants it, and who controls it—around issues of class.

Additionally, contemporary scholarship in composition and cultural studies, particularly the work produced by Ellen Cushman, Bruce Herzberg, Eli Goldblatt, Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, Ann Waters, and many others, attempts to address the inherent problematics of cultural literacy. This chapter explores the research possibilities that cultural ethnographic study offers for both composition scholars and students, particularly when

such research is supported by the scaffold of feminist ethics and research practices. Such reconfiguration of ethnographic research includes a set of practices that incorporates and relies on dialogic interaction rather than monologic dominance, with the researcher working with the community as partners enjoined in the task of creating new knowledge. By engaging in ethnographic research as a means toward broadening both students' and scholars' understanding of the politics of literacy, these scholars have successfully merged composition theory into community practice.

Chapter Three, “‘Bitch’ Pedagogy: Agonistic Discourse and the Politics of Authority,” considers issues related to feminist critique and the ethics of feminist authority in the writing class. The primary focus of this chapter is the application of agonistic discourse—a conglomeration of various pedagogical strategies based on the premise of rhetoric-as-advocacy. Scholars like Susan Jarratt, Alan France, and Karen Fitts have long argued that well-intentioned, nonconfrontational classrooms often leave students ill-prepared for the necessary intellectual work required for full engagement as citizens in a democracy.

More significantly, this chapter reviews argumentation scholarship from our sister field of speech communication, which unequivocally indicates that teaching and modeling argumentative behavior enhances students' critical thinking skills, helps them to gain confidence and self-esteem, and is professionally beneficial. Those who are able to advocate positions are more likely to be perceived as more capable, and therefore more agile in social, political, and personal environments.

Chapter Four, “‘Wat’cha Think? I Can’t Spell?’: Postcolonial Studies and the Narratives of Literacy,” addresses language and literacy as it emerged in a racially heated classroom environment. The chapter considers the manifestation of white privilege in the classroom, and how postcolonial scholarship (along with studies in ethnic rhetoric) is applicable in tracing and critiquing how language and literacy are construed by both teachers and students.

Finally, Chapter Five, “Emancipatory Politics and Composition: The Pedagogy of Liberatory Writing Instruction,” discusses the ethics of engaging in emancipatory politics in the composition classroom. The chapter suggests that the emancipatory ideals of Freire, expressed through the combined disciplines of