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Inquiry as Social Action

> I shall purloin no valuables, appro-
> priate no ingenious formulations.
> But the rags, the refuse—these I
> will not inventory but allow, in the
> only way possible, to come into
> their own: by making use of them.
> —Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

> There will always be a tension
> between what rhetoric makes and
> what "makes" or produces rhetoric.
> —Thomas Farrell,
>   "The Weight of Rhetoric"

I mentioned in chapter 1 that we needed to cultivate public subjects who are capable of imagining themselves as situated within many complex networks. Not only are we all located within a specific home-work nexus, but we are also located within regional, national, and global networks. Furthermore, each of us is situated within transhistorical and transspatial networks of place. The choices we make for ourselves have effects on future times and places that do not only parallel our own lives. Thinking through these networks demands an ability to imagine the incongruent and asymmetrical networks within which our agency is lodged.

I pointed to the BP oil spill and the call for boycotting stations as an example of thinking in terms of networks. People were understandably outraged by the events that unfolded around the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion. Negligence by BP seemed to have contributed to the explosion and subsequent spill, and stopping the flow initially seemed to be out of anyone's power. We watched helplessly as oil spewed into the water while BP unsuccessfully tried endless tactics to stop the spill. Of course, none of us wanted to

feel helpless; we wanted to act. Not surprisingly, one of the most visible and organized calls to action was the national boycott against BP gas stations. E-mails, Web sites, letters, and even flyers asked drivers to pass BP filling stations the next time they needed gas.

No matter how good it feels to drive past a BP station, truly sustainable thinking demands that we think about this crisis across incongruent and asymmetrical networks. The gas sold in BP gas stations is actually extracted and refined by a number of other companies, with only a small amount of BP additives mixed in near the end of the process (Lieber). But, more importantly, driving past a BP station and into another gas station does not solve the problem of petroleum mining, which led to the Deepwater Horizon tragedy. Choosing Exxon or Mobile gas still supports the same system that causes problems over time (Begley). Boycotting BP does not consider how drilling is spread asymmetrically across many networks, including across international networks that often remain invisible. Although the Deepwater Horizon spill gained much attention at home, even greater oil spills in the Niger Delta have been happening for decades without much awareness in the United States. The popular call for us to boycott BP gas stations fails to place the event within multiple networks, which ultimately would call for us to consider much more dramatic changes than where we fill up next time.

Sustainable futures demand that we think about ourselves as beings who exist in multiple and asymmetrical networks. Intervention must also happen within networks; public subjects are never single. Therefore, becoming oriented to the public sphere is never simply a matter of joining publics or counterpublics. Whether or not we know it, we are already part of multiple networks. We are already in a relation to others and to the world. Transformative rhetoric thus requires that we learn how to think of ourselves within these multiple networks, and also how they might be otherwise construed.

One of the questions motivating me is how we can encourage public subjects who are capable of using the communicative moment to critically address changing landscapes. How can we encourage subjects who can make ethical judgments (*krisis*) about those changes, and who can work to rebuild and reimagine spaces for public discourse? We must pursue inquiry as a mode of publicness. My publics approach to place crisis means that I recognize an advantage to interrogating public discourse in order to investigate how it produces more or less effective subjects who can intervene in sustainable futures. But it also means that I see public talk itself as our best hope of making a change. By transforming the kinds of subjects that public talk makes, we can transform the kinds of rhetorical actions those subjects make.

Rhetorical Pedagogies and Exceptional Subjects

I have argued that the exceptional public subject is cultivated through vernacular patterns of public talk. Though this mode of production is important, I do not want to lose sight of another way in which such a key subjectivity is encouraged today. Closer to home, we might also consider the technologies of production that exist in our own rhetorical pedagogies. Are we inadvertently reproducing discourses that cultivate exceptional public subjects? The first time I typed this question, I happened to be sitting in a coffee shop. Beside me sat a young woman and a young man. I could not help but overhear parts of their conversation, and I could tell that they were talking about writing. The woman had her laptop open on the table, and they were both surrounded by notebooks. They were talking about essay assignments that were due in a few days. The woman looked at the man and said, with total certitude, "It's always easier to write about something you feel passionately about." The man nodded and they both went back to their work. Only a week earlier, during my own individual conferences with students who were completing their drafts, one student told me that he found this assignment easy because he could write about what was interesting to him personally. These two different scenes suggest a kind of victory for rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Aren't students like these examples of public pedagogy gone right? After all, writing is usually posed as an engagement with something the writer is invested in. And a good rhetorical pedagogue's job is to help students become invested. This, at least, had been my mantra for many years. And I know I am not alone.

Rhetorical pedagogies have a deep commitment to helping students make connections with public issues, including helping them to understand how those issues affect them. Composition studies especially takes up this challenge in undergraduate writing courses. For example, in "Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Post-Publicity Era," Nancy Welch outlines her own public pedagogy as a kind of bridge-building among individual students and larger community issues that hold significant meanings for them. For her part, Welch assigns union literature and newspapers (such as *Strike!* and *Labor Pains*), since a "majority of my students are going on to jobs—as teachers, social workers, healthcare providers, engineers, service workers, and technicians—that are, or need to be, union jobs" (485). By engaging in critical reflection about labor issues, Welch hopes that these students will connect their own plights with the ongoing public debates about ethical labor practices. Welch is thus engaging in a pedagogy grounded in students' investment. She sees their (potential) futures as union workers and laborers as

leading to an investment in the ongoing conversations about labor practices, both current and historical. This kind of pedagogy operates from the premise/promise that by seeing connections and relations, students will become public participants.

Many scholars see the job of rhetorical pedagogy as helping students to forge real relationships with publics and counterpublics. Susan Wells's article "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" makes one of the best arguments for a public writing pedagogy that engages in this work. Wells explains, "If we want more for our students than the ability to defend themselves in bureaucratic settings, we are imagining them in a public role, imagining a public space they could enter. I argue that we need to build, or take part in building, such a public sphere" (326). Public writing in the composition classroom, then, is a process of students "speak[ing] in their own skins to a broad audience with some hope of effectiveness" (334). Students in a public writing classroom thus seek to compose an engaged audience—a public—that can negotiate (about) taking action on a given problem or issue. Similarly, Christian Weisser advocates a pedagogy that "help[s] students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience, and, consequently, might result in significant outcomes" (107). Weisser argues that one key to successful public pedagogy is allowing students to "discover and write about all of the issues that affect their lives—not just those that have been delegated 'of common concern'" (109). The practice advocated by Wells and Weisser reaffirms that our jobs are primarily one of connection building. Teachers help students find and build relations that have meaning in their lives. For rhetorical pedagogues, the answer to public disengagement seems to be in cultivating connections between the public's crises and a student's own private life.

Although the actual means of pursuing this connection is unique to each scholar, there is some tacit agreement about the importance of helping students see the relevance of public issues in their individual lives. As Jeff Smith recommends in his attempt to combat the political passivity of "illegeracy," people "naturally take an interest in things that affect their lives, particularly if they feel it's up to them how those things will be decided. So what's needed is a framing of the issues that shows people the systems they're enmeshed in and outlines the real choices available to them. People then will want to reassume their political role" (210). According to Smith, our challenge is to show people how they are already affected by political events and debates. Ideally, once you make this revelation, people will begin to feel an investment. They will care once again, and this care will lead to action.[1] Even our work as teachers is often framed as necessarily beginning in feelings of investment, care,

and so forth. In *Doing Emotion,* Laura Micciche reads pedagogy as primarily rooted in particular kinds of feelings like hope and belief. Transformative teaching, writes Micciche, is a matter of our "investment in producing compassionate citizens . . . as a result of which people care for and about others" (106–7). Without investment in care, both teaching and learning are seen as partial and, perhaps, even tragically flawed. Consider how many assignments in our most common courses (lower-level and introductory writing and speaking classes) reflect a pedagogical assumption that students should feel something prior to writing, speaking, or producing a rhetorical text. In choosing a topic, how many times have we encouraged students to choose a topic in which they are invested? *Choose something you care about.*

As rhetorical critics, we must learn to see our pedagogies as apparatuses (themselves embedded in an institution) that are designed to produce certain modes of self-understanding. Pedagogies are technologies that are invested in certain kinds of productions. By the way we talk about forms of argument, we tell students essentially how to see the world. We teach a preferred way of rhetorically engaging with problems. As James Berlin writes, "in teaching writing, we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the students' place and mode of operation in it" ("Contemporary" 766). What does it mean, then, that so much of our pedagogy underscores the premise that publicness is related to one's feeling: the feeling of impact (including injury and benefit), the feeling of memory (or sense of relatability), or one's feeling of equivalence (the experience of seeing both sides, beyond your own version). By making feeling a prerequisite to publicness and to public rhetorical action, we are endorsing what Lauren Berlant calls the "true subject of feeling." This feeling subject is one whose very humanity is registered through an experience of feeling. That is, this figure indexes his or her way-of-being through the kinds of feelings experienced.

By yoking students' feelings of investment or excitement to public crises and exigencies, we promote the notion that feeling is the proper means of engaging these topics. Our practices often begin from a mantra about feeling investment in your topic. We endorse the belief that rhetorical intervention begins from a relation of towardness, so we guide our students to write about their own towardnesses. (A goal perfectly reflected in the coffee shop conversation between the two students excitedly working on their essays.) But, at the same time, this endorsement tacitly—against our best intentions—promotes awayness as an alternative mode of public orientation. Distance itself becomes another form of relation to the site of publicness. If I do not feel pulled toward the site of crisis, then my distance marks a legitimate stance in the larger rhetorical situation. Therefore, by grounding our students' sense of

publicness in the work of feeling, we help to maintain the exceptional spaces I discussed in previous chapters.

We might move away from discourses that root rhetorical deliberation in care, impact, memory, and decidability. Instead, I want to encourage a pedagogical practice of inquiry as its own telos. Inquiry can become a form of social action where place changes are concerned. This pedagogy of inquiry asks students to develop a different kind of relation to place, crisis, and discourse. Inquiry becomes a habit, not a precursor to anything else. It does not matter whether one feels injured by the changes or has authentic memory or feelings about the changes, or whether the changes have some kind of decidable value. In fact, it does not matter whether one cares or does not care about the issue at hand. What matters is the challenge of inquiry itself.

This is not to say that I imagine some way in which feeling is removed from the site of pedagogy or public rhetoric. Such a task is not possible, nor is it desirable. Education will continue to be what Lynn Worsham calls an education of sentiment ("Moving Beyond" 163). However, we can imagine a different kind of investment and care that is habituated in the work of inquiry, not in the work of feeling. In order to pursue this different kind of subjectivity and rhetorical habituation, I want to explore some examples of how people are actually pursuing inquiry as a social response to urban development's crises. I will look closely at several past and ongoing projects that pursue a telos of inquiry among its participants. Many of these examples reflect a kind of public subjectivity different from the ones I developed in previous chapters. I have attempted to implement this kind of rhetorical approach in my own classroom, although the project is ongoing and far from perfect.

What Is Inquiry?

Crises and controversies are networks, and they invite our investigation into them. Inquiry is an endless survey of these networks within which a crisis is embedded. But inquiry is different from the epistemic of controversy and crisis (Who is correct? What shall we call it? Is this good or bad?). Within epistemic discourse, our aim is to find a perspective whereby the question can be answered. Inquiry, however, is not a pretext to a greater telos; it is its own telos. In shifting away from an epistemic perspective, inquiry looks much more like what network theorists John Law and John Urry call a performative ontology, or the investigation of networked relations (How is it composed? What are the working relations? How can we change the relations to remake this process?). Both kinds of discourse involve judgment (*phronesis*), insofar as we are making ethical and political claims about how the world should be. But the performative ontology of inquiry asks investigators to occupy a differ-

ent kind of subject position. Instead of seeking resolution, the inquiring subject seeks to uncover the composition of a given scene (What are the relations that give it shape and form?). The subject is implicated within the process, and that relational position is also revealed in the act of investigation. Most importantly, the goal of inquiry is not always resolution.

In the opening pages of this book, I stated that sustainable thinking must be capable of thinking across multiple and asymmetrical networks. I make this claim because being public is a matter of living and working in (and, hopefully, reconfiguring) the networks at various times. In order to better understand what I mean by multiple and asymmetrical networks, I draw briefly upon a body of literature that has radically changed the ways we think about ourselves as social beings. Actor-network theory provides a model for understanding all kinds of networks, including networks of social problems. Bruno Latour and others introduced the field of actor-network theory in order to challenge the too limited concept of "the social" within sociology. Latour defines the social as ongoing action within a network, or "a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes" (*Reassembling* 65). As Latour explains it, his notion of actor-network theory is a means to expand the social beyond a "local, face-to-face" dynamic that is paradigmatic within sociology (65). Actor-network theory helps sociologists to rethink sociality as a distributed network of connections rather than as a singular substance that coheres into a whole. Latour's emphasis is not about how we (as individual agents) are either affected or how we affect. Rather, actor-network theory is more about how we *are* within a process. While we may not be conscious of the networks we inhabit, we are aware of the networks through a kind of embodied knowledge that is reflected in our behavioral adjustments.

For instance, consider how human users adjust their practices according to the particular ways the nonhuman materials work. For example, the local cultural conditions of my department's building provide a clear illustration of that nexus. After a few paper jams, you would learn to avoid using the coin-operated copier for double-sided papers. Better to feed the machine small batches at a time, which means that rush jobs should probably be taken to the library copiers. You would also learn that the mailroom is too awkward to have a nice chat, and that the east-west wings of the hallways will inevitably slow you down if you are in a hurry. This is more than an observation about traditional senses of "the social," for all of these local practices involve connections among humans and materials. Rather than seeing nonhuman materials as secondary objects functioning as tools for humans, Latour suggests that our local conditions are comprised of the interactions between the two.

In describing how the tight springs of an automatic door work, for example, Latour (writing as Jim Johnson) observes that it is the human user who must adjust his behavior: he must either speed up to catch the door, or else clear the way to avoid being squashed. "An unskilled nonhuman [door spring] thus presupposes a skilled human user," he writes ("Mixing" 301). In this case, the tightly sprung door actually imposes certain behaviors on its human users. Latour suggests that nonhuman actants can redistribute competencies, generate the potential for certain narrative frames, and even shift their own delegation of necessary action (309). In my case, the coin-operated copier has made me more organized than ever before. I know that I cannot simply run downstairs at the last minute to copy a handout for my class because the machine almost always has some problem. This means that I must plan the classes at least a few days in advance, giving the administrative assistant time to copy the handout for me. However, the maladjusted coin-operated copier also means fewer colleagues offer to copy an article or chapter that might be relevant to you. My previous local environment consisted of a free, working copier that was tucked away in a private room, which made it simpler for friends to simply run off an article and leave it in your mailbox with a sticky note that read, "Thought you might be interested."

Networks are not about fixed indexes of meaning but about relations among elements. Furthermore, networks are not human—or at least they are not merely human. As actor-network theorists Annemarie Mol and John Law explain, "Network elements may be machines or gestures. And their relations include all sorts of co-constitutions" (649). In *Communities of Practice,* Etienne Wenger shows us another example of how material, social, and institutional activity networks change not only how something is produced but also what is produced. Wenger undertakes an ethnographic study of insurance claims adjusters and their work environment in one company's office. Wenger is less interested in the actual process of claims adjusting than in the ways this particular office works. He follows the moves of one office worker, Arial, to document how she works within a network of practices. According to Wenger's analysis, Arial's office involves what he calls "constellations" of interconnected practices. "The term constellation refers to a grouping of stellar objects that are seen as a configuration even though they may not be particularly close to one another, of the same kind, or of the same size," explains Wenger (127). For example, Arial works smoothly by knowing which pieces of red tape can (and should) be bypassed in order to be productive.

Attaining a goal sometimes requires help from another adjuster, which means that you cannot bring lunch to eat on your own. Lunch at the deli may involve thirty minutes of office gossip and personal stories, but its ritual sig-

nifies a kind of friendliness among its participants. Arial's lunch talk is crucial in solidifying certain relationships across the office. So when she needs to bypass an unnecessarily bureaucratic step, those networks are already in place to help create shortcuts with the help of another office colleague. A constellation indicates particular proximities, which "are not necessarily congruent with physical proximity, institutional affiliations, or even interactions" (130). Lunch is an activity that involves much more than an immediate goal (to satisfy rumbling stomachs). Instead, it is an activity related to office politics, current projects, and the sly elision of company policies.

My discussion here is not a thorough explanation of actor-network theory, but I offer it as a way to provide vocabulary for what actor-network theorists call "network tracing" (Latour, "On Actor Network Theory"). Tracing a network requires one to reflect on the relational processes and linkages that form a network. In an excellent example of network tracing, Mol and Law track the relational existence of anemia and its cross-regional diagnoses in their discussion of the porousness and fluidity of anemia's diagnosis in Africa. The authors interview a number of Dutch doctors who have worked in different African subregions, all of whom conclude that anemia levels are extremely high among Africans. On the face of it, this diagnosis seems to be a simple matter of fact. Doctors are able to determine that high numbers of African patients have low RHB Hb (red blood cell hemoglobin) in their blood. Yet, ask Mol and Law, exactly where is the anemia to be found? When the authors begin to trace the networked elements that go into the Western conclusion that Africa has "high" levels of anemia, we begin to see complex relations among different elements that are present within these so-called factual diagnoses.

When a patient comes to see a doctor, she encounters screening techniques that differ based on the doctor's background. Western doctors depend upon listening to a patient's complaints, while a non-Western doctor often relies upon the (dis)coloration of a patient's skin and eyes. Lab machines used in detecting hemoglobin also differ between standard labs in the Netherlands and in African countries. Whereas Dutch labs often use photo-electric meters, African labs primarily employ less accurate hemoglobinometers. Language differences are also working within the constellation of Africa's anemia diagnoses. Not only are lab manuals written in English, demanding that the lab technicians translate across multiple dialects in order to follow basic procedure, but Western doctors also spend less time with African patients in the hospital as a result of the time spent translating between doctor and patient. Other elements present within any diagnosis of high or low anemia rates include organizational standards for acceptable ranges of hemoglo-

bin. For example, the World Health Organization has set one important scale that is sometimes (though not always) used to determine what should be considered high or low. Furthermore, the decision to condense regional differences into a single topographic signifier called "Africa" is also an important element within this network. In places where civil war violence is a constant threat to citizens, examinations for anemia (via the clinical gaze of one's skin discoloration) may not be a priority among medical workers.

By tracing out this complex network, Mol and Law are not attempting to dispute the ontological validity of anemia. Low hemoglobin levels do exist and do cause serious physical problems. However, the active diagnosis, conceptualization, and treatment of anemia are located in the mutable relations among all of these elements. "It may flow in people's skills, or as part of the attributes of devices, or in the form of written words—any or all of these may carry anemia" (664). In other words, the concept "anemia" is an effect of the network itself. When an element of this network is altered or removed, anemia will show up differently for us. Its meaning and consequences are also likely to change as well. This is one reason why the network as a source of meaning-making is so important to understand.

Tracing a network has been described as an "empirical" investigation (Mol and Law; Latour, "Reassembling"; Doolin and Lowe). It is empirical insofar as it investigates contingent relations among elements within a conceptual region: an insurance claims office, regional anemia rates, a marriage, or a city's light rail program. However, network inquiry itself is not apolitical. Its empiricism does not displace its potential to serve activist goals. John Law and John Urry argue that inquiry into networks can help us to enact the social, not merely to reveal its workings. As a method, write Law and Urry, network inquiry and tracing marks a turn away from epistemology (with an emphasis on what is known from a particular perspective) to ontology (with an emphasis on remaking the known differently). Their use of ontology here is not a facile sense of fixed reality. Reality is created through networks of rhetorical acts. By inquiring into these relations, Law and Urry argue that we are better equipped to ask an ontological question of enactment: "Is it possible to imagine developing particular methods that strengthen particular realities while eroding others?" (397). For some actor-network theorists, the answer is yes. Bill Doolin and Alan Lowe make a similar point in their argument that network inquiry not only reveals how things are, but also how things could be (or have been) otherwise (75). The political potential of network inquiry lies in its ability to imagine new relations, thus creating a new network of meanings.

Network tracing is quite similar to what I have been calling rhetorical in-

quiry. These activities are fundamentally interested in what Annemarie Mol and John Law call "co-constitutions" and what Doolin and Lowe call the "underlying relationships that pervade contemporary society" (76). Just as Law and Urry suggest that such inquiry is concerned with ontology—or a remaking of reality—discourses of inquiry can perform such remaking of meaning through an investigation of co-constitutions. Moreover, the telos of network tracing and rhetorical inquiry is located within the process itself. Inquiry is the rhetorical goal.

The Difference of Inquiry

What does it mean to adopt inquiry as one's rhetorical goal? How does this practice differ from more recognizable responses to crisis and exigence? Let me explore inquiry in terms that may be closer to home, depending on where your theoretical home happens to be. In the work of inquiry (or even in network tracing), we might see something like the *flaneur* ethic that Walter Benjamin so passionately adopts in his *Arcades Project*. More than almost any other theorist, Benjamin gives us a logic for reading and researching the streets in their seeming banal details and encounters they afford. Benjamin's fragmentary method offers one research method that acknowledges scenes as only a frozen moment within a larger process:

> Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their "Post No Bills" are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture. . . . The street reveals itself . . . as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses. (423)

Researching the streets, according to Benjamin, is a form of analysis concerned with the constellations of networks that make up our social field. In Benjamin's case, these were the networks embedded within and across the Paris arcades. The arcades were more than a fixed space; they were linked to large historical epochs and the movements of capitalism. Benjamin leads us toward a method that embraces what he dubs "the collective" as our field of operation. The street serves as our space of engagement, and while we cannot arrest its development, we can make use of the flashes. Benjamin thus illuminates an original logic of generative research that is focused on inquiry.

Benjamin's telos is collection for its own sake. "I needn't say anything,"

he writes. "Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them" (460). For some, this method may resemble a starting point of argument more than a rhetorical response in its own right. Yet, this is precisely what Benjamin is proposing. Instead of appropriating ingenious formulations, Benjamin aims to "merely show." In the face of crisis, in other words, we may imagine other possibilities of critical response.

Benjamin's *flaneur* is an interesting figure to pair up with actor-network researchers. One aims to "merely show" the refuse, and the other aims to trace networked relations. Although they seem to be worlds apart, both methods manage to show how inquiry can serve as a guiding principle for people facing a crisis. More importantly, neither act depends upon a relation to the site of feeling: towardness, awayness, memory, decidability. Indeed, there is no site of feeling. There is only a moment, an event, that sparks the inquirer's tracings and collections. What is created is like an archive or a collection. The archive is what the actor-network tracers and the *flaneur* have in common. And the archive that they share is special in that it has no end in sight.

Most importantly, both Benjamin and actor-network theorists offer some perspective on how to imagine oneself in a different kind of public relation to others and to the world. Where a question, exigence, or crisis exists, the inquirer's approach to this scene is not yoked with his or her own feelings. Instead, the inquirer invests in this scene as a moment for inquiry. The moment of crisis becomes a moment for practicing one's ability to trace, collect, uncover, and follow. Crisis is an archivist's moment. This relation takes no account of how I am related personally to the scene of crisis. It does not depend on my feeling of towardness or awayness for my response. Only insofar as I use the moment for inquiry do I step into this alternative kind of publicness. In short, this alternative public subjectivity defines my role as a public subject through the activity of inquiry.

Let me stop here and give a small example of how these different kinds of subjectivities played out inside my own classroom when I taught an intermediate writing course at the University of Missouri called "Writing Mizzou." In this class, students were assigned the task of writing argumentative documentaries about a place or event in the campus community. Our research was conducted primarily in the university archives, where we worked closely with the archivists. Together with the head archivist, I asked students to focus on the history and life of the Legion of Black Collegians (LBC), the oldest and largest black student group at the University of Missouri. The archives contained an abundance of information on the Black Collegians, including

organizational materials dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. No histories had been written on the organization, and the archivist was excited to share the materials stored in the files. Not only were past LBC publications preserved, but the university archives also preserved racist flyers and letters that appeared on campus throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These were the materials to which the LBC often responded in their own publications, but the flyers themselves were important to help us understand a wider context of race on Missouri's campus.

When I announced the focus of the class on the first day, I immediately began receiving e-mails from students who wanted to know whether I would be willing to consider other topics. Students assured me that they were interested and passionate about other subjects that could also be studied in the archives: campus architecture, other student organizations, or even important historical figures who contributed to campus life. During the next class, I once again announced that this focus would be our group's only task. Nobody would be switching topics for any reason. Some students appeared excited about the prospect of digging deep into the archives about a topic they didn't know much about. Others, meanwhile, were visibly disappointed.

Toward the end of the semester, when our research was nearing its completion, several students approached me about their difficulty in writing their documentary. More than one student admitted that their block was coming from a lack of personal investment. As white students, they felt disconnected from the historical details contained in the archives. They knew very little about what the LBC stood for or what issues they addressed. The students agreed that the racism found in these archives was horrible. But what else was there to say? How could someone with no memory of campus racial tensions, or no feeling of personal injury, really have an opinion or a perspective?

In response to these anxieties, I repeatedly launched into a narrative about how everything contains an argument. I encouraged students to find the argument buried somewhere in all of their research. What kinds of conclusions could they discover? What could they help their readers discover? I spent hours in my office with students and their drafts. Together we would look for the interesting argument that could be made. In each case, I experienced the "aha" moment that writing teachers strive for. Students mostly left the conferences feeling like they could actually reach an argumentative conclusion after all.

But when I received the fifteen documentaries at the end of the semester, I quickly realized that something was deeply wrong. The papers themselves were well-written, creative, and visually masterful. They were also well documented and researched. The class consisted of a strong group of writers,

and their writing deserved the high grades that they earned. However, the conclusions themselves were troubling in the ways they reflected my pedagogy. They suggested something was wrong with how I encouraged students to approach the archives.

The papers could roughly be divided into three kinds of conclusions. Almost all of the papers used the archival materials as a way to shed light on the state of racism on Missouri's campus today. Some of the documentaries concluded that the archival materials showed vast improvements in terms of race. Several concluded that racism was no longer a problem on campus. The proof was there in the documents themselves: old flyers with rebel flags, scrawled with angry words telling "white people" that they should "wake up." Nothing like that appears on campus today, concluded several documentaries. Therefore, we live in a postracial era where racism is a dead issue. Other documentaries tempered this claim just a bit. It is true that racism is getting better, but some people still experience ugly incidents of racial discrimination. Though racism is different today than in the 1970s, it has not been completely obliterated.

Finally, the third set of documentaries ran in the other direction. Some of the more interesting arguments used the writers' own lack of knowledge about the LBC as evidence that racism was still alive and well on campus. These papers were tied to an ugly incident that happened on campus at the same time that we were working in the archives. Sometime in the early morning hours of February 28, the final day of Black History Month, someone threw several bags of cotton balls directly in front of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center on campus. The cotton balls were lined up to look like rows of cotton, a symbolic gesture that was not wasted on the campus community. Two students were arrested for the incident, which they later described as a late night prank. The entire campus community responded, as did the local community.

Students in my class especially reacted to the openly racist reader comments in the Columbia city newspapers. Readers claimed that the story was being blown out of proportion by the liberal media and by a campus staffed by liberals. The many online comments in the newspaper's web versions were especially offensive. One commenter remarked, "Not making excuses for the two idiots but we have a president of the country who went to an anti-white church for 20 years. How about some perspective?" (Equaloff). Another commenter responded in shockingly offensive language to an African-American writer who was protesting the crime:

> Number one, yes there is racism against blacks, whites, Jews, Muslims, Mexicans, Kahki [sic] colored people. deal with it. It is life. That is the

point of freedom, people can think whatever they want, you will never change that. You only make it worse by letting it get to you! So your ancestors were enslaved by people that didn't care. . . . The white people brought you from a horrible place where you all killed each other and lived in dung huts. . . . but your people over came the hardships became better people and are now a free race in a free country. You should be proud of that. (FreeSociety)

Other letters were subtler in their language, yet the racism across the newspaper letters and message boards was shocking to read. Students read these letters and the callous responses to the cotton ball incident as evidence that racism is no less real today than it was in the 1970s, when the LBC launched vigorous antiracist campaigns on campus.

This conclusion certainly seems to be warranted, and I was amazed at the skill these students used in tying together archival material with events that were literally taken from the newspaper's front page. However, I was also disappointed with the way that these arguments fell back upon culturally and institutionally authorized commonplaces about injury, memory, and feelings of decidability. They relied on the notion that proper rhetorical arguments were to be grounded in feeling itself. There is nothing wrong with the conclusion that racism is still alive on campus. I agree with my students that the cotton ball incident shows that racism is not a dead issue. However, it is a mistake to confuse this claim's accuracy with a rhetorical stance capable of making an intervention into the scene of crisis. To point out and decry racism (or any other social ill) is not the same as adopting a truly public subjectivity. Ironically enough, it may be a way to write oneself outside the scene of public rhetorical action. To simply call for an end to racism (or an end to any other public crisis) risks closing the line of intervention too soon. We leave no space to consider the multiple networks across which this crisis is embedded, and through which we may rework the relations of power.

My disappointment with the documentaries was not due to poorly made arguments on the part of students. The arguments, claims, and reasoning were quite strong. However, I could not help but see each conclusion as untimely closure sponsored by the true subject of feeling. Some projects concluded that racism on campus was a nonissue because the writers did not feel the pull of racism, nor did they remember encountering (or hearing about) racist incidents. Other projects made a passionate argument in the exact opposite direction. Not only is racism alive and well on campus, but we must do something about it. Proposals ranged from requiring multicultural classes of all university students to increasing recruitment among African-American high school students. Still other projects concluded that there is indeed rac-

ism on campus, but it is not as bad as it once was. In all of these instances, the arguments inadvertently closed down other ways of relating to the subject of race on campus and across local, regional, and national spaces.

After I reflected on these papers, I realized my goal could have been different that semester. We could have started working from the position of inquiry where the crisis of campus racism is concerned. Together, we could have pursued the telos of collecting, tracing, and creating our own kind of critical archive. I could have used the initial moment of awayness expressed by the students (a moment that I expected to come even before the first class meeting) as an opportunity to foreground a different kind of orientation to the public sphere. Instead of writing themselves in relation to this topic from a personal feeling, students might have been pushed to see themselves in the role of inquirer in relation to this topic. Rather than trying to show them how and why they should feel the closeness of relation, I might have vigorously challenged the notion that we must care about the subject in order to become public subjects. I could have challenged them to stop caring about care.

If we had acted as collectors or archivists, on the other hand, we might have traced the campus and town threads that cut across both the history of the LBC and the recent cotton ball incident. This nexus proved to be an important element in both situations. Racism on campus is not contained to the physical space on campus, nor can it be understood as an effect of campus activities. How racism circulates on campus, how it is received and how one responds to it is necessarily tied up with local and regional details. The fact that Columbia, Missouri, is a predominantly white area surrounded by rural communities impacts how minority students encounter the campus as a whole. Moreover, the relatively working-class community of Columbia has a complicated relationship to the campus and the faculty who seem to be different from local residents. Faculty can seem more liberal, elitist, and even foreign. Critiques of the local and regional environment, including any element of racism circulating in this place, are likely to be read across multiple contexts. Both the cotton ball incident and the much longer history of campus racism are embedded across complex campus-town and campus-region networks.

In the practice of inquiry, we might also have traced the threads of preservation and its effects. Though our work was conducted exclusively in the university archives, we did not discuss how this material space and its artifacts also help to embed the local and institutional memory of racism. By giving racist flyers and posters a proper index within an official space like the university archives, the university helped to frame these campus incidents in particular ways. They could now be read as part of a history, albeit a painful one. In class, we flipped through the yellowing pages of racist literature and

the counterliterature that fought back. It did indeed make the incidents on campus seem very real to students, yet it was preserved as a finished archive. The cotton ball incident, however, is unlikely to be archived in quite the same way. Many of the racist comments in local newspapers (including the campus newspaper) were exchanged online. Evidence of the many community and campus forums that were held to discuss the incident is also unlikely to appear in archival form. How such memories are "stored" and "indexed" is apt to become more complicated in the digital age, which has interesting consequences for how we publicly remember and think about racism.

Of course, there are any number of other ways we could have traced the various threads of race and place. This is not to say that a better answer to the problem of racism would have been made possible through this process. If anything, we would have found answers out of range in our inquiry because the process of collecting and tracing would likely have exploded race and place across multiple and asymmetrical networks. This might be frustrating to teachers who want their students to propose solutions to crises (whether racism, environmental change, or any other major problem) within the span of one project. However, this process may also have helped expose students to a different mode of encountering public crises. Rather than closing down investigations, the work of rhetorical inquiry actually encourages a sustained and ongoing investigation through the work of tracing, collecting, archiving, and reading the networks.

Models of Public Inquiry

I thought about this class for a long while. I decided to try again by creating a course that would approach the issue of place and crisis through a practice of network inquiry. But I was not sure exactly what this would mean. What would a class look like if we took inquiry as our primary telos? What kinds of writing would we do? What would be our goal? Would this class truly help develop ethical subjects who are capable of making rhetorical interventions, or would it continue to cultivate exceptional public subjects? To help answer these questions for myself, I began to look for examples of public inquiry in action.

Writing Austin's Lives

One of the first models of public inquiry I turned to was a citywide documentary project in Austin. In 2003, Sylvia Gale and Evan Carton, co-directors of the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas, decided to take seriously their goal of creating a "public humanities" program across the Austin community. They embarked on a major project that would potentially

reach every single person living in Austin. Gale and Carton called their plan a community writing project, and it invited all Austinites to write about their experiences in the city. Stories would come from young residents and older residents, from longtime Austin citizens and newcomers who were only in the city temporarily. The project, called *Writing Austin's Lives,* was a citywide documentary endeavor, and it was certainly a massive undertaking.

Calls for submissions were plastered across the city. Gale and Carton wanted to be sure that every resident was aware that they were being asked to write. They recall the intensity of the search in its initial stage: "We actively campaigned to sound that call in and far beyond the city's writing circles. We placed ads in newspapers and ran radio public service announcements, made contact with schools, libraries, bookstores, community and religious centers, social service agencies and senior centers, and we hired a high-school student whose sole job was distributing flyers anywhere it seemed like people would be gathering in the Texas heat" (41). Writing was sure to be intimidating to many potential contributors, so the Humanities Institute helped to sponsor a large number of writing workshops across the city. The workshops were held in public libraries, schools, local bookstores, churches, and community centers. Flyers across Austin announced that the workshops were free and open to everyone. No writing experience required, the flyers announced. Furthermore, the calls assured writers that they could write in any style they wanted; no formula or goal existed beyond describing a fragment about the city ("Austin, Meet Austin").

Writing Austin's Lives is different from many other communitywide documentaries. The object of documentation was not necessarily city history (some of the stories do tell historical events, yet there is no guarantee of their reliability or correctness), nor was the object strictly about personal memories of lost places or feelings about the city. Instead, the object was simply to encourage Austin citizens to relay "finds" across the city. Six topoi were used to jump-start investigation:

1. My family's history in Austin
2. Where I live
3. The best day of my life
4. What I really need
5. My family's most treasured possession
6. What I see when I look at Austin

These topoi were inventional categories used to start inquiry. The writing itself might be histories or memories, but it might also be a description of a writer's current neighborhood. The writing might also be simply a brief

description of a place, an experience within the city, or even the sounds of a neighborhood street. The fragment might even be a list of questions posed without answers.

Over the span of six months, the *Writing Austin's Lives* project received 947 personal stories written in both English and Spanish. Gale and Carton recall that the stories arrived "in crayon, on thin, yellowed sheets of typing paper, in stacks from teachers and writing groups, in envelopes covered with fancy, old stamps and in envelopes stuffed with photographs" (xi). The institute chose 127 of the stories to be published in a large collection that was sold nearly everywhere across the city. A local news station ran several writers' stories as features on the nightly news.

The documentary is a remarkable work of collective inquiry. There are no real themes that hold the individual pieces together. The documentary as a whole does not make an argument about the good or bad changes across the city. Neither does it offer any final vision of what a future Austin might (or should) become. Instead, what holds them together is a shared process of exploration. For instance, Antelmo Vasquez's entry, written in Spanish and translated into English, tells about his neighborhood and the people living there: "My neighbors here are Hispanic; some have been living in Austin for more than three years. . . . Some feel like they are tourists, buying their cowboy hats and great big cars to identify themselves. The young guys wear brown-colored shirts with the logo of a bull. It is said that there is a bull that is everyone's director and even represents all the sports teams. People even get their pictures taken with him" (210). Rosalinda Stevenson's story describes her old segregated neighborhood on the East Side: "Rosewood Park was right behind our house. I went to that park every day. That was my park. I spent most of my free time there. . . . Later on Urban Renewal would buy Aunt Bee's house and put some low-income apartments there, and we would move farther east" (269). Jennifer Reyes, a tenth grader living in Austin, writes about her experience of being a "troubled" teen in the city: "What I really need is a miracle. . . . Right now I am in Juvenile. This has been happening to me since I was 13 years old" (158). Each of these entries documents a fragment from the ongoing networks of Austin. The stories are placed side-by-side without additional narrative framework, which helps to performatively expose a complexity within the city. No definitive answers or arguments are possible, because these voices do not meld together in a coherent way. Yet, at the same time, these fragments cohere together in the work of mutual exploration.

Gale and Carton are careful not to take credit for the project's wild suc-

cess. They write, "The success of *Writing Austin's Lives,* we submit, lies in the fact that it asked participants to share in the incarnation of culture, not only its consumption" ("Toward" 41). This insight opens up questions about what kind of work inquiry actually accomplishes. Carton and Gale argue that the citywide documentary project was more than a collective memoir. They suggest that *Writing Austin's Lives* was also constitutive, rhetorically speaking. Participants shared in what Gale and Carton termed the "incarnation of culture," which means that the telos of inquiry was both creative and rhetorically constructive.

Inquiry across networks has long been used as a form of constitutive rhetoric. Even Isocrates sketches a version of how rhetorical inquiry can lend itself to the "incarnation of culture." For Isocrates, facing moments of crisis always involves surveying *doxa,* or our public memories, beliefs, desires, and vernacular talk. More than mere opinion, doxa is not unlike the multiple networks we have been discussing so far. In *Antidosis,* Isocrates tells us that we cannot ever hope to uncover the Truth in any given crisis, yet we can use our "powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the right course" (271). According to Takis Poulakos, this formulation goes beyond the use of public opinion in order to persuade people about the correct course of action. Poulakos shows that Isocrates posits doxa as one way of cultivating new relations among citizens. Poulakos argues that Isocrates' primary use of doxa lies not in its connection to persuasion, therefore, but rather in its ability to constitute the identities of public agents: "Less interested in rhetoric as an instrument of symbolic influence with the sole end of winning over auditors in particular situations, Isocrates explored rhetoric's . . . power to create a world of its own making and situate audiences as potential inhabitants of that world" (65). Maybe *Writing Austin's Lives* isn't exactly what Isocrates had in mind. But the citywide documentary project certainly shows one way in which tracing the threads of doxa can invite citizens to imagine themselves in a different relation to the world.

As geographer Dolores Hayden notes, inquiry constitutes something valuable beyond an initial step toward a final argumentative conclusion. "The process that transforms places demands analysis. . . . As a field of wildflowers becomes a shopping mall at the edge of a freeway, that paved-over meadow, restructured as freeway lanes, parking lots, and mall, must still be considered a place, if only to register the importance of loss" (*Power* 18). In short, archiving, tracing, collecting, and surveying can do important work by placing the inquiring subject in a new relation to the world. These acts are also the beginning points for reimagining a new reality for these spaces. *Writing*

Austin's Lives does this very kind of analysis. By tracing the threads of place through circulating doxa, Gale and Carton "appropriated no ingenious formulations," as Benjamin says, but attempted to "merely show." Yet, in this act of merely showing the threads, they simultaneously invited readers to inhabit a different kind of world. The world that is constitutively written in their project is a multiple, complex, and untotalizable one. These collected pieces of mutual inquiry also help to un-write a version of this space as fixed in its meanings, histories, and futures.

The Neighborhood Story Project

Another model of public inquiry in action is found in the Neighborhood Story Project, an ongoing community-writing project centered in New Orleans's public housing projects. The Neighborhood Story Project began in 2004 as part of a writing program for high school students in the Lower Ninth Ward. Two teachers, Abram Himelstein and Rachel Breunlin, saw the desperate need to help young people confront the crises of their home places. Himelstein and Breunlin began working with Lower Ninth Ward youth in order to create documentaries that investigated New Orleans across its multiple, complex networks. When Hurricane Katrina took its toll in these neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Story Project became even more devoted to helping student writers address the crisis as rhetoricians who were capable of intervening. The documentaries were eventually published as a series of visually stunning books that takes on many different subjects about life in New Orleans's public housing projects.

The Neighborhood Story Project responds to place and its crises, but the documentaries themselves do not seem to arrive at any definite answers. At some level, the young authors are practicing what I would call an ethic of inquiry over an ethic of argument. When I asked Breunlin if she would agree with my characterization, she answered that the goal is to get the writers to consider New Orleans as a space of complexity, rather than a space of simplicity whose meanings are obvious, fixed, and unchangeable. Consequently, the documentaries are not merely personal memoirs, although there is much personal writing to be found in the texts. But the personal is only one part of a more intricate network. "We encourage them to connect their personal experiences to the larger historical and cultural forces at play in the city," she explains. "Such inquiry is necessary because while people are proud of their place, they aren't necessarily critically examining what's going on there. There isn't a lot of conversation between young and old people about how the city has changed, or why we live where we do. So the books provide a good

opportunity to go on these journeys to learn the histories, to investigate how race, class, gender, and sexuality are spacialized, how performance traditions weave through the main and backstreets" (Breunlin).

The books are what Breunlin calls "a journey" rather than any specific arrival. The process of investigation serves as a mean of habituating young writers into a new kind of relationship with the world around them. Instead of seeing their home places as already fixed with meanings—regardless of whether those meanings are positive or negative—the work of inquiry helps students to understand these places as embedded in multiple meanings and relations. Breunlin remarks, "What I think the books do is give them the confidence to have a complex narrative—not to be pigeonholed, to be able to speak multiple truths."

In practice, the young writers venture out into their own neighborhoods, serving as local documentarians for streets that have largely gone unnoticed and undocumented. They begin their work by literally collecting and archiving oral histories, images, descriptions, community memories, and stories. Their method almost perfectly mirrors Benjamin's method in the *Arcades Project*, which theorizes the streets as "the dwelling place of the collective," which is "an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being." Himelstein admits that he was initially worried that this collection method would yield books that look too much like a yearbook, with young writers simply pasting random pictures and captions. However, he quickly saw their value as pieces of vernacular anthropology. They are investigative pieces that dig into the spaces of young writers' neighborhoods (Himelstein).

Around 2007, the Neighborhood Story Project teamed up with another organization, the Porch, in order to create a new project called "7th Ward Speaks." This project uses the same inquiry practices of asking residents to interview other residents about life in the Seventh Ward. The interviews and collected fragments are turned into posters that reprint parts of the interviews, and the posters are then placed around the city. People in the neighborhood begin by participating in an interview. They are then asked if they would like to conduct their own interviews of other residents. The process can potentially ripple across the Seventh Ward, reaching all residents who are willing to speak (*Neighborhood Story Project*). A poster from the 7th Ward Speaks project, much like the books published by the Neighborhood Story Project, do not necessarily end with argument; they are fragments that seem to be working collectively toward a mutual exploration.

This different kind of approach to place is not without its challenge, of course. I regularly assign one of the first books from the Neighborhood Story Project, *The Combination,* in my writing classes. This book, written by high

school senior Ashley Nelson, is a *flaneur*'s walk through the Lafitte housing project. Nelson "appropriate(s) no ingenious formulations," but instead merely shows the neighborhood across its multiple networks and threads. Nelson's book is divided into five headings: family, businesses, violence, representing and celebrating Lafitte, friends and neighbors. Each section features fragments of interviews, images from the neighborhood, personal memories, and thick descriptions of particular sites. In the section on violence, for example, Nelson includes an interview with Poppee, a true O.G. (original gangsta), images of graffiti and memorials to dead friends, a copy of a prayer, and a list called "What gets you put in jail in da hood." When I assign this book in my classes, students often express confusion about what Nelson's point happens to be. Is she saying that the neighborhood is good? Bad? Is she saying that we should be fairer to inner-city neighborhoods, since we are relative outsiders? Is she indicting us for misjudging places like her neighborhood? We gradually push past these questions to see something else that Nelson is doing: She is creating an archive; she is surveying the doxa. She shows us the many different threads that comprise a single space like the Lower Ninth Ward. In the course of this "mere showing," Nelson also invites readers to inhabit a different kind of relationship to the world—not one that we can claim to know better (or to not know at all), but one whose networks reach across us in many different ways.

Another book produced by the Neighborhood Story Project, *Signed, the President,* shows another way in which inquiry can lead to a more complex understanding of place and the networks that embody or are embedded in it. Young author Kenneth Phillips explores life in the housing projects of New Orleans's Seventh Ward and organizes his investigation around interviews with six members of his family. After each interview, he follows up on particular threads that were uncovered in the course of his family's responses. In Phillips's interview with Grandma Irma, for example, he asks about her decision to have children. Irma discusses what it was like to raise her children after a divorce, and what it was like to raise one particularly hardheaded child named Irvin. Following his interview, Phillips picks up on the thread of his Uncle Irvin, who was a fun-loving man and a wild rebel. Uncle Irvin was shot and killed in 2001. He recounts Irvin's life as a DJ and his relationships with local rappers like Mia X. Phillips also includes images of Irvin's funeral cards and program, as well as a beautiful description of his own dreams and visions where Irvin appears. These threads lead to a broader discussion of tragedy, including the Katrina disaster and his family's experience with homelessness after the flood. At the conclusion of the section, he asks Grandma Irma about her feelings when the St. Bernard housing projects were torn down. He

then asks whether she is worried about her grandchildren, a question that sparks Irma's reflection on the power of proximity and prayer.

Although Phillips organizes his inquiry around personal memories and family interviews, his fragments and collections actually manifest a much broader picture of the connections among housing, violence, and especially the image of manliness. As Phillips writes in his introduction, the book looks "at how young men have been loved and nurtured in my community, but also sometimes [how they are] boxed in by ideas about what men are supposed to be" (1). His unique exploration of manliness is made possible by drifting across topics like the experience of public housing, mass displacement, fighting, classroom tensions between students and teachers, and even the experience of writing itself. In ways that are not immediately obvious, ideas about "what men are supposed to be" are locally embedded within these sites in New Orleans's Seventh Ward. *Signed, the President* is like a multidimensional map that exposes the reader to these connections.

Experiments in Inquiry: "The Rhetoric of the Midwest"

Projects like *Writing Austin's Lives* and the Neighborhood Story Project illustrate how inquiry can serve as an active (and activist) rhetoric for addressing the crises of place. The methodology is more than a way to index previously unknown facts or information. It is also more than a preliminary step on the way to some more important epistemic perspective (Who is correct? What shall we call it? Is this good or bad?). Instead, the method of rhetorical inquiry creates what Law and Urry calls a "performative ontology," or a performative revelation of the many relations and threads across which a process is embedded. It asks questions about the parts of this space, crisis, site, or network (How is it composed? What are the working relations? What happens if the relations are changed?). The goal of such performative work is to constitute new kinds of subjects who imagine themselves differently as public beings. As Law and Urry state, conducting a performative ontology means "that the world—and the objects, the institutions, and the people that make it up— is no longer a single thing. Instead of a 'universe' we are instead caught up in, and help to produce, a 'pluriverse'" (399). We create a rhetoric that invites audiences to imagine themselves as inhabiting multiple networks (or a pluriverse) that stretch our agency across spatial and temporal scenes.

Shortly after my experience with the archives class, I began to think about how I could create a new class that would take inquiry as a primary telos. I borrowed from models like *Writing Austin's Lives* and the Neighborhood Story Project, and I also reflected on the goals of such a course. My hope was that this class would help students to think of themselves as differ-

ent kinds of public subjects. Rather than being exceptional public subjects, or subjects who maintain a relation to the public without intervening in the scene of crisis, I wanted to push students into new kinds of roles. This role would not ground subjectivity in feeling, but rather in the process of inquiry. In other words, the measure of public subjectivity would be enacted through the process of tracing, archiving, collecting, and investigating. Whatever the class would ultimately look like, I knew from the beginning that it would not look like a traditional writing classroom.

I also continued to think about the challenge to teach toward sustainable futures. For me, this meant that I would need to focus the class around specific places and crises. We would directly address contemporary challenges to our biocultures, including the places where we actually live and work. For this reason, I decided to make the Midwest our primary focus. Without knowing who my students would be, I had no way of knowing what places and spaces they inhabited. But I did know that we were all located (temporarily) in this single space: Columbia, Missouri. Some of the students were likely born and raised in Missouri, while others would be relative newcomers to the region. Some of us would consider this region to be our home, and others of us could only see it as a rest stop. Regardless of personal relation or feeling, however, the Midwest was a single place of convergence for us. I named my class "The Rhetoric of the Midwest," and I listed it online with a detailed description about what we would be doing that semester. Then I waited.

On the first day of class, I stood up to announce that this class would not do what a class typically does. Usually you come into class with a cloudy, distant idea of what the course's subject matter is. At the end of the semester, you expect to leave with a much clearer idea of the subject. You have mastered the content in some degree of expertise. In this class, however, we are beginning from a point of expertise. We all live in the Midwest, and many of us have grown up in this area. And even if some students did not know the Midwest from personal experience, they were surely familiar with the cultural tropes and topoi concerning the American Midwest: flat, bland, heartland, conservative, and so forth. Our goal would not be to master an unfamiliar subject. The goal of this class would not be to teach students content that they were unfamiliar with. It was the inverse: to unlearn what we presumed to know already about the subject. "By the time you leave the class," I told the students, "I hope you no longer know what the Midwest is." Students looked nervous and a little confused.

Throughout the semester, we read essays written by midwesterners, essays written about the Midwest, and even some texts written for midwesterners. In their own way, all of the texts we read treated the Midwest as a space

of change. Many writers were pessimistic about the changing region: it was becoming too politically conservative, too monocultural, too dependent upon personal automobiles, too Christian, too boring, too fat. The texts that immediately garnered the most attention were those that criticized and ridiculed the region. Students leapt on one side or the other of these critiques quite swiftly. One of the most divisive essays was David Foster Wallace's essay "Ticket to the Fair," which recounted Wallace's trip to the Illinois State Fair. Foster describes the midwesterners attending the fair as obese, slow-witted, and physiologically sick. They seem to live in a different culture from the more cosmopolitan regions on the West or East coasts. According to Foster, they do not seem to distinguish authenticity from the plastic replicas around them. The grass is fake, the food is fake, and even the so-called authentic midwestern exhibits are fake. Students spent an hour in heated debate with one another about whether or not Foster was dead right or dead wrong. Students tended to respond to the texts from their own feelings. They talked about how they could relate to the authors, as well as how the authors' arguments felt distant or unfamiliar.

Similarly, Richard Rhodes's essay "Cupcake Land: Requiem for the Midwest in the Key of Vanilla" laments the slow dissolve of Kansas City from a thriving space into a suburban nightmare. For some students, Rhodes articulated the very feelings that they had harbored for years. Other students felt disconnected from Rhodes and his memories of 1970s Kansas City. As one student remarked during class, "I can't really comment on the article one way or the other. I'm from St. Louis." Ironically, these kinds of feeling-full responses gave us an opportunity to talk about how to talk. For several weeks, we had been discussing these texts from the vantage of personal relation (not to mention the lack of relation). I challenged them to think about alternative ways of talking about these texts and their ideas. What other kinds of responses could we create?

In order to show a different way of talking, I introduced students to our class wiki during the second week of class. The wiki is an online space that can be collaboratively edited and written. Wiki users can create new pages through multiple links that are not hierarchically ordered like a blog or other Web page. Any user can create a brand-new page from a word or phrase on another user's page. I told students that this wiki would be like a living archive for us. Using Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a model, I told students that their task was to collect and archive the various topoi, tropes, observations, quotes, images, and specific lines that jumped out from the reading. At this point, our aim was to "merely show," I told the students. I instructed them that when they encountered something that should be entered into the ar-

chive, they should create a new space for it. Likewise, if they saw connections among the fragments, they might link them together without any additional comment. They were becoming investigators in this rhetorical scene.

The challenge of becoming an investigator proved to be a bit tricky. Repeatedly, the matter of opinion emerged as a sore subject. Students admitted that they felt like they were not actively thinking since they were not regularly framing their writing with feeling. One student asked when they were going to be able to "be themselves" in these responses. As uncomfortable as these objections were, they exposed a deep connection between feeling and publicness. Students felt that I had limited their ability to be a public subject by erasing personal feeling (the sensation of relation, memory, opinion) from the act of response. Yet, this exposure also gave me an opportunity to discuss new ways of reading and responding. Rather than seeing ourselves as subjects who could only respond from feeling, could we not also be subjects who discover and uncover connections, linkages, and relations within and across these texts? Is it possible to respond by tracing the threads? And, more importantly, what will happen if we do it? I acknowledged the students' nervousness while also asking for their willingness to participate in an experiment. "It's a thinking experiment," I said. "All I ask is that you suspend your disbelief for twelve more weeks." With some hesitation, they seemed to oblige.

Shortly after introducing the wiki archive, we dove into one of our main texts of the semester, William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth: A Deep Map,* which served as one of the most challenging and useful guides for thinking and writing about place through the method of inquiry. In *PrairyErth,* Heat-Moon seeks to create what he calls a "deep map" of Chase County, Kansas. The space he has chosen is relatively unremarkable. Heat-Moon did not come to a place typically seen as rich in history, culture, or complexity; just the opposite. He writes that Chase County, Kansas is a "sparse landscape, seemingly . . . thin and minimal in history and texture, a stark region recent American life had mostly gone past, a still point, a fastness an ascetic seeking a penitential corner might discover" (15). Yet, Heat-Moon's book is vastly deep. *PrairyErth* offers a history of place that surpasses what most people see in more complicated landscapes. This is because Heat-Moon is guided not by the topoi that are already familiar to him (this place's history or its well-worn descriptions that circulate freely). He instead is guided by inquiry, becoming a "digger of shards" (15).

His method for conducting a deep map, or a "vertical history," of Chase County is unusual, to say the least. Heat-Moon says that he is "in search of the land and what informs it" (10). In order to conduct such a search, he tex-

tually digs into the shards that are embedded in this space. He digs from the soil on up to the surface. Readers are led into long investigations of how the soil, rocks, and grass interact in ways that have shaped what Kansas has become over time. For example, he meditates on the particular kinds of grass that cover the county's vast plains. The native grasses in this prairie land are perfect for nourishing cattle, but their sugar content is low. This makes the grasses imperfect for activities like brewing malt, which native landscapes in other regions can support. "Were Kansas known for barley instead of beef and wheat," Heat-Moon amusingly remarks, "local notions would be different, and Carry Nation would likely not have chopped up her first saloon thirty-five miles from here" (196). Whether or not Carrie Nation's temperance movement was centered in the Midwest because of the local conditions, Least Heat-Moon is relentless in his juxtaposition of vertical shards from the landscape. He collects geological fragments, social histories of floods and displacement, linguistic and etymological details, personal portraits of current residents, the histories of workers who are rooted to the land, and even discourse about Kansas.

Students sometimes did not know what to make of Heat-Moon's six-hundred-page book. *PrairyErth* resembles Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in its fragmentary and wandering style. The book frustrated any attempt to get at the epistemic questions we wanted to ask: Is he saying that the Midwest is a good place? Is he saying that Kansas is not as flat as it may appear? The sprawling and fragmentary drift left us feeling as though we were witnessing a kind of unraveling. His method leaves no possible thread unraveled. Like a true archivist, he juxtaposes a number of materials together in a single space. These include images, letters, descriptions, interviews, facts, and quotes. Heat-Moon pulls apart threads in what seems like a unified (and plainly obvious) field. His search to discover what informs the land slowly uncovers a multitude of pieces. The result is a portrait of Chase County, Kansas, that reveals how place is constituted across networks.

Students were especially taken with the extensive collection of quotes at the beginning of each section. Their collection mimics Benjamin's quotes and sayings in his *Arcades Project.* The quotes in *PrairyErth* appear without further commentary, always under the ambiguous heading, "From the Commonplace Book." Some quotes are drawn from historical guidebooks to Kansas, some from more recent texts about place and the land, some from works by Victor Hugo and Walt Whitman, and some from newspaper debates and reference guides. The quotes do not seem to introduce the section themes that follow, nor do they all form a coherent whole in their own right. Yet, as students quickly discovered, Heat-Moon collected these quotes as a way to

create a commonplace book between him and his readers. One particular quote by Peter Steinhart became a class favorite: "Maps are a way of organizing wonder" (Heat-Moon 4). The work of inquiry, or of digging deeply into the shards, resulted in a mutual wonderment that was as useful as it was informative.

Heat-Moon's work became a methodological guide for beginning our own inquiry into place. We also drew upon N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain,* which also pursues a rhetorical investigation into place. Momaday writes about the Kiowa people, yet he does not offer a linear history or straightforward narrative of his journey back to the Kiowa origins. Instead, his book stylistically juxtaposes fragments from Kiowa mythology, actual Kiowa history, and personal memories of revisiting his family's own story. These three strands are not hierarchical. Momaday archives the places of Kiowa people (from Montana to Oklahoma) alongside his own memories of family. One fragment does not inform another, yet the collected fragments and shards perform a kind of unraveling similar to what we see in *Prairy-Erth.* Momaday describes this approach to inquiry as an ethical imperative for all of us, insofar as we must consider the land. He writes, "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it" (83). We returned to this quote many times throughout the semester, adopting it as our own particular challenge for inquiry. Such experience did indeed seem to call for us to give ourselves up to the landscape. Looking at the land from as many angles as possible demands a different way of performing responses and performing writing.

Toward the end of the semester, students began to better understand this method of rhetorical inquiry as an alternative way of talking about (and responding to talk about) place. Our goal was to see the multiple networks in which the Midwest is lodged. We became peculiar kinds of archivists, ones who testified to the constellations that moved together and apart from one another as part of this process. Students also needed to learn how to inhabit a different kind of subjectivity. Rather than validating their own sense of publicness through the experience and expression of feeling—in terms of felt agreement, relation, care, memory, or investment—they were being asked to become subjects who engaged the public world through questions, investigation, and wonder.

The course's final project called for students to create a deep map, the kind that Heat-Moon illustrates in *PrairyErth.* My directions for the deep map assignment were as follows:

For this project, you will follow William Least Heat-Moon's method of making a "deep map" by also writing a topographic map of words. Heat-Moon shows us a way of mapping that can potentially re-orient our vision of the landscape. Like the deep map we read in *PrairyErth,* you will also perform a vertical history. Your deep map will need to choose one particular place (nothing larger than a county or city) that has definite boundaries.

Start by digging into the native soils, rocks, grass, trees, weather habits, animals, and so forth. You should try to give us a geological-rhetorical "slice" of this space, not a total and perfect representation of the history. Your deep map will cut across the social, historical, personal, political, and geological forces that inform this place. Remember Momaday's call to look at the land from as many angles as you can. This is your challenge.

Your final text will probably not resemble a traditional essay. Think about how texts like *PrairyErth* and *Way to Rainy Mountain* use layout, font changes, images, and headings in order to perform their investigation for readers. You should think of this project like a textual archive. There are a number of ways to perform it for readers, but you must consider the various effects that such layouts will have for your own audience. Word minimum is 1,500 and word maximum is 2,500 words. You should include any images, maps, documents, or illustrations that may be relevant. You will be graded based on how well you create a thorough archive, using all the available resources you can find.

Remember: this is an experiment and a challenge. Your deep map is an opportunity to practice giving yourself up to a particular landscape through the work of rhetorical inquiry. Leave no thread unpulled.

The projects that resulted from this assignment looked much different from the papers I received in my archives course on race. These texts lacked the kinds of argumentative conclusions found in the documentaries. They did not leave readers with calls to actions or specific proposals. However, they did not turn away from rhetorical gestures. Students' deep maps invited readers to imagine these spaces differently, as more complex and multiply composed. A kind of archival spirit informed these deep maps, inviting readers to use the writing beyond what was imagined by the current text. In other words, the results of inquiry could spark further invention. The text became a facilitator of mutual exploration rather than a final word on an issue.

One student took a small Missouri state park and lake as her space. Her project began with several quotes culled about the area, including poems written about fishing in Missouri's waters. She next recalls fishing in this park's lakes with her father, though her attempts at fly-fishing were half-

hearted and dispassionate. Her memory about fly-fishing flows into a meditation on the waters gushing beneath their boots. The springs churn more than ninety-six million gallons a day, and they flow from a valley. The steady flow of the spring attracted settlers in the early nineteenth century because it was such a rich source for mill work. Missouri introduced various fish into the streams at the beginning of the twentieth century, a practice that continues to be questioned globally. Stocking lakes and streams with fish is not a neutral act. It has consequences beyond this state park, since the ecosystem is altered with every new introduction of nonnative farm fish. It all has to do with microorganisms that are too miniscule to see.

Above the waters, the topography is classified as "karst." This means that there are lots of natural caves in the area. Missouri's landscape is largely karst. Groundwater dissolves layers of limestone over time to make sinkholes, caves, and natural tunnels. This state park is a perfect example of karst topography, with its series of connecting tunnels and caves. Driving out of town from Columbia, you cannot miss the tourist signs advertising cave tours near the park. Cave exploration and canoe tours have become a commodity that the state depends upon for revenue. Ideally, you would take a cave tour and then buy one of the souvenirs embossed with the name of the cave on it. Perhaps a small plastic replica of the cave or maybe a T-shirt advertising the tour company's name.

The student then considered the relationship between karst topography and Missouri's tourist trade. Daytrips to lakes and caves are a valuable source of livelihood for many small towns. Another karst region, Lake of the Ozarks, is almost entirely a tourist town, much like Branson. This means that the land is never simply in relation to the local people. It is triangulated: local people maintain the land for the benefit of others who come as tourists. The student included images of advertisements for small shops and restaurants sitting just outside the state park. The restaurants were named after the park and the springs themselves. They boasted "world famous" pies and desserts, though the claims all seemed to betray a self-aware sense of kitsch.

The student's creation could be best described as a work of rhetorical inquiry. Using a vertical history method, she collected fragments from a given space. She did not give a complete history, nor did she make any particular arguments about her discoveries. Instead, her text archived fragments from the geological landscape, historical experiences, and contemporary social and political scenes. By tracing these fragments from as many angles as possible, her text cut across local reflection into national (even global) spaces. She created less of a representation than an inquiry into the multiple networks of this space.

This inquiry is then available to readers as a point of departure. When I read her text for the first time, I immediately thought about current stories detailing how state parks in Missouri were increasingly serving as ad hoc meth labs. Local residents in rural areas were using the land in alternative ways to make a living. The meth produced in state parks like this one would travel across the Midwest, circulating mainly among working-class users. When the entire class read her final texts, students picked up on another thread exposed by her inquiry. She had discussed the natural springs and her own family's visitations to the area as a seasonal event. The seasonality of state parks and the surrounding communities lent a certain rhythm to this landscape, a rhythm that may be different from a landscape supported by steadier sources of employment and revenue. When the snow begins and the fly fishermen stop visiting the springs, concession stands and souvenir shops are no longer viable. Work itself has a rhythm. This concept took some students by surprise, sparking further thoughts about seasonality and survival. By surveying the networks within which this site is embedded, the student writer helped to generate a point of departure for her readers.

Such a project is not without its limitations, of course. Not everyone will be satisfied with the results of such an experiment. Indeed, there are times when we must make definitive arguments that leave aside inquiry. I would never abdicate my obligation to teach students how to make strong arguments in the face of rhetorical exigencies. However, I also see projects like the deep map assignment as a way to teach another skill that we have neglected for too long in rhetoric classrooms: inquiry. By emphasizing inquiry as a legitimate mode of relating to the world, we can help to cultivate citizens who avoid writing themselves out of the public scene of crisis. Inquiry challenges and contests those spaces of exception that so many public subjects inhabit. Our pedagogical practice cannot ever hope to completely overcome the rise of exceptional subjects, but it can create conditions for reflecting on its assumptions. "The Rhetoric of the Midwest" was far from a perfect course, and I learned just as much as my students did. Yet, the course is an example of how the rhetoric and writing classroom can contribute necessary and ethical changes within the public sphere.

Inquiry and Sustainability

It goes without saying that we have special roles as teachers of rhetoric. Not only can we intervene in crisis by transcending our own comfort zones, but our classrooms can also help encourage students to relate differently to the world around them. In "Rhetoric of the Midwest," I pushed students to experiment with the work of inquiry because I saw this as an opportunity to

reflect on other modes of relating to place. Rather than continuing to think of themselves only as subjects who relate through feeling, I hope that the class also gave them some opportunity to think of themselves as subjects who relate through question, investigation, and inquiry.

But is the act of inquiry necessarily a rhetorical act? Thomas Farrell reminds us, "Rhetoric is the art, the fine and useful art, of making things matter" (470). Does inquiry make things matter in the way that more traditional forms of argument do? Inquiry, as a performative ontology of relations and networks, looks quite different from traditional forms of argumentation. Yet it is also embedded in judgment. The rhetor who collects, archives, traces, or inquires does not give up any claims to judgment (*krisis*). In fact, Quintilian tells us that judgment is embedded in all five canons of rhetoric. He remarks that some rhetors regard judgment as a sixth canon of rhetoric, since we appear to invent first and then judge. However, continues Quintilian, "I do not consider that he who has not judged has invented" (*Institutes* 3.3.5). The act of invention entails judgment and cannot be separated out like a multistep process. He writes, "Cicero . . . has included judgment under invention, but to me, judgment appears to be so mingled with the first three parts (for there can neither be arrangement nor expression without it), that I think even delivery greatly indebted to it" (3.3.5). Quintilian supposes that rhetors must call upon critical thought at every step in the process of public engagement, even in the inventional stage. The work of inquiry as a process—even as a process that may seem overly stylistic to some—is thus embedded within judgment.

To better understand how judgment plays a role in the work of inquiry, consider how Quintilian discusses the various kinds of questions (indefinite and definite) that rhetoricians take up (*Institutes* 3.5). Quintilian lists the various questions that fall under our consideration, as well as the kinds of discourse that follow from these questions. In this way, he theorizes an important link between the kinds of questions we ponder and the rhetoric that follows. Indefinite or general questions ("Should a man marry?") spark a much different discourse than definite questions ("Should Cato marry?"). Our questions guide us into particular rhetorical channels, and away from others. Since inquiry is the endless survey of the networks within which a crisis is embedded, it is comprised of questions and (therefore) particular vectors of rhetorical movement. The threads we choose to pursue, the shards we choose to archive, are never without consequence. They collectively change the resulting text of inquiry, which then invites further mutual exploration. Because the student in my class decided to pursue threads of karst landscapes and tourism, the class as a whole found themselves extending this inquiry into a discussion of seasonality, rhythm, and work. Her deci-

sions led to a particular discourse, which means that her inquiry is not free of judgment itself. Therefore, when we use this process, we must also be aware that our collection will have effects (even unforeseen) in terms of how we talk about place and its problems. We are still firmly within the realm of rhetoric.

But why is this inquiry process necessarily sustainable? In chapter 1, I argued that sustainable public subjects need to think across networks. What is sustainable about rhetorical inquiry is not merely the exposure of networks, though that is an important part. Exposing and tracking the networks is work that ecocomposition is especially adept at doing. But I am advocating something more: a change to public subjectivity. By encouraging subjects who relate to the world through questions, wonder, inquiry, investigation, archive, we are disallowing subjects who write themselves out of the scene of rhetoric. We are closing down those spaces of exception. True public subjects of feeling can write themselves out of scenes for intervention, perhaps because they feel an awayness from the site of injury or memory. Or perhaps they feel a legitimate undecidability. But the public subject of inquiry is never exceptional, never outside the realm of inquiry.

This brings me back to the crisis of development. How can our public discourse ethically address the problems of development? There are many valid answers to this question, and I am not alone in asking such questions. However, from the vantage point of a rhetoric teacher, my answer returns to the site where I can make the best contribution: the classroom. Sustainable futures and more thoughtful development will depend partly on our ability to become nondistant subjects. Teachers can encourage such subjects through pedagogies that tacitly endorse ways of relating to the world. By helping students to imagine themselves as inquirers to crisis, teachers of rhetoric have already changed how they write themselves into the rhetorical scene.