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Class Ethos and the Politics of Inquiry: What the Barroom Can Teach Us About the Classroom

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Before I was an English teacher, I was a bartender. When I tell my first-year composition students this as we take turns exchanging getting-to-know-you trivia during the first class session, they laugh—some, I suspect, struck by the improbability of the leap from one profession into the other; others, I know, amused by the irony of ending up with an ex-bartender for a teacher. For these others, sons and daughters of iron workers and auto mechanics and waitresses, my move from barroom to classroom traces the trajectory of their own lives.

When I first began teaching, I thought—or, I have to say, I hoped—that the university was the farthest point from the local tavern, and that teaching writing to college students was the furthest thing from opening bottles of Bud for laborers. So I was surprised to find myself, after three years of teaching writing, feeling compelled to return to the bar where I’d worked for several years to do community research into local rhetorical practices. In the ethnographic tale that was to grow out of this research, I wanted to map out connections between class, culture, and rhetoric by investigating how rhetorical genres—and in particular, arguments about politics—participated in the public construction of knowledge in, and ultimately in the production of, working-class culture. I was not, of course, surprised to see my data confirm what I’d already suspected: that this small blue-collar society at the bar differed significantly from the cultures of middle-class academics in orientations to word, work, and world. What did come as something of a surprise, however, were what I have come to recognize as

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functional parallels between the barroom and the classroom as institutional sites of rhetorical practice. When, as a teacher working in a public university, I question the nature of the service I provide and try to understand the dynamics of the relationship I have with my student "regulars," I am struck by how handily the questions I ask myself about my role in the classroom can be expressed in the same language I might use to reflect on the nature of my job at the bar: What am I selling? Who are my customers, and where do they come from? Why are they here? Do I get to decide what's on tap—and to decide when a customer has had enough? To what extent do I mediate the talk that goes on, and when should I attempt to contain or redirect it? Do I have the right to decide when someone's language is inappropriate and bounce him out? Such questions (suggestive as they are of parallels between the roles of bartender and teacher in their respective institutional contexts) have motivated me to further question how the barroom might compare to the classroom. What does each institution mean to the community it serves? What does each do for the populations it serves? And what discourse(s) are sanctioned by each?

I want to suggest that an examination of rhetorical practices at the local bar is instructive for two reasons: (1) the barroom is predictably different from the university writing classroom; and (2) the barroom is surprisingly similar to the university writing classroom. A look at how neighborhood bars are qualitatively different from classrooms can teach us about our working-class students' rhetorical motives, and a recognition of how they are functionally similar can teach us something about our own. As repositories of cultural values, the working-class bar and the university writing classroom are, of course, quite different. As institutional spaces where public knowledge is constructed according to private rules and where conventional discourses are routinely—even ritually—performed, they have much in common. Just as the university writing classroom is an institutional context within which rhetorics—ways of speaking and of knowing—of the middle-class academic community are sanctioned and performed, the neighborhood bar functions as an institution in which rhetorics of working-class communities are routinely transacted. Within each institution is an economy of discourse, and it is within the terms of that economy that rhetoric—the sum of the discourse-knowledge equation—is produced.

No longer do we assume that classrooms are happily homogenous and insular "communities" that are somehow exempt from the market forces of other linguistic economies. Thus in a recent article Virginia Anderson characterizes classrooms as "rhetorical situations, sites of complex interactions between speakers, audiences, subjects, and codes," a situation she trusts that "teachers all along the continuum between activism and neutrality recognize" (198). But I believe that having recognized these com-
plexities, we still have plenty to learn about what kinds of rhetorical situations writing classrooms are—especially insofar as they are constituted by competing (academic and local) discourses. It would help, I think, to conceive of the classroom as a kind of rhetorical marketplace, one that constitutes a complex scene of rhetorical performances, performances that take on value as cultural capital and are symbolically meaningful as currency. As middle-class writing teachers working with students from working-class communities, we need to make it a priority to cultivate an awareness of how our own class capital—as well as our institutional power—positions us as rhetors in such a marketplace. Such an awareness would serve us well in moving us closer to a resolution of the ethical problem (of ethics and of ethos) that Frank Farmer identifies as the problem of “knowing how to teach in manner that both respects our students’ views and, at the same time, questions the complacencies which too often inform these views” (187). Thinking of the writing classroom as a marketplace where discourses operate as symbolic capital can help us to understand how the rhetorical strategies that we use to establish our class(room) identity may delimit our authority to influence belief even as they allow us to enforce belief; and further, to see why it may be unconvincing to sell what functions as capital in the private marketplace of the academy as a transcendent rhetoric of moral integrity or political empowerment.

The problematics of social class and higher education in the United States have received a good deal of attention by Marxist educators and proponents of critical teaching such as Ira Shor, Peter McLaren, Stanley Aronowitz, and Henry Giroux. The autobiographical narratives of working-class academics like Mike Rose and Victor Villanueva have further enriched conversations about confrontations between local working-class and middle-class academic ways of knowing. Researchers such as Tom Fox have conducted ethnographic investigations into the composing strategies of working-class students to understand what it means for these students to grapple with the (social and rhetorical) demands of university writing instruction. Still, inquires into the class-based cultural affiliations of the students who turn up in our writing classrooms have lagged behind inquires into the pedagogical implications of identity and difference based on race, ethnicity, or gender. Since Lynn Z. Bloom complained in the October 1996 issue of *College English* that her call for papers on “intersections of race, class, and gender in composition studies” for the 1993 meeting of the MLA drew one lone proposal on class in contrast to 12 on race and 94 on gender (657), little has changed. We continue to operate with a thin understanding of the social knowledge—by which I mean epistemological habits rooted in community practice and emerging from material conditions—working-class students bring with them to that space.
What is worse is that when we do recognize this social knowledge, we too often regard it as a bad habit to be broken. Thus Jeff Smith finds in the words of Marshall Alcorn powerful evidence for his complaint that we seriously undervalue students' social obligations, arguing that when Alcorn "speaks of disabusing students of their 'commitments' without seeming to realize, or care, that he is thereby admitting students have commitments (not just wishes, commitments!) different from the ones he would like them to have" (303). Though I have reservations about the kind of instrumental approach to writing instruction Smith appears to recommend, I share his concern that well-intentioned writing teachers—often those most concerned with issues of social justice—seem to give little attention to the material circumstances from which students' local knowledge emerges.

It is perhaps symptomatic of this problem of inattention to the meaning of students' commitments that the approach to writing instruction most concerned with investigating institutional rhetorics to uncover the formative processes of social knowledge seems at times to be so unwilling to consider the specifics of local practice or to acknowledge the ways in which even the most "critical" or "multicultural" classroom works as a site of cultural reproduction. Cultural studies-derived pedagogies aim to have students interrogate the material conditions of their lives, and thus to help them arrive at a fuller understanding of their own (and others') socioeconomic predicaments. While I see this as a worthy goal, I question the means, which seem not to put nearly enough energy into the enterprise of learning what is at stake (and in particular, what is at stake for working-class students) in assenting to such critiques, into figuring out what resistance to cultural-studies projects might mean. For these reasons, it is important that we look beyond the university to see what happens in institutions where working-class identities and values are publicly invented and ritually affirmed.

In what follows, I offer a view of rhetorical practice in one such community institution. I offer examples of the public discourse of the barroom to show that the rhetoric that is valued most highly in today's writing classroom—that is, the rhetoric of conjecture and speculation—not only operates differently as currency in the working-class institution of the barroom, but often becomes, in that rhetorical economy, a powerful class symbol, one that occasions expressions of the problematics of working-class identity. Since speculative rhetoric—the discourse of inquiry—tends to be highly valued as currency in the classroom (and especially in the cultural-studies classroom, where inquiry into social and institutional power structures is the explicit goal), my hope is that teachers of composition will be encouraged not only to examine their assumptions about what this rhetoric is worth and why, but to consider how their authority to teach it
is a function of the ethos they create by their own claims of rhetorical capital. Such considerations will, I believe, better equip teachers not only to understand the terms of working-class resistance to their critical teaching agendas, but to understand the nature (and consequences!) of their own resistance to working-class agendas. It is imperative that we learn how to manage (if not transcend) these resistances if we wish to rescue the classroom from its current predicament as the site of a standoff between working-class students’ goals of entry into institutions of power and teachers’ goals of critique of these same institutions.

“The Problem with You Is That You Ask So Many Questions!”

The Smokehouse Inn,² the bar where I both worked as a bartender and conducted ethnographic research into working-class rhetoric, is more than just a place for the locals to get good barbecue and cold beer: it is a neighborhood institution. The barroom of the Smokehouse, though it functions in part to service the adjoining family-style restaurant, serves the local community as a kind of public forum where members of this suburban Chicago community—laborers, machinists, Teamsters—can congregate to meet with friends and fellow workers, to drink, and to participate in conversation and debate with others about how to make sense of current issues and political events.

Though a relatively small sample of the larger population participates in the social life of the Smokehouse, the bar nonetheless plays an important role in the life of the community. In many working-class neighborhoods, local bars like the Smokehouse have long served as public spaces where private rhetorics are enacted. Historian Roy Rosenweig points out, for example, that barrooms have historically functioned as sanctuaries for expressions of working-class identity, and came to represent an institutional articulation of working-class resistance to middle-class values (145). Despite changes in the industrial landscape, the barroom persists as a site where working-class concerns are given voice. Writes Stanley Aronowitz:

> We live in a postindustrial service society in which the traditional markers of working-class culture survive—especially, the barroom, where waves of male industrial workers have congregated to share their grievances against the boss, their private troubles, their dreams of a collective power and individual escape. (204)

Ethnographic studies of working-class communities have, as well, demonstrated the importance of taverns to the production of knowledge and flow of information in these communities. In E. E. Le Masters’ study of lifestyles
in a working-class bar in a Midwestern town, for example, the author concludes early on that “the tavern in this small community was the center of social life,” to the extent that “the proprietor had an amazing amount of knowledge about the residents of the town” such that “he could predict election results with great accuracy” (17). While neighborhood demographics have changed since the time of Le Masters’ study, it remains true that bars continue to function as public forums in many working-class communities. (Though there are many people in such communities who have no direct involvement with bars, local taverns nonetheless act as important sites for the construction of working-class identity.) As such, they are likely to serve as a general point of reference for others in the community, including those who are (legally) considered too young to patronize them. Given the status of bars as neighborhood institutions, young working-class adults—even adolescents—are likely to feel the influence of local bars even if they have never set foot in one. Yet given as well the tendency of working-class adolescents to assume adult roles earlier on, chances are that they will in fact have had direct experience with bars.3 As a teenager growing up in a blue-collar neighborhood, I experienced bars as an important rite of passage from childhood to adulthood—one that has as a functional parallel, I would venture, the passage undertaken by young middle-class adults first going “away” to college. My experience, while perhaps not universal, is far from unique.

The Smokehouse, where working people come together to publicly invent a private culture, is not in fact situated in what one thinks of as a traditional white-ethnic enclave. However, the community it serves largely comprises working whites who moved from such southside enclaves to flee the southward migrations of urban African-Americans. One could argue, in fact, that the Smokehouse is all the more important as a community institution now that the community itself has been geographically “displaced.” Most of the men and women who participate regularly in the social life of the Smokehouse work in traditional blue-collar jobs: The men are skilled laborers (telephone linemen, woodworkers, plumbers, truck drivers, machinists) and the women work in service jobs (as waitresses, bartenders, clerks, child-care providers, and hairdressers).

The voices who have featured most prominently in my story of Smokehouse rhetoric belong to the men and women who were “regulars” at the bar: that is, to those who treated the bar as a kind of home-away-from-home and who enjoyed an established role in the social network there. Many of these “regulars” spent several hours a day, several days a week at the bar. Though at the time I conducted my research most of the regular bar patrons were men, the bar did have its share of women who enjoyed status as regulars, as well.4 The regular Smokehousers who are at the core
of my study are Walter, a retired foreman for a farm equipment manufacturer; Arlen, a 60-year-old cook and bar manager; Joe, a 40-year-old machinist; Maggie, a young mother who has worked at the Smokehouse as waitress, hostess, and bartender; Roberta, waitress and fifteen-year Smokehouse veteran; and Jack, entrepreneur and former steelworker. There have been constellations of others as well, regulars and droppers-in who have moved in and out of the Smokehouse scene, and with whom I have chatted, joked, commiserated, and contended.

Since I had lived in the area for many years and was well-connected in the community, I got the Smokehouse job through a friend of a friend who had been a bartender there. Within a week from the day I first showed up to work the bar at the Smokehouse, I found (or rather, was relegated to) my niche in the small society of the barroom. My prior commitment to the neighborhood meant that I was regarded by the Smokehouse “establishment” as an insider, even as my status (then) as a graduate student clearly marked me as an outsider. This ambiguous identity earned me a distinctive place in the social structure of waitresses, bartenders, and regular customers. I like to describe my role at the Smokehouse as that of friendly antagonist, since my status as insider and place in the network depended on my willingness to provide occasions for argument by challenging conventional values and beliefs. To be an insider, in other words, I had to cultivate a performative persona as outsider. It was in my capacity as bartender that I worked as ethnographer, using my position behind the bar to record the political arguments that took place with such frequency, and such apparent fury.5

As bartender/ethnographer—and, as worker/graduate student—I often found myself to be a central actor in these speech events. My own presence at the Smokehouse offered a reference point in terms of which Smokehousers could express themselves as a coherent sociopolitical body by articulating who and what they were not. For this reason, my own conversations and confrontations with others at the Smokehouse were responsible for generating data that is richly suggestive of Smokehouse orientations to truth and language, and of the relationship between rhetorical practice and class identity. Often quite against my will, I “helped” those at the Smokehouse to articulate the conventional wisdoms of the community by taking part in arguments in which oppositions to middle-class rhetorics (and in particular, academic rhetorics) were ritually dramatized.

I expect that the terms of my place among others at the Smokehouse will sound (perhaps painfully) familiar to anyone who has ever found himself or herself struggling to negotiate the space between local working-class and middle-class academic social spheres. Smokehousers publicly spoke about my associations with the university in ways that revealed that
I came to represent an orientation to work and knowledge that was vastly different from local norms. Any mention of my “other life” as student and teacher of English, for example, invariably inspired much lively commentary from the regulars at the bar, much of it derisive: Wendell, a union laborer and Smokehouse regular, would often ask me if I was “done with school yet,” and would remark on my status as a “professional student.” On one occasion, he leaned over the bar to me and demanded to know if I was “still in school.” When I assured him that I was, Wendell turned his attention to the others at the bar, and addressing them, remarked, “This one here’s the only one I know gonna be collecting her social security checks from a goddamn college!” Though he does not articulate my transgression against community norms in terms of social class, his quip suggests that as a graduate (and therefore “professional”) student, I symbolize an unnatural, or at least unhealthy, identification with the university—and a defection to middle-class values and lifestyle. For Wendell, and presumably for the audience he addresses in his commentary, I clearly represent a departure from local norms which dictate that public identities are built on the fundamental values of work and community. My involvement and identification with the university meant that what I came to signify for others in Smokehouse society was an orientation to all things academic, pedantic, and ultimately without value in the everyday life of the “real world” of work. Once, in a conversation about race relations in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict, Walter threw up his hands in exasperation and complained, “The problem with you is that you ask so many questions that sooner a later, a guy runs out of answers!” My rhetorical habit of speculating and raising questions, a strategy that is so richly rewarded within the academic institution, was apparently seen by Walter and others at the Smokehouse as both unproductive and manipulative. However (as I shall argue), the contempt Smokehousers such as Wendell and Walter show for the habit of “asking so many questions” has at least as much to do with (what they perceive to be) my use of it as a status claim as it does with their attitudes toward this rhetoric more generally. That is, the Smokehousers’ responses to me have less to do with any negative assessment of my personal integrity or with wholesale rejection of a particular rhetorical practice than with their critique of the public self they saw me as trying to invent in my arguments with them.

Social scientists have long struggled to describe the class situation in the United States quantitatively, in terms of material conditions. But the place of political argument in the everyday life of the Smokehouse community indicates the extent to which “working-class” is a cultural category, and hence, a rhetorical construct. Richard Ohmann, taking as an example his own class experience, describes class “membership” as a discursive pro-
class: "in all my doing from day to day I and the people I mingle with and am affected by constantly create my class position.... From this perspective, class is not a permanent fact, but something that continually happens" (qtd. in Fox 73–74). Though of course the everyday realities of people in traditional blue-collar jobs are shaped by material conditions, these conditions are always subject to (and the subject of) invention and interpretation; the barroom at the Smokehouse is just one example of a site where working-class identity is under construction. This collective identity is, however, conflicted and problematic: in a sense, contentions about how it should be named are what define the group as a social unit. In the absence of an articulated consensus about how the class to which they belong should experience itself as a sociopolitical body—people at the Smokehouse tend to believe that they can claim neither the established power that accrues to those at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, nor the emergent power of historically marginalized “minority” groups—their social identity comes, in large part, from managed dissent.

One important way the Smokehousers express class solidarity is through participation in performances of agonistic discourse. Political argument at the bar functions as a conventional speech genre, knowledge of the conventions of which establishes one’s place among others—at the Smokehouse, and in the world. Further, ritual performance of conventional speech genres establishes and authorizes the “official” discourse of the institution. Topoi for barroom debates are shaped in relation to that official discourse, which functions as a conservative but negotiable public epistemology, one that maps out the rhetorical territory on which contenders in performed arguments position themselves in staging their disputes. Though individuals may occupy different positions on this discursive terrain, the official discourse serves as the heuristic in terms of which class identity is invented. My presence as a dissenter helps to resolve the tension between individuating and consolidating functions of rhetoric—that is, it both opens possibilities for inquiry (thus freeing individuals to claim distinctive positions) and inscribes the parameters of social knowledge (thereby allowing the Smokehousers to articulate what they have in common). In their arguments with me, that is, the Smokehousers could show dissent without showing themselves to be dissenters.

One topic that functions as a site for—and implicates me as “teacher” in—the process of invention and identification is that of education. Though most people who work and play at the Smokehouse have not attended college, they urge their children to “stay in school and work hard,” seeing higher education as a means to economic opportunity. Many at the bar have been quietly supportive of my academic career, have congratulated me on my efforts to “make something of myself.” Yet this valorization
of my success in achieving whatever economic mobility my education makes possible—often by the very people who publicly devalue it—bespeaks a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the kind of capital higher education has to offer. Smokehousers privately approve of those who strive to join the middle class, but publicly disapprove of those who embrace the rhetoric of its institutions: Earning a degree is seen as a route to upward mobility even as identification with the university is perceived as a kind of cultural abandonment.

Attitudes about the role of education are connected in complex ways to views regarding the value of work; attitudes about the meaning of work are an essential component of the institutional discourse. In the terms of that discourse, work tends to be defined in opposition to play or leisure, a distinction that reflects a deeper structural opposition in Smokehouse conventional wisdom between doing and thinking, producing and philosophizing. Speaking to me one-to-one in an interview, Walter articulates an investment in practice as the distinctive feature of Smokehouse sociopolitical identity. His response to a question I posed about what is to be learned from institutional versus experiential education suggests that he sees the world of formal education as a world of artifice, one that sets itself in opposition to the “real” world of work. Walter explains that you “learn more” outside of school than in it:

The first thing they [employers] almost always—everyone’ll tell you: First thing you gotta do is, forget what you learned in school! “Cause you’re out in the so-called real world—that’s where it’s at. There’s more to be learned outside of college than there is inside of college...with the exception, now, of, ah, let’s say, uh, engineering, ah, medical professions, uh, some disciplines like chemistry...you just can’t do without college...there’s where you learn, you learn the basics. Uh, the real test comes when you get out in the field...uh, I, um, here I go again—you’re gonna think I’m really hung up on this subject—but I am! Ah, I judge an educated man by his ability to do. You understand? That really says it all.

Walt will concede the value of higher education, but only if it doesn’t come with indoctrination into middle-class values, values here represented by identification with rhetoric-for-its-own-sake. He speaks for many at the Smokehouse in insisting that the value of formal education lies in its ability to convey immediately applicable, practical knowledge—not in training in speculative rhetoric.

Though the official discourse serves as a heuristic for public debate, the conventional wisdoms it encodes are by no means professed with equal enthusiasm by all. Rather, one’s position with respect to the official dis-
course has everything to do with how one is positioned within the group. Walter, who describes himself as "working class," does in fact identify strongly with the conventional wisdom, and in public arguments, tends to perform views that affirm group solidarity. Walt is the voice of consensus at the Smokehouse, and he is often called upon to give voice to the public view in response to challenges from "outside." In this sense, he occupies a much different role in the Smokehouse network from that of Perry, the owner of the Smokehouse. In private interviews with me, Perry clearly attempted to position himself against what he perceived to be working-class cultural habits and Smokehouse conventional wisdoms. He told me that he thought of himself as "lower middle-class," and his commentaries on the uses of higher education are suggestive of his middle class identification and his approval of upward mobility. Perry spoke to me of the humanistic potential of a college education, and remarked often on its capacity to allow for social mobility. He remembered his own college experience, for example, as a time when he was free to break from local norms:

I think that the friends I made, the ah, black friends that I had in college that were my best friends, had something to do with shaping my life...so yeah, in some respects you learn a tolerance, that you can't pick up if you don't get an education...if you don't spend time with a variety of people, and around learned people. If you're just gonna be—you know, if your life is sitting around a bar, entirely, then that's all you're gonna know...is those people, it's those rednecks out there, that you're gonna be doing most of your learning from. Unless you really are a person who can rise above it...

In looking at the conflicting responses of Walter and Perry, it becomes clear that Smokehouser attitudes toward the value of higher education have much to do with how it is claimed as an identification strategy. To simply attend college is not enough to set one apart: to inhabit its philosophical world, however, is.

For Walter—himself a skilled rhetorician—to claim the rhetorical is suspect, because it confuses the practical with the theoretical, mixes work with play. Walter voices this attitude in valorizing those who "do," while devaluing those who merely "talk." As an illustration of the preferable former type, he holds up as an example another Smokehouse regular, Joe:

You got people around here that—and I don't want to mention any names—but, uh, that are very quick, and very responsive, and uh uh blah blah blah, they got the floor all the time, but they, uh, when it comes to the ability to do, earn a living and take care of yourself—Joe is head and shoulders above 'em.
Walt's sly reference to my own rhetorical posturing sets me up as a point of reference against which to contrast Joe as a man of action. For Walt (who doesn't always agree with Joe, and who frequently tries to bait him into arguments) Joe's refusal to play rhetorician and to claim rhetorical prowess as a source of prestige marks him as someone who exemplifies class loyalty and with whom it is appropriate to identify. Walt's praise of Joe is consistent with a view, expressed by Smokehousers time and time again, that doing rhetoric—performing and philosophizing at the same time—is essentially dishonest, is a play for status motivated by personal vanity, and not necessarily by concern for truth or for the public good. While Smokehousers regularly use the barroom as a place to stage elaborate verbal performances demonstrating individual prowess in agonistic rhetoric, they hold in suspicion those performers who are obviously adept at the game—the better one speaks, in other words, the less he or she can be trusted. (Not surprisingly, Walter himself was often accused of being a "bullshitter" by other Smokehousers who suspected him of enjoying argument as a rhetorical exercise.)

Though the official discourse of the Smokehouse serves a solidarity function in setting itself in opposition to the middle-class practice of speculative rhetoric, in arguments individuals stage performances to distinguish themselves as rhetoricians in the group even as they publicly declaim skepticism about the usefulness of rhetoric-as-inquiry. In barroom arguments I was consistently scripted into the role of one who, as teacher (and therefore as one who asks questions for a living), cannot therefore do (anything really productive). This was the part in which I was cast even though people at the Smokehouse knew me first in my capacity as worker: My alliance with the university and its ways of knowing worked to divest me of the authority to speak the truth on matters of "real life" and to provide meaningful commentary on the world of work and action. In performed arguments, I was consistently cast by others at the Smokehouse into the role of "teacher"—that is, I was called upon to give dramatic voice to what, in terms of orientation to discourse and knowledge, the academic institution represented to the Smokehouse community.

An excerpt from one argument in particular illustrates how argument operates in the domain linking rhetorical practice to class identity. The argument from which these data are taken took place among several Smokehouse regulars and workers on a Friday evening as I worked behind the bar, and features Walter and me as primary players. The exchange began as a discussion about then-candidate Bill Clinton's qualifications for the office of president given his history as a "draft dodger," and quickly grew into a more philosophical debate about the general morality of refusing to serve in the military during wartime. I held that there were indeed...
circumstances under which one might refuse to participate in war; others at the bar, and most notably Walter, argued that the duty to serve one's country is an absolute moral imperative:

Walt: [indicating a man seated across at the bar]: I wanna talk about this young man, here. Next year we get involved in a war—and he's ripe. Do you think that he's got the prerogative to say, "I don't like this war, so I'm not going"?

Me: It depends entirely on the circumstances. Now why don't you ask him what he thinks?

Walt: There's no circumstances! The law says—the law says, we've declared war on...ah...Mesopotamia...

Me: So what if we declared war, and it...it did not seem like a just cause?

Walt: We didn't declare war on anybody! Well, this is why I say I can't ever discuss anything with you, because here you always say, "What if, what if?"

Bullshit on "What if"! When our country says we're at war, it's his [points again at the man across the bar] job to go!

A Voice from Across the Bar: That's what I say!

Me: So you should do whatever your country says to do, regardless—

Walt: That's right!

Me: So what if you lived in Germany—

Walt: Same thing! I don't care where it is! If your country says you go, you go!

Me: But who makes these decisions? Aren't—are you, the people—this is a democracy—are you—

Walt: Ooooh, fugu on your goddamn bullshit! Now you're changin' the argument—who makes the laws, who done this, who done that...I wanna ask you one—

Me: You said—

Walt: [pounding on the bar to punctuate each word] I wanna ask you one question, and one question only! Do you think that each man has an individual right to obey the law or disobey it?

Me: Sure, but I also think people—since this is a democracy—

Walt: I don't want to hear it! I want a yes or no answer.

Me: [with exasperation] Wal-ter...!

Roberta: Wait, wait—I gotta ask one question—
Me: You’re imposing all these conditions—

Roberta: Do you think—

Me: —and you won’t let me impose my own!

What is most immediately striking about this exchange is how operatic the argument is in its exaggerated rendering of moral opposites, and how much it depends for dramatic effect on the performances of individual actors. While individuals work to display their talents to the audience of others (each player functions by turns as performer and as audience), they also work together to express the thematic structure of a unified dramatic composition. As performance, the argument is in effect cordoned off as ceremonial space where the script of public knowledge is enacted. Within this generic dramatic structure, however, Walter performs a role that gives voice to the deep assumptions that are fundamental to the institutional discourse of the Smokehouse. What is dramatized by Walt in his performance for the larger audience of people at the Smokehouse bar is his (and, by implication, the audience’s) contempt for my privileging of theory over practice—that is, for my investment in the hypothetical what-if at the expense of the constative it-is. Walt’s dramatization of the importance of practice over theory, then, enacts the institutional philosophy regarding the place of what-if in the cultural marketplace in which the Smokehouse participates.

And yet—while it tends to be something of a commonplace among middle-class academics that the working-class is characterized as a group by a kind of stubborn literal-mindedness—it is important to understand that Walt’s rejection of my rhetorical strategy does not mean that Walter and others at the Smokehouse do not practice what-if rhetoric. Notice how Walter himself proposes a hypothetical scenario immediately prior to his grand dismissal of my own what-if question. (In fact, the barroom—as a place for leisure, a place apart from work—is the official site, the appropriate institutional space for what-if.) It means, rather, that in this particular rhetorical economy, I will not be granted the authority to claim the rhetoric of what-if as capital. As illocution, Walt’s declamation can be understood to mean something like “bullshit on people who use what-if to show they’re better than me!” While the bar is seen as a place of play and therefore as an appropriate place for what-if games, my status as one who takes part in a marketplace where what-if has actual value as work—in which theory is practice—undermines my persuasive ethos and makes me an occasion for cultural performance. In other words, at the Smokehouse it is appropriate to practice what-if rhetoric only if one neither publicly claims (or proclaims) it as a way to make knowledge nor identifies with institutions.
where theory is practice, where talk is action. What-if is particularly suspect when it becomes clear that someone outside the community is trying to use it as a way to claim a position of privilege: in the absence of an alternative rhetoric which makes it possible to conceive class in other than crudely economic terms, what-if becomes the site of agonistic performance when it is suspected to activate claims of symbolic capital. (Consider, if you will, another example of how what-if is linked to persuasive authority: Almost without exception, those at the Smokehouse supported the presidential candidacy of Ross Perot, a anti-politics politician whose persuasive ethos was predicated on his wholesale rejection of all things political. Having demonstrated a commitment to getting things done, Perot was free to spin hypothetical scenarios illustrating just what would be different if he were president. In other words, Perot can be forgiven for his material capital—he can still be real—as long he doesn’t claim rhetorical capital.) To use what-if, and to publicly advocate its uses, is predicated on the ethos one can only establish by refusing to use it to claim class privilege. This powerful association of what-if with cultural capital has obvious implications for middle-class teachers working in middle-class institutions to teach middle-class rhetorics to working-class students.

**Teachers, Students, and the Politics of Inquiry**

Of course, Walter doesn’t speak for all working-class students, or even for most. How students will receive the critical agenda of the writing classroom has to do with how they perceive rhetoric to work as currency in marketplaces in which they currently trade, on the one hand, and aspire to claim membership, on the other. The population of a writing class is not a mere random sample of the larger population, as Jeff Smith points out. “For,” he says, stating the obvious but often overlooked truth, “students have already passed through gates en route to our classrooms.” He goes on to remind us that as different as our students may be from us and from each other, what they have in common is that they have chosen to come to college (102). Clearly, the writing students who show up in our classrooms have—unlike Walter—demonstrated a commitment to the middle-class enterprise of higher education. But though the very presence of a working-class student at the university would seem to indicate his or her belief in the virtue of upward mobility (or at least, if such a desire is not fully realized, an ambivalence toward identification with the working class), such a student may not be equipped to trade in the kind of rhetorical currency we’re offering. The place of what-if in the rhetorical economy of the Smokehouse suggests that it is not learning the habits and conventions of inquiry that is troublesome for working-class students—since, as
we have seen, what-if rhetoric *does* happen in working-class institutions—but rather, that the politics of identification in the use of this rhetoric is what these students find truly problematic.

Quite obviously, the barroom differs from the classroom in the social values it sanctions. As institutional sites, barroom and classroom embody different sets of cultural prerogatives. In “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” Lynn Z. Bloom argues that whatever else we may think we’re doing in the writing classroom, we are promoting—through teaching style, writing assignments, evaluation, everything—a set of clearly identifiable middle-class virtues. She goes on to list some of the values university writing instruction promotes: respectability, decorum and propriety, moderation and temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification; and, finally, critical thinking. It is easy to see how working-class bars represent the violation, indeed the antithesis, of this middle-class value structure: the typical corner bar appears to be a place of fierce solidarity, vice, aggression, drunkenness, profligacy, leisure, chaos, sloth, and excess. But it is the final item in Bloom’s list, the one that does not participate quite so neatly in the above list of oppositions, that we as writing teachers use most often, and most insistently, to define ourselves and our classroom discourses against local institutions and local rhetorics: the virtue of critical thinking.

Though we still haven’t reached a consensus about the means and ends of freshman writing instruction, I think it’s fair to say that most teachers—and particularly those who see themselves as working to advance the aims of a “critical pedagogy”—are committed to teaching the transformative power of rhetoric both for self-discovery and social change. This would include any writing teacher who participates in current conversations in composition studies, from process-approach specialists to proponents of Freireian liberatory pedagogy to those who take a cultural-studies approach to the teaching of writing. In other words, it implicates anyone who believes that an important goal of first-year writing instruction should be to educate students in ways to approach discourse “critically”—that is, to both interpret and invent strategic uses of text. Marilyn Cooper articulates this common philosophical ground in noting that most compositionists “believe in the value of critical thinking, cognitive dissonance, and adopting different perspectives—all of which are based on the central value of coming to know through reading and writing” (55).

What is productive as an educational goal, however, is likely to be counterproductive when claimed as a moral virtue. I would go so far as to argue that the rhetorical habits Cooper describes are habits in which we as compositionists not only believe, but identify—that is, we claim their practice as a moral virtue which we then use to locate ourselves in relation to
our students and the institutional rhetorics they represent. While addressing the needs of working-class students demands that we become aware of the ways in which the classroom is different from the barroom in the rhetorical gestures it rewards, it would also serve us well to note that as a rhetorical marketplace, the classroom has much in common with the barroom. Like the barroom, the classroom is a place where (though different market values may obtain) insiders trade in cultural currencies and claim their places in the institution though generic cultural performances.

While it’s important that we remain aware that we speak from a position of institutional power and therefore have a moral obligation to speak responsibly to students in our classrooms, the difficulty as I see it has as much to do with how to be persuasive at all as with how to decide what kind of influence to have. As politically sensitive instructors, we worry endlessly about the ideological messages we convey to our students, but my work and field experiences at the bar have given me to suspect that we’re giving ourselves rather too much credit. In her recent work exploring the meaning of authority in the postmodern composition classroom (1996), Xin Liu Gale argues that teachers working within institutions of higher education have always had coercive power, a power that derives from their associations with the institutions themselves, but she gives rather less attention to the question of what kind of coercion this power implies, and to how it actually affects students’ ways of thinking about their lives. I do think it is safe to assume that, just as persuasive authority is unevenly distributed among rhetoricians at the Smokehouse, the academic institution does not wholly, unequivocally, or unproblematically determine the authority of individuals working within it. If working-class students have had limited participation in marketplaces in which intellectual capital holds currency, then what is to say that they will regard writing teachers—who are often rich in symbolic capital but do not display signs of material capital—to have the kind of ethos that effectively persuades them of the value of what-if as a resource?

It seems doubtful that we will be able to make the necessary ethical appeals to convince students to engage in the kind of writing-as-inquiry we value when we claim what-if as capital at the same time we fail to demonstrate social and economic power. In their discussion of the nature of authority in the writing classroom, Mortensen and Kirsch call into question the idea that authority as it functions in the classroom “community” is a linear process or static condition that works independently of particular discursive contexts, observing that “relations in communities are in part defined by differences in knowledge, experiences, and status—differences in power that endlessly shift with and across social contexts (557–58). To identify different kinds of authority in the social dynamic of the classroom,
Mortensen and Kirsch suggest that a functional distinction be made between the power to enforce belief and the power to influence belief, calling the former “authority of office” and the latter “authority of expertise” (559). In one sense, what we lack when we fail to persuade of the value of what-if is the authority of expertise—i.e., we have somehow failed to demonstrate the profitable uses of our knowledge-as-capital, even as the authority we enjoy by virtue of our office within the institution gives us the power to dictate classroom policies and procedures. From another perspective, the crisis of persuasive authority can be located in the relation between the authorities of office and expertise, insofar as our failure to persuade of the value of what-if originates in our failure to make apparent to our students the specificity of the relationship between the authorities of office and of expertise. In other words, what we have failed to demonstrate is that the kind of expertise we are selling—the capacity to engage speculative rhetoric—does in fact have something to do with the authority of offices outside the academy. When we display a kind of capital that appears to be without value in the larger social economy, we have not succeeded in persuading students from working-class communities that expertise in what-if confers power in socioeconomic institutions that exist in (as such a student might put it) “the real world.”

Writing about problems feminist teachers face in attempting to persuade students to ally themselves with feminist concerns, Virginia Anderson calls upon the Burkean idea of identification to explain that such attempts fail because they misapprehend the rhetorical situation in which they operate, and misunderstand the role of ethos in the process of identification. In her critique of Dale Bauer’s tactics for persuading students to realign themselves with her feminist agenda, Anderson argues that it is Bauer’s own ethos that is largely responsible for her failure to persuade. Explains Anderson: “[Bauer] presents herself as an embodiment of her political agenda, and hence as a site, intrinsically valid and appealing in itself, where students will one day decide they want to end up...[But] sites are seldom intrinsically persuasive; identification is created. We induce it through the tactical choices we make—our own moves in the rhetorical alignment and the types of arguments we construct” (200). She speculates that feminist teachers go wrong in that “they align themselves with those students hope never to become, and they depict themselves as enemies of what many students are” (203). I am suggesting that a similar dynamic is at work in the attempts of middle-class teachers to persuade working-class students to identify with the practice of what-if—that teachers who claim what-if as capital while encouraging critique of other symbols of middle-class capital do not themselves embody persuasive sites. In making conventional symbols of middle-class capital the subject of our critical performances,
we not only set ourselves in opposition to the discourse of working-class institutions but also demonstrate class privilege by aligning ourselves with an economic predicament working-class students are trying desperately to transcend. In a recent issue of CCC, Frank Farmer confesses that his students, upon being asked for their responses to essays critical of popular culture forms for an advanced composition course, were more interested in figuring out what the critics stood to gain in their rhetorical performances than they were in evaluating the validity of the critiques themselves. Far from accepting the claims of the pop-culture critics uncritically, Farmer's students suspected that the critics were motivated by an urge to assert class distinction at the expense of the average, unenlightened reader (190–92.).

What I have come to understand since Walter pounded his fist on the bar at the Smokehouse and declared "bullshit on 'what if!'" is that he was right in suspecting me of trying to win the game by claiming what-if as capital. I was, admittedly, more concerned with characterizing myself as something other than the ill-informed, literal-minded working stiff I imagined (and constructed) him to be—was more concerned, that is, with showing myself to be middle-class—than I was with trying to move the conversation into a place where we could engage in mutual inquiry into the truth of the matter. I knew immediately that Walter was using me as a foil against which to construct a public persona, but it took me longer to see that I was just as eagerly doing the same.

I worry that what we are doing is convincing students who have strong local ties that the only use of what-if is as a strategy for identification with something they don't necessarily want to be. While some students (those who, like Perry, are driven by a desire to set themselves apart from "those rednecks out there") might be persuaded to identify with us and with the institutional rhetorics for which we speak, this hardly encourages critique of dominant institutions, nor does it produce humane, informed citizens. It merely teaches working-class students a trick of achieving class distinction, a trick that entails seeing those in their home communities—and worse, those parts of themselves that remain at home—as dupes. I worry that when we construct what-if as class capital and ourselves as examples of successful investors in such capital, students who wish to buy into what-if must necessarily identify against the "rednecks."

What, then, can we do to create an ethos that is persuasive to students who may be inclined, like Walter, to say, "bullshit on 'what if'? We need to make the uses and powers of what-if the very subject of deep inquiry in the writing classroom—to focus, for example, on the relationships between the practice of what-if and socioeconomic power, and to pose such questions as, Who has the "right" to engage in what-if, and under what circumstances?
What is the relationship between the ability to perform speculative rhetoric and capacity to achieve one's social, economic, and political goals? At the same time that we work to understand students' reasons for their resistance to us and to what we stand for, we should also interrogate the terms of our resistance to what they stand for. We need to communicate our efforts in both respects. We can begin, for one, by responding not with contempt or derision for such students' vulgar instrumentalism, but by demonstrating a willingness to open a space in the classroom for inquiries into the relationship between academic writing and what-if, to interrogate the different instrumentalities what-if might have. It is important, I think, that we as teachers remain open to what sometimes may strike us as the (distressingly) utilitarian motives of first-year students, and to work to open a dialogue between writing-as-critical-inquiry and writing-as-instrument; between means and ends. When students invested in acquiring practical knowledge want to know what learning to write in the ways we sanction will do for them, we should take the question seriously.

The way to persuade working-class students of the value of what-if, then, is to openly acknowledge functional parallels between the rhetoric of the barroom and that of the classroom. This means that we would make the nature of institutional discourse the focus of our pedagogy, and would encourage students to think about how speculative rhetoric can be of value to them as capital, how it can be useful as currency in the marketplaces in which they wish to participate. Examining how what-if can be useful as an instrument in the academic marketplace might then invite inquiries into how much philosophical and instrumental rhetorics are differences in kind, and to what degree they suggest differences in context. The language of action and use may help to invest us with the authority to persuade students that writing has important uses even when it isn't being useful. I am not arguing that we should be concerned only with teaching students how to fill out job applications; I believe that we should encourage them to write in ways that are critical and exploratory. But I am suggesting that we need to make it a priority to raise questions about how each text performs, in which domain, and to what ends. This seems essential if we are to demonstrate to students that we are aware of what we are up to in our performances.

Every so often I hear one or another of my colleagues invoke the white-male-in-a-baseball-cap-who-wants-just-the-facts as a symbolic focus for his or her resentment toward student resistance to what-if (and to critical pedagogy more generally). Just as Walter publicly identifies me as a symbol of the kind of middle-class intellectual one must not claim to be, teachers construct such students as symbols that are ritually invoked for political ends. Such rhetorical strategies bring to mind the profoundly troubling what-if question Virginia Anderson poses: "What if the real soli-
darity that appeals to activist teachers is not that solidarity we might achieve with our students, but rather the unity and satisfaction we find in our radical stance?” (212). It is certainly true that working-class students’ obvious lack of (middle-class) cultural capital, combined with their apparent political conservatism, may tend to frustrate and alienate teachers whose political views and teaching philosophies work together as valuable symbolic resources within the institution. But while white working-class students may seem to offer a safe opportunity to express such resentments, surely these students are not themselves unaware of their status as the focus of such teacherly frustrations. In setting ourselves in opposition to such students we may succeed in expressing our own class distinction, but we succeed neither in showing solidarity with their needs, nor in constructing an ethos that might help us to persuade them of the value of what-if in their writing and in their lives.

While it is certainly true that learning about rhetorical practices in working-class institutions helps us to understand the nature of working-class students’ (social and rhetorical) commitments, it may also be true that an awareness of the politics of inquiry in our own institutional context better equips us to persuade our more traditional students of the value of inquiry, as well. That what-if is so problematically linked to class identification does, of course, mean that working-class students have more to gain, and more to lose, in buying stock in the rhetorical capital of the academic institution. But I am convinced that knowing our own rituals and performances is a way of becoming intimately familiar with who we are as rhetors, with our powers and limitations, with our motives and agendas. If we are truly concerned with teaching the transformative power of writing for political empowerment and social change, then we must understand that our first and most critical task is to assess, and commit ourselves to working within, the rhetorical economy of the writing classroom itself—even when this entails taking an honest look at the terms of our own investments in what-if.

Notes

1. Joseph Harris complained years ago of the tendency of compositionists to accept the notion of discourse community uncritically, and cautioned that “theories have tended to invoke the idea of community in ways at once sweeping and vague: positing discursive utopias that direct and determine the writings of their members, yet failing to state the operating rules or boundaries of these communities” (12). Harris’ caveat has encouraged me to see that the complex sociocultural dynamics of the classroom “community” might better be understood in Bourdieu’s terms, whereby specific social scenes operate as marketplaces within a larger social economy in which products of culture function as currency and take on value as capital (1991).

2. A pseudonym. Since the bar services a barbecue restaurant and is usually filled with a dense haze of cigarette smoke, “the
Smokehouse" seemed like the obvious choice of name.

3. In her study of social categories in a suburban Detroit high school, sociolinguist Penelope Eckert demonstrates how working-class students tend to assume adult roles much earlier than their middle-class counterparts, for whom adolescence is preparation for an adult life characterized by stages of upward mobility. Eckert explains that because working-class adolescents tend to look to local networks for social and economic resources, they are not necessarily set off categorically from the social world of adults. "Continuity between high school and early adulthood," writes Eckert, "resides in different spheres [for middle- and working-class adolescents]" (139).

4. It has been noted by linguists and anthropologists who have studied barroom cultures (Le Masters, Spradley and Mann, Bell) that bars have traditionally functioned as spaces where rituals of masculinity are given ceremonial treatment. At the Smokehouse, women are active participants in the social life at the bar—though they earn the right to claim membership by taking part in male-solidarity rituals (such as buying rounds of drinks and participating in performances of agonistic discourse), they nonetheless are an important part of the Smokehouse scene. This participation extends beyond the domain of work, since women who are employed as waitresses and bartenders often spend much of their leisure time at the bar. As a bartender—that is, as one in a central position in Smokehouse social routines—I enjoyed a position of high visibility and status in Smokehouse society.

5. Because of the bar's status as private-space-within-a-public-space, the mechanics of data collection presented particular challenges. My general method for gathering data was to switch on a small, hand-held tape recorder I kept behind the bar as episodes of conversation happened. Though I did not remind people of the presence of the tape recorder as I recorded each episode of talk, I did discuss my plan to record conversations with the owner of the Smokehouse as well as with those regulars who are featured most prominently in the study. In other words, regulars knew I was working on a research project about "how people talked about politics in the real world," and that I was likely to tape conversations (even if I did not announce my intent to record particular stretches of discourse). Generally speaking (though many at the bar said that they were glad I was going to write something about the way things really were among people who worked), my research project was regarded as an eccentricity, as further evidence of the peculiar habits of academics.

6. It is, of course, important to bear in mind that even though I conducted interviews with individuals at a remove from the arena of public performance, interviews are themselves performances to an audience—me—perceived to be skeptical of the truth of working-class values.

7. In his research on first-year writing students' responses to critical pedagogy, David Seitz observed that working-class students in a cultural-studies research writing class at the University of Illinois at Chicago learned how to render convincing performances of the kinds of critical discourses sanctioned by teacher and institution. In conducting a series of follow-up interviews with these students, however, Seitz found that the students remained unpersuaded of the truth (or usefulness) of these discourses, and that the architecture of their local knowledge had managed to remain more or less intact (65-73).

8. That teachers operate as signs in the assemblage of texts that is the discursive world of the writing classroom is no great revelation, but it is nonetheless a crucial point in considering what kind of persuasive authority we have with students. No matter what else we may be doing in the classroom at a given moment, we are busily signifying our social allegiances. I am made uncomfortably aware how much I work as signifier beyond (and perhaps in spite of) the more explicit messages I wish to convey each time a student informs me that I don't "look like an English teacher." That students perceive my physical self to signify something other than what they've come to expect an English teacher to represent tells me that the signified "English teacher" is associated with a particular and conventional set of signifiers. Clearly, what for middle-class academics functions as valuable currency in their cultural economy—the capital of tastes, manners, language, and style that signals to insiders the power to reject the very kinds of material capital to which working-class students aspire—may have no cultural meaning.
for students “outside,” or worse, may be read as signs of failure to achieve socioeconomic success.

9. In William Covino’s rhetoric for writing students, *Forms of Wondering*, reader-writers are drawn into a conversation about the means and ends of writing. The book opens with an assignment entitled “What’s the Use of Writing?” a dialogue designed to get the writer to create a dialectic between the philosophical and utilitarian functions of writing. While some of the writing tasks in Covino’s book may be too generically esoteric to be persuasive to students seeking to learn forms of writing that perform conventional functions in nonacademic marketplaces, *Forms*’ ongoing dialogue about the goals and uses of writing is an excellent model for teachers wishing to structure classroom activities around such a discussion.

Works Cited


