

## Book Review

Alexander, J., Jarratt, S. C., & Welch, N. (Eds.).  
(2018). *Unruly rhetorics: Protest, persuasion,  
and publics*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

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I read *Unruly Rhetorics* in the early months of 2021, while I watched a jury convict George Floyd's murderer, Laurentian University lay off tenured professors, and anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests flare up in my home province of Alberta. I was also teaching a rhetoric and writing course at the time, asking students to think strategically about how to reach audiences—academic and popular—who might be divided from them in identity position or political perspective. This volume resonated with me personally and professionally then as much as it will continue to influence my advocacy and teaching in years to come.

This edited collection offers a strikingly (ha!) unified perspective, which I summarize as follows: the ideal of “civil” discourse—preached throughout centuries of Western education in rhetoric and composition; upheld by democratic governments, privileged elites, and corporate universities across the U.S. and Canada—is a problem. Powers-that-be exhort civil tones and reasoned argument as the best way to engage in democracy or undertake university governance. But civil discourse itself is an oppressive norm: it is complicit in racist, colonial, neoliberal power structures; accessible only to some; and deaf to other means and languages of engagement and resistance. And civil discourse is weak. It speaks only to the converted. To truly resist oppressive regimes, contributors argue, activists and allies must deploy “unruly” tactics, breaking the rules with noisy, ugly, indecorous, incoherent, sometimes inarticulate or self-contradictory, and usually embodied performances. While professors of rhetoric and composition often align themselves politically with struggles for equity and inclusion, their teaching sometimes betrays that struggle, this volume points out, by encouraging reasoned, decorous, and respectful discourse. (I was guilty of this, I now see, in winter 2021.)

Bracketing the collection with an introduction and afterword that propose the value of the unruly as a category of political action—indeed, as fundamentally “constitutive of the political” (Alexander & Jarratt p. 8)—and a focus of rhetorical scholarship and pedagogy, editors Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch organize the chapters into three sections. The first section, “Bringing Back the Body,” establishes a theme that resounds elsewhere in the collection as well: an argument that the material, inescapably audible, spectacularly visible

bodies of assembled protestors, collectively occupying spaces where they are not supposed to be, are more powerful than any orderly argument or internet meme. Notably, though, different bodies experience occupation differently. As Anderson's chapter on Indigenous tactics of decolonizing resistance shows, for example, when Indigenous peoples assert their enduring rights to be in place, they embody histories of resistance that must be understood as protecting the land, not as protesting on it. Meanwhile, as Rhodes carefully points out in her discussion of both the feminist value and critical failures of #SlutWalk protests in Toronto and elsewhere, the rhetorical impacts of making bodies—white women's sexualized bodies, in particular—visible, or of inspiring a viral protest format, are not always progressive.

These chapters generally celebrate the effectiveness of embodied intervention: Sterne interprets the sheer noise of clanging pots and pans in Québec's *casseroles* parades as so immersive and penetrating as to draw bystanders in and assert new ways of being together in neoliberal space. And Abraham asserts that Palestinian efforts to make their bodies' rights visible—efforts that he sees supported by scholar Stephen Salaita's unruly tweets—expose the political harm done by U.S. composition scholarship which, in Abraham's view, tends to favour the flows of multimodal discourse over the materiality of bodies. But as Cloud documents in her analysis of the #unrulymob's feminist occupation of the Texas State Capitol, the "effectiveness of body rhetoric [with its...] capacity to obstruct and interrupt business as usual" has its weakness: once those bodies are compelled to disperse, their show-stopping effect diminishes (pp. 40-41).

The second section, "Civility Wars," offers the collection's most sustained critiques of the orderly discourse promoted by the liberal Western mainstream as the most appropriate way of engaging in democracy and advocating for institutional change. Chapters by Welch, who draws lessons from labour strikes in early twentieth-century Massachusetts, and by Rodríguez and Kuebrich, who participated in pro-equity student sit-ins at Syracuse University in 2014, reveal the racism and classism propagated by accusations of incivility. Welch illustrates how nonviolent disobedience, when embodied by "immigrant workers acting on their own authority" (p. 118), gets taken as unacceptable violence by otherwise sympathetic intellectual commentators. In their excellent chapter, Rodríguez and Kuebrich argue that charges of unruliness only reveal the opinion that some people's bodies aren't acceptable; that so-called unruly tactics do not actually divide people but rather "reveal the existing divides of structural oppression" (p. 170); and that to submit to civil dialogue is to be unconscionably "incorporat[ed]" into the colonial university (p. 178). Their theme is echoed by Mutnick's chapter from a later section, which sees in Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* a model of black male unruliness that helps to articulate the necessary modes of anti-racist protest in the twenty-first century U.S. Embodied unruliness is necessary now, Mutnick argues, because it is "the only means of response to a ruling elite invested in maintaining a deeply inequitable status quo" (p. 220).

Chapters by Mahoney and by Trimbur raise questions about the responsibilities of educators in these contexts. Mahoney plumbs his own disillusioned response to an otherwise inspiring Obama-era U.S. curriculum document promoting “civic learning and democratic engagement” (p. 147), arguing, ultimately, that contemporary government is in effect un-democratic, unresponsive to what people actually want (p. 156). Hence, reasonable debate cannot function: direct, embodied action and incivility must be embraced. Trimbur, who narrates the NCTE and CCCC’s failure to respond directly when the University of Illinois abruptly un-hired unruly tweeter Salaita, similarly argues against “the equation of democracy [with] rational argument” (p. 195). I found Trimbur professionally interesting: in his effort to understand why these organizations (unlike, for example, the MLA) might not have taken a public stand on Salaita’s un-hiring, he considers both a disciplinary faith in the democratic potential of reasoned stance-taking and the burden of administering so-called “service” courses.

The final section of this collection, appropriately titled “Limits and Horizons,” explores both rhetorical practices of hope for, and progress toward, more livable and equitable futures, and some final comments about the real limitations of mainstream rhetorical practice. Martin and Licon, writing about the creative potential of play in queer youth’s activist video-making, see in play a valuable way of imagining utopic futures, even if those remain presently out of reach. And in one of my favourite chapters for its hopefulness and mundanity of vision, Ackerman and Dunn remember what happened when, after the occupation of a Wall Street park was shut down, the bodies who had assembled there went home. Ackerman and Dunn argue that those dispersing bodies brought home with them a revised vision of co-habitation.

Peters’s and Parks’s chapters point, respectively, to the ways powerful rhetorics do more, or less, to shake up institutions than activists might wish. In Peters’s view, language itself—always more dialogic, fluid, and unstable than dominant and even activist ideologies of language recognize—will always undermine efforts to incorporate material bodies into corporate bodies or publics. And Parks’s chapter, based on his work with co-authors Ghandour, Tamarziste, Masbah, and Alahmad, closely observes the rhetoric of activists writing from Middle Eastern and North African contexts of conflict and oppression where powerful nation-states, such as the U.S., have intervened to restore a particular kind of order—a neoliberal, statist order that sustains those foreign states’ power at the expense of local resistance. Parks finds that, in activist writing from such contexts, using a Western rhetoric of democracy tends to betray the activists’ efforts. What is needed is a different kind of society and an as-yet-unrealized rhetoric to match it.

Across the collection, it will by now be clear, contributors argue that instructors of writing and rhetoric must re-examine the rhetorics they teach. As scholars, we must fix our eyes on what Welch, in her “Afterword,” calls the “messy rhetorical art” of protest (p. 305), recognizing its power and urgency in its very indecorum. As advocates of social justice, we must support and engage in public rhetoric ourselves,

embracing its unruliness in support of those oppressed by mainstream discourses and power structures. As instructors, we must examine these arts with our students and—I gather—reconsider what we assign and value in student writing.

*Unruly Rhetorics* sustains several points of focus—on performance, on publics and counterpublics, on material and embodied rhetorics, on informal and unpredictable public utterances—that also concerned an earlier volume of interest to readers of this journal, *Genre and the Performance of Publics* (2016). But while contributors to the *Genre* volume used the lenses of rhetorical genre and uptake theory, contributors to *Unruly Rhetorics* draw, sparingly, on classical vocabularies. Being more familiar with genre theory, I found myself remarking on how certain of this collection's conclusions might have been articulated differently if they had been presented in the earlier volume. George and Mathieu's chapter, "Circulating Voices of Dissent," for example, details how both a mainstream press and liberal intellectual accounts suppressed a substantial effort to articulate the perspectives of early-twentieth-century migrant ("hobo") workers in the U.S., because the more powerful media didn't hear, or didn't want to tell, those perspectives in the workers' own terms. George and Mathieu explain the efforts of hobo activists as a problem of circulation—what mattered was getting the stories physically "into the hands of readers"—and of the tenor and mode of hobo publications (p. 137); contributors to the *Genre* volume would have interpreted the same history in terms of uptake and, well, genre.

This is not to complain: I found the chapters of *Unruly Rhetorics* refreshing for how sparingly they employed their analytical terminology—for their focus on their case studies and on establishing the importance of rhetorical unruliness. Students might appreciate that focus too. The studies here appeal broadly to scholars interested in the politics of public discourse, rhetoric, and performance; in addressing an audience of rhetoric, composition, and English scholars, they employ an unremarkable-because-common vocabulary of ethos, exigence, argument. Thinking about analytical terminology, though, as I read George and Mathieu, made me reflect on the ways that the circulation and uptake of scholarly arguments, like activist rhetorics, is influenced by which publications will carry, which hands and voices will pass along, their stories.

On the note of what stories get passed along, a final remark. Importantly, the editors of *Unruly Rhetorics* made the principled decision *not* to study the protest tactics of certain unruly mobs who, in their view, were not "left-leaning or progressive" (Alexander & Jarratt, p. 14). As occasionally remarked throughout the collection, noisy, embodied disorder can look pretty similar when practiced, for example, by those who want to resist the efforts of equity-seeking groups, to that practiced by those whose rhetorics you or I or the contributors to this volume would more likely endorse. The editors carefully distinguish an "ethical unruly rhetorical practice" (Alexander & Jarratt, p. 14, emphasis in original) as one that highlights

inequalities and fights for “livable interdependency” (p. 14) rather than seeking security as such or defending a status quo. This distinction is meaningful to me, and it helps to answer my qualms about the selectivity of academic attention. As Mahoney argues in his chapter, in the current context, there’s no point holding on to ideas of a common good. Here’s to being part of a faction. [1884 words]

## **References**

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