Space: Mapping Democratic Openings in Empire

On the first night of last year’s CCCCs in New York City, the United States began its war against Iraq. I can remember walking through the lobby of the Hilton, glancing into the hotel bar and seeing those ghostly green, night-vision images of explosions and tank movements bleeding out of the television screens onto the sober faces of a gathering crowd of convention attendees and hotel guests. There was an odd mix of despair and tempered anger in that room as the weight of the moment sank in. But there we were. A few dozen teachers and scholars of rhetoric and composition—in NYC to present papers, attend panels, and reconnect with friends and colleagues across the country—witnessing the onset of the first US war of the 21st century on TV screens in the city in whose name this war was being waged.

In that context, it did not seem unreasonable to ask how our field, which defines itself—at least in part—as the study and teaching of public/democratic literacies, is important to and relevant in, this new world order? If I were to judge our relevance solely by some of the despairing sighs in that hotel bar last year, I might conclude that the relevance of our field for democratic possibilities within Empire is suspect. However, there were other, hopeful voices at the conference that pointed away from disabling despair. In her paper presented the day after bombing began, “A Matter of Life and Death: Public Debate in the Culture of Consent,” Diana George refused despair, claiming instead “it’s a great time to be a rhetorician.” She argued that the study of how to best intervene in literate spaces, a core value of our field, is fundamental to democratic participation—even more so in times of “crisis.” This call for engagement with the world was recognized both in Kathleen Blake Lancey’s opening address and in a resolution passed by membership entitled “Encouraging Communication about the War,” that stated:

Whereas in our best moments we have relied on the power of rhetoric to mediate disputes, and in our college classrooms we teach students to understand one another, respect their differences, and resolve their disputes through discourse.

BE IT RESOLVED that we encourage teachers of writing and communication at colleges and universities across the country to engage students and others in learning and debate about the issues and implications of the Iraqi war and any other acts of war perpetrated by the United States of America (2003 CCCC Resolutions).

And there were those conference attendees, including those of us on this panel, who weathered the cold pouring rain and gathered with hundreds of New Yorkers in Times Square the night the bombing began in order to contest any presumption of an un-fractured public “consent” for the war—unlike the relatively seamless consent circulating on those same TV screens in the form of polling data and selective “person-on-the-street” interviews.
We could also point to the networks of protests across the globe that took to the streets the following Saturday under the broad slogan “The World Says No to War!”—networks that brought into being the single largest, simultaneous protests in the history of the world. Within a few hours of bombing, in fact, a cycle of world-wide protests sprouted in Athens, Cairo, Barcelona, Berlin, London, Rome, Delhi, Ankara, and Sydney, to name but a few. While the major news outlets in the US situated these protests within a framework of “spontaneous” protest, these protests were woven together through a global communication network of resistance. Not only were we witnessing the largest simultaneous protests in the history of the world, we were also bearing witness to the first globally integrated network of struggle against the militarization of Empire.

It is with this backdrop that I want to open my discussion of Empire, globalization, and the interwoven questions of literacy, citizenship, and democratic openings in what Hardt and Negri call the “non-place” of Empire (Hardt and Negri 208-10). The public debates over the war in Iraq—as well as the “counter-argument” posed by mass protests—demonstrate the fragility of our current concepts and framing logics for understanding and challenging the war and occupation of Iraq, the war on Terror, and the erosion of our civil rights and liberties through legislation such as the Patriot Act and the growing paramilitarization of the police. In her dissertation, *The Modern Invention of ‘Culture’: Empire, Globalism, and the Persistence of History, 1776-1876*, Corri Zoli argues that “the event that marks the contemporary is an absence, not a presence, a plurality of differences, not a question of identity or origins, the glaringly obvious absence of a transnational social theoretical vocabulary to map the increasingly complex and diverse nature of the phenomenon we call globalization” (Zoli vi). Zoli’s text attempts to complicate and redraw conceptual maps of historical processes of globalization—in particular, through resituting the concept of culture in the long-19th century along developing routes of exchange and capital flows—and has been central to the approach to reading *Empire* and the implications of Hardt and Negri’s text for composition and rhetoric that I discuss below.

The “absence of a transnational social theoretical vocabulary” is a central concern of Hardt and Negri, and they concur that this absence has to do with the fact that the networks of relations of global capital have out-paced our language for grasping the resultant dynamics. For example, there is a shared discourse among those on the left and right of place-based concepts associated with the nation-state. We speak of “American” companies such as Ford or Microsoft, when in practice there is very little “American” about these companies other than the location of their headquarters or a lingering sense of “place of origin.” We can see the gap between our common language of nation-state and the actual networks of capital fairly readily even in “state-based” documents such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. As Benjamin Barber notes in his influential book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, when the authors of the agreement had to decide which products would qualify for tariff-free status in the new zone, they had a bit of trouble. They found that even “American” cars produced by companies such as General Motors, a company that has been virtually synonymous with American heavy industry, were not really “national.” In fact, several competing “foreign” companies such as Toyota, produced cars with a higher percentage of “North American” labor and parts than did “North American” companies. In the end, the NAFTA framers settled on defining an “American” car, for example, as having “50 percent of [its] parts (by value) as well as 50 percent of [its] labor contributed domestically” (Barber 25). Yet, while the treaty provides a raw peek into the productive networks of transnational corporations, the language of the nation-state still dominates popular discourse.
We still speak of “American companies,” and bumper stickers still read “Real Americans, Buy American.”

We can extend the NAFTA example further to illustrate the very real impacts of transnational capital networks on democracy and our common language of citizenship. For all its faults, American democracy has traditionally offered a process through which citizens—through their elected representatives—exercise sovereign control over their lived-space, their city, their state, and their nation. However, a provision in NAFTA, chapter 11, the chapter delineating the rights of investors, refigures a “spatial correspondence” of rule to more closely approximate emerging relations of rule along the pathways of transnational capital flows. Chapter 11 provides “investors” (corporations, entrepreneurs, patent holders) the right to sue national governments for loss of profits—including future profits—due to laws or regulations that constitute what the authors refer to as “non-economic barriers to trade.” That is, any law passed that either directly or indirectly appropriates or places limits upon existing or future profits of a company is illegal under the terms of the treaty. Just so we’re clear, “non-economic barriers to trade” can be environmental regulations, food labeling laws, or state-subsidized services such as public education. Several cases brought before the NAFTA board seek to overturn environmental regulations (1999 case brought by Methanex seeking $980 million in compensation for losses resulting from a CA ban on MTBE), to supersede jury decisions (1998 case brought by the Loewen Group, a Canadian-based funeral home conglomerate, seeking $780 million for losses resulting from a jury finding the company guilty for unfair and predatory business practices), and to restrict the right of local governments to regulate development (1999 case brought by Canadian-based real estate developer against the Supreme Court of Massachusetts and City of Boston, seeking $50 million resulting from losses stemming from regulation governing the granting of publicly-funded contracts) (Public Citizen). While much attention has been paid to the attack on national sovereignty and the erosion of environmental, labor, and health laws, I wish to make a different point.

The NAFTA Chapter 11 cases hint at what Hardt and Negri refer to as a “new logic and structure of rule,” a “new form of sovereignty,” that is not place-based—Empire is written and encoded through a juridical “apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontier” (xi-xii). Empire, however, is not the same as imperialism. Imperialism, they argue, “was really the extension of the sovereignty of the European [and American] nation-states beyond their own boundaries” (xii). Under imperialism, even colonial subjects had a center of power to resist—India threw out British rule, Mozambique French rule, and Cuba first Spanish then American rule. These anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles were also national struggles for a post-colonial state. Progressive and radical struggles since have tended to be framed though expanded spatial relationships of affiliation, still based on the nation-state, but extended to oppositions between the First and Third World. In Empire, however, the “spatial divisions of the Three Worlds…have been scrambled so that we continually find the First World in the Third [and] the Third in the First” (xiii). In a sense our maps no longer correspond to the space of sovereignty—and sovereignty itself has become “deterritorialized” (xii) presenting challenges to our well established concepts of citizenship and the public sphere and posing the questions as to where “we” exercise our democratic rights in Empire.

_Empire_ poses important questions for our field, especially given recent calls for a return to the public spaces of democratic deliberation and participation. For example, Susan Wells has encouraged writing teachers to foreground public writing by considering the classroom as a
version of the public sphere, analyzing public discourse, producing texts that enter the public sphere, or writing at the intersections between the disciplines and the public (Wells 337-9). Ellen Cushman has explicitly called for critical teachers to “locate ourselves within the democratic process of everyday teaching and learning in our neighborhoods” through participatory activism (Cushman, “Rhetorician” 12) as a way to combat a recent history of critical teaching that neglects the actual forms of resistance oppressed people’s enact in their daily lives (Cushman, Struggle 25). Gwendolyn Pough has examined how her students’ analyses of Black Panther documents moved them to actively seek change and Pegeen Reichert Powell, in the most recent issue of CCC’s, analyzes the public statements of the president of Miami University in response to a perceived hate crime on campus and the resulting two days of protest. The theoretical and methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, she argues, offers composition teachers a means of “acting against injustice in terms of our area of expertise: language and texts” (Reichert Powell 465). All of these scholars are rooted in rhetoric’s long association with the communicative practices of democracy. And each of these essays implicitly or explicitly suggest those communicative practices are not static—they are dynamic and historical.

Hardt and Negri attempt to grasp an emerging apparatus of rule that will call for additional communicative practices. What I think is most significant about their attempt to offer an admittedly philosophical theorization of Empire, is that unlike much of postmodern critical theory that emphasized either the omnipresence of institutional power or the “undecidability” of meaning (and, therefore, action), Hardt and Negri insist upon focusing on the creative and productive potential of social collectivities. In a sense, they seek to lay much of postmodern critical theory to rest, arguing that in the passage to Empire, “the deconstructive phase of critical thought, which from Heidegger to Adorno to Derrida, provided a powerful instrument for the exit from modernity, has lost its effectiveness. It is now a closed parenthesis and leaves us faced with a new task: constructing, in the non-place, a new place; constructing ontologically new determinations of the human, of living” (Hardt and Negri 217-8).

This constructive project is, they argue, also a communicative project for a couple of reasons. First, global capital has not only shifted where it locates industry, but it has also shifted the very nature of productive work. Echoing calls by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich to shift the focus of American education to focus more on producing “symbolic analysts” skilled in the analysis and manipulation of symbols and concept and service workers with exceptional interpersonal skills, Hardt and Negri argue that postmodern capitalism tends evermore toward what they call “biopolitical production”—that is, “the production and reproduction of life itself” (24). It is telling that other more popular writers on issues of globalization, have also identified this tendency for production to become ever more “immaterial”. For example, Naomi Klein, known for her consistent reporting on global justice movements and author of No Logo, identified the move among leading US-based corporations such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Starbucks, to shift their focus away from the “production of things” to the production of the “image” of their brand and “lifestyles”—the production not of commodities, but of concepts (Klein 21). While Klein rightly draws attention to the fact that the production of commodities has not disappeared—in fact, she is more careful to insist upon recognizing where primary commodity production does take place—she draws attention to the shift in “immaterial” production emphasized by Hardt and Negri. However, unlike many writers on globalization, Hardt and Negri argue that even the basic production of commodities in global sweatshops and tax-free “export processing zones” has become more and more reliant upon communication
networks, symbolic production, and the production and reproduction of social life—so that “the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another” (xiii).

Second, the growth and consolidation of communication industries—including media corporations, internet companies, email services, “just-in-time” production networks, and “scientific” polling—have been at the forefront of organizing the form of globalization “by multiplying and structuring interconnections” so that “the sense and direction of the imaginary...is guided and channeled within the communicative machine” (32). This communicative machine is no longer distinct from the economy, it is fully integrated into the fabric of production.

Third, unlike political struggles that took place under the rubric of the Cold War, the most intense and broad-based political movements/rebellions within Empire are “all but incommunicable” (54). For example, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and the mass general strikes in Seoul and Paris, appear to have nothing in common when viewed through the lens of traditional political categories. Each seems to represent a massive local uprising, grounded in culturally specific issues. What connects them is that each local uprising jumps, almost immediately, to the global level and are struggles that are both rooted in histories of social struggle as well as new constituent struggles for new public spaces and new forms of community. Yet from within our current understandings of what constitutes politics, these struggles appear “already outdated—precisely because they cannot communicate, because their languages cannot be translated” (56). Thus, the role of communication becomes central to establishing and maintaining Empire as well as resisting Empire—not at the level of ideology, but at the very heart of the production. Communication, for Hardt and Negri, is itself one of the key productive networks of Empire.

Two more issues need to be addressed to flesh out the concept of Empire and the implications for how central questions of rhetoric and democratic participation are posed. First, for Hardt and Negri, there is no outside of Empire. That is, the political task is not to work against the global networks of Empire and return to the nation-state as the primary site of democratic politics. Rather, they argue for the necessity of constructing a counter-Empire “within Empire and against Empire” (61). Against many tendencies on the left who argue for limiting the global networks being established by Empire, Hardt and Negri argue that it is necessary to deepen these networks and refigure them, to appropriate and refashion. Thus, the point is not to reinscribe a spatial correspondence of rule, but to follow the dynamic “non-place” pathways and to root a new political project there. For example, if we were to look at the production of cut-flowers, or the mushroom industry in Berks County, PA where Kutztown University is located, we would immediately be forced to reckon with the mass migratory labor force needed in order to operate. Migrant workers from Mexico, Central, and South America and their movement across borders creates the industry. Their movement is productive. However, current immigration laws do not recognize movement across these borders as a fundamental right, let alone as productive activity. Rather, migrant workers are policed, criminalized, and denied basic political rights. While current efforts to reform immigration laws by legalizing the status of migrant workers as “guest workers” (echoing the German guest worker program), these reforms still separate economic and political rights. While migrant workers would be decriminalized as workers under this significant reform of immigration law, they are denied the right to citizenship. Hardt and Negri make as their first political task the struggle for “global citizenship rights” that links “right and labor” and “rewards with citizenship the worker who creates capital” (400). To simply retain, or return to, a spatial correspondence
between citizenship and nation, would actually reinforce Empire, by denying movement as a fundamental productive network. That is, even such progressive reforms of immigration laws would serve Empire first and foremost because it maintains a separation between the political and economic sphere in practice. And to go even deeper, new forms of productive labor—movement across borders—would remain invisible. Instead of the movements of productive and creative labor, migrant movements remain movements of the outlaw, outside of the rule of law of the nation-state.

Secondly, while it may appear that Empire is yet another Foucauldian-esque structure of power that makes resistance futile, the everywhere of Empire creates openings for a global counter-Empire that is both local and global at once. Thus we do not need to go to the “belly of the beast” to find the source of Empire’s power. Since Empire is a *global* logic of rule, and the production and reproduction of life itself its *modus operandi*, “Empire presents a superficial world, the virtual center of which can be accessed immediately from any point across the surface” (58). Rather, than seeking to attack the center of power at its weakest point, now the strategy is to attack it at its strength—at the very logics of rule that imbue every aspect of our social lives. For Hardt and Negri, this is not simply a shift in political tactics, it is the ontological and material state of Empire. Its a historical fact of Empire that is a result of the imperial project itself. That is, if Empire seeks to invest every aspect of life with its logic, then every aspect of life is already in the belly of the beast. Furthermore, because Empire extends its reach well beyond the traditional economic or political spaces into the fabric of the production and reproduction of life itself, then potential sites for effective resistance are extended into social spaces such as the neighborhood, the family, commuting, leisure time, and public space.

This does not mean that they are calling for a return to local community organizing—in fact, they are quite critical of the call to return to the local [look at their discussion of the local in organizing and their critique]. Nor does this mean that they are rejecting the local. Rather, this has to do with how these local struggles are articulated in relation to Empire [examples of local struggles that speak to Empire]. That is, HOW we struggle, how we act in local spaces is already touched by Empire—however, our existing communicative frameworks work against acting globally in local spaces.

For example, there is a student in my advanced composition class who is researching the waning influence of “Pennsylvania Dutch” culture in Berks County. Her grandparents are Pennsylvania Dutch farmers who speak the language and who still follow many traditional practices. Her research led her almost immediately to networks of Empire. She found it impossible to talk about farming without discussing the deregulation of development and agribusiness and the global market place. The erosion of Pennsylvania Dutch culture, she suggests, is not simply a matter of “Americanization,” or the disappearance of the small family-farm. Rather, it is part in parcel of a systematic logic of Empire that connects Pennsylvania Dutch culture to other minority cultures across the globe—even as these multiple and highly differentiated minority cultures are incommunicable at the present moment. And it’s not a matter of equating Pennsylvania Dutch with the Aborigines of Australia, for example, but rather a recognition that both are becoming integrated into the same logic of Empire.

My present interest in the issues raised by Hardt and Negri, are part of a longer preoccupation with the question of “service” in the recent history of our discipline. As a graduate student, I was introduced to resistance to composition being understood within our institutions as a “service” to the rest of the university. Usually this meant that that as composition teachers, we were expected to train students solely in the mechanics of writing so
that when they emerged from our courses they would be free of any writerly defects and our colleagues in other disciplines—and our departments—would not have to descend into the gritty world of comma-splices and subject-verb agreement. More recently, the “service” issues has taken on a different interest. Through service-learning, our colleagues across the country have created programs that attempt to make writing concretely relevant to our immediate communities and to re-invest the teaching of writing in the practical challenges of citizenship. In both of these cases, the question of who we are serving and why has been an integral part of the debates. In my own dissertation, I tried to pose the question of “who we serve” in a different way. I asked 1) what are the key challenges posed to democratic participation in today’s world; 2) who are the key agents of change in that world; and 3) what historical and contemporary traditions of struggle can we learn from so that our teaching can be immediately relevant to the literacy needs of those agents of change? This led me to examine the rhetorical strategies and tactics of emerging global justice movements that had arrived on most of our radar screens with the mass protests in Seattle in 1999 that shut down the meetings of the World Trade Organization. Their blips on the public’s screen became more pronounced throughout 2000 with global protest against global finance institutions—WB and IMF in DC, G8 in Genoa, and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

These new movements seemed to demonstrate in practice some of the issues raised in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. On the one hand, in the major media the protests registered as outdated and reactionary—most famously, perhaps through NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who referred to the Seattle protestors as “a Noah’s ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960's fix” (Friedman). On the other hand, even many activists had trouble making out “the message.” It seemed incongruous that Teamsters were marching with people dressed up as sea turtles; that a protesters with signs ranging from “End the AIDS crisis” and “Stop Coke’s War on Unions in Columbia,” to “Shut down the WTO” and “Our Bodies, Our Rights.” And furthermore, there were groups from all over the world—Zapatistas from Chiapas, Landless Worker activists from Brazil, and AIDS activists from South Africa. To the ears of many, this chorus of multiple voices was dissonant. And yet, this post-Greek chorus managed, nonetheless, to resonate at a frequency that brought the meetings to a standstill. There was no one organizing body. As Vandana Shiva, an Indian scientist and bio-activist, noted, there was no one central organizing body. No one demanded that everyone march in tune. What went out was a call, to which a hundred thousand people responded in all their diversity. We might think of what appeared on the streets of Seattle was not the nameless, faceless “masses,” or the singular, civic minded “people,” but what Hardt and Negri call the “multitude”—a new historical subject that does not wish to march to the same beat of a political party or centralized movement. Rather, the multitude represents a social subject in all the multiple ways that it is touched by Empire.

So the question posed was how can rhetoric, the teaching of writing, “serve” democratic social movements? That is, if critical teachers are committed to deepening and expanding democratic participation, what are demands on literacy for democratic participation that is now virtually unthinkable outside of its global networks of interrelationships?

I’ve been teaching an Advanced Composition course for almost three years now called “Global Literacies,” in which we try to pose this question as the center of inquiry. On the one hand, the class attempts to speak to students who are already activists, opening up a temporary space to consider rhetorical strategies for effective organization and action. On the other hand, the course seeks to pose questions for students who know nothing about globalization focused on
tracing global networks of interrelationship that would complicate and rework how they structured their arguments, how they identify rhetorical constructions of space, affiliation, and belonging, and most concretely, how they can make their arguments intelligible, meaningful, and significant to the Kutztown University community. I’ve tried to construct the course around the rhetorical concept of *kairos* as discussed by rhetoricians such as Carolyn Miller and John Poulakos, in looking closely at Gorgias’ rhetorical practice. In their work, *kairos* is not simply a “confluence of utterance and time, or to a marking of time with speech” (Poulakos 89). Rather, Gorgias’ pedagogy of *kairos*, they argue, seems to suggest that timeliness can be created by the rhetor—that it is not limited to appropriateness—but it is, in effect, a productive act of making sense, and the rhetor’s role is to find the fractures—or create them—in the audience’s common sense or held beliefs to make her/his speech/writing meaningful and significant. Miller adds to this productive notion of *kairos* by emphasizing both the temporal and spatial aspects of *kairos*. On the one hand, *kairos* is about creating the “right time,” on the other, it is about creating “openings” in discursive spaces (Miller 313). As an interesting aside that I will simply note here in interest of time, Negri’s most recent book, *Time for Revolution*, contains four chapters on the concept of *kairos* as it relates to moments of revolutionary possibility, very much complimenting the notion of *kairos* outlined above. While it is true that much of the interest in Gorgias’ notion of *kairos* corresponds to the “imperial” logics of postmodern “undecidability” that Scott Lyons outlines in his paper for this panel, there is not a necessary relationship between the apparent confluence of Gorgias’s rhetoric and the logics of Empire. That is, *kairos* can provide a means through which to link the creative project of Hardt and Negri’s counter-Empire with a rhetorical history that is open for remaking. In my advanced composition class, we use the concept of *kairos* not to project the inability to know and, by extension, act, but rather to map the possibilities of effective rhetorical intervention in Empire.

While we don’t read *Empire* in my advanced comp class, it seems to sit there in the classroom with us. For example, during one week of class, after reading Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, students in the class write responses to her claims about corporate branding, sweatshop labor, and the disappearance of public space. We chart out these on the board, looking for key claims and assertions. Then I draw a map of the globe on the board and we try to locate their arguments/responses spatially. In almost every case, students’ responses reproduce the language of spatial correspondence (the nation-state) in their text in trying to locate very basic categories like “we” or “them” or “corporations.” When we try to map these arguments on the globe, I ask them to do so without regard to national borders. That is, I ask them to track the networks of relationships they refer to in their arguments. So, for example, Nike is not located simply in Eugene, Oregon, corresponding to it’s international headquarters. Rather, is in a dynamic, global space along the flows of capital and workers. Likewise, “local” educational policies that open up public schools to corporate advertising and teaching materials are “linked” to IMF structural adjustment programs through the content of the specific contracts in which they are enacted. Through this exercise, I try to get students to pose specific questions for revision that replace the language of spatial correspondence with concepts, metaphors, and arguments that more accurately reflect the *actual* pathways of global capital unmediated by the nation-state as a category. It’s common for these “new languages” to be partial, inadequate, and in some cases far-fetched. But the exercise does not expect students to create terms, concepts, and arguments that are another rearticulation of the next universal truth. Rather, it asks students to reframe their existing conceptual framework asking them to begin to walk a different rhetorical pathway and
create a “new place” in the “non-place” of Empire. They are contingent terms and arguments to be reworked and rearticulated throughout their research and writing.

The major paper for this course is a 20-25 page original research paper on globalization that is bound together at the end of the semester and submitted to our university library. This asks students to consider the concrete audience of the university community and to try and construct openings in that community. That is, I try to get students to think concretely about the fractures in local and dominant arguments about globalization. Writing a paper about the impact of NAFTA on the local steel industry, for example, does not disrupt the spatial correspondence language of “national industries.” A reader could just as well conclude that it is necessary to shut our national borders and retreat into an argument for protectionism. However, students need to also consider the very framing language with which their readers will engage their work. I ask them to try and construct their texts in ways that not only present their research in convincing ways, but in ways that also attempt to refigure the framing language of their readers.

I offer these examples from my class not to suggest they are the answers or that they fully address the challenges posed for teachers and scholars of rhetoric and composition. They are only very provisional attempts to try and address the broader question of the implications of Empire for writing classes with the goal of deepening democratic literacies. The more important issue, I think, is that we recognize that there is a shift in the very space of democracy—and that at a very basic level, we are challenged to respond if we are to retain the vital link between rhetoric, democracy, and literacy.
Works Cited


