

Charles Sheaffer
Department of Cultural Studies and
Comparative Literature
University of Minnesota

**The Democratic Frontier of the Digital-Age United States:
Toward an Extimaterial Humanities Pedagogy**

“If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” said Gatsby. “You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock.” Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. . . . Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald,
The Great Gatsby

A few years ago I decided to give up residence at the University of Minnesota and return to my native west, to the Camas Prairie, a rugged piece of Idaho between the Snake River and the Sawtooth Mountains where hard livings are made on single-family wheat and cattle operations. I wanted to break away from the new texts and emergent methodologies—the ceaseless streams of signification upon which advanced study in the information age has come to be predicated—and simply live and work amongst family and friends. Instead of an escape, however, my move seemed to result in something more like a short circuit. Upon my arrival, word was spreading around Camas County that large tracts of land were being purchased by Valley Entertainment, a holding company controlled by film stars Bruce Willis and Demi Moore. There was talk of condominiums, a new airstrip, and an extensive new ski resort in the timbered mountains rising from the Prairie’s edge. Concern was widespread amongst the county’s eight hundred residents, a few of whom had lost family ranches or farms elsewhere through similar development and who therefore knew the pattern all too well: With the rise in the cost of property and

services which an emergent tourist industry would bring, a few large land owners would profit while most others would simply be priced out of business and forced to leave.

From the local perspective, then, the arrival of Valley Entertainment was potentially tragic. And yet from my perspective it was also ironic, in that it entailed an unwitting *facilitation* by the Prairie residents of the very kind of development that they so anxiously sought to avoid. The Camas Prairie sits about an hour away from Sun Valley, the world famous ski resort where Willis and Moore made their home at the time and where thousands of well-monied transplants reside. In contrast to the transient, leisure-oriented lifestyle of the Sun Valley scene, however, the residents of the Camas Prairie revel in their historical and occupational ties to the local landscape. Some of my neighbors on the Prairie were descendent from the area's first homesteaders; accordingly, in the face of the impending real-estate crisis, many of them began sporting shirts and stickers bearing slogans such as "I was here before Bruce" and "Sun Valley is not Idaho." But the irony here—and the point not to be missed—is that not only can the Sun Valley establishment *become* the real Idaho through economic transgression and media management, but that this transgression is actually *fueled* by the very claim to authenticity which the Prairie residents' shirts and stickers represent. In the age of late capitalism, to shun the market place is to merely assure one's subsumption by it—a point which Willis himself illustrated from another angle when he enthused to Boise television reporters about his intent to develop and expand one of his newly acquired Camas County resort properties "as the down-to-earth kind of place it's always been."¹

¹ Willis' mastery of this "other angle"—his ability to manipulate the marketplace through a purported distinction between marketing and authenticity—surfaced again when, upon his completion of improvements at the nearby Soldier Mountain ski resort, he erected a large billboard on the Camas Prairie reading "S-h-h-h-h! Don't tell anyone!"

Read as such, the crisis on the Prairie exemplifies one of the key phenomena of the electronic age: the increasingly patent contingency, or symbolic mediation, of every experience—i.e., the increasingly palpable primacy of the signifier over that which it represents. Equally significant, though, with respect to my project, is our ability as academic humanists to *make* any such reading in the first place. Indeed, as a student and teacher of critical theory, I could have instigated my analysis of the Prairie crisis from a number of starting points: Marx, for one, characterized the market place as inherently transmutational, as entailing not only a constant re-negotiation of its own means of production but a ceaseless absorption of those systems extrinsic to it, as well. Likewise, Saussure's turn-of-the-century demonstration of the relational nature of the signifier (i.e., the dependence of each instance of meaning upon its difference from others) has led to the post-structuralist articulation of the dispersionary nature of contemporary power. Across the field of critical theory, then, otherwise incommensurate movements help in one way or another to paint the following picture: In the age of late capitalism, to attempt a distinction between authenticity and image is to merely enmesh oneself further in the process of image-production.

This, of course, is an important insight in its own right. And yet, in introducing my dissertation project, a clarification becomes necessary here: If, as I say, my return to the Camas Prairie played like a short circuit, my point is *not* simply that the Valley Entertainment acquisitions confirmed for me the lessons of critical theory or cultural studies. What struck me, rather, was the extent to which the Prairie residents' condition as the unwitting facilitators of their own antagonists seemed to *replicate our own position as theoretically informed academic humanists*—seemed to replicate, that is, our tendency

as critical theorists and cultural critics to inadvertently bolster the positions of our own detractors. The tendency which I refer to could be characterized as a vicious circle of sorts: much of our public (whether off-campus or in the classroom) puzzles over our various investments in increasingly abstract positions and obtuse political interventions—and we respond to this public (when we respond at all) with a self-incriminating mixture of resigned shrugs and additional postulates. Through the publicity generated by the so-called culture wars, the topic of cultural contingency and its political ramifications becomes commodified—our lessons on the matter now received by students and public as the predictable (and predictably opaque) tenets of political correctness, i.e., as so many bills of goods, to be bought or rejected, used or discarded at the outset, without much possibility of intellectual gain either way.

Of course, neither the eschewing of political engagement in favor of purportedly transparent experience nor the falsity of any such choice between the two is news to theoretically informed scholars working within the humanities disciplines. What *is* new, though, at least as I see it, is the transformation in recent years of the lessons of cultural contingency from a condition of simple *incomprehensibility* to one of outright *notoriety*—a transformation which many of us who work with critical theory seem to simply ignore. Consider Louis Althusser's classic allusion to the plight of the revolutionary educator in his 1969 essay on "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses." In Althusser's characterization, the radical academic works in utter isolation from colleagues, the majority of whom, in contrast, "do not even begin to suspect the 'work' the system . . . forces them to do . . ." (157). Indeed, writing thirty years ago, Althusser *could* still accurately describe the position of the radical educator in

the way that he does—as a kind of Kuhnian anomaly, so antithetical to the ideological function of the educational apparatus itself as to remain largely amorphous before the eyes of students and colleagues. At present, however, how many of us who use critical theory to teach or write about cultural contingency (or to otherwise politicize the cultural field) would regard our position as *anomalous*? As Gerald Graff has observed, a quick glance at the program of any recent meeting of humanities academics renders any such suggestion ridiculous.² The increasing cynicism toward the work we do as theoretically informed academic humanists cannot, then, be attributed to a simple lack of familiarity on the part of our audiences; on the contrary, my contention is that the problem stems paradoxically from a *plenitude* of sorts, a feeling on the part of our students and public that they’ve somehow “heard it all before,” no matter how innovative, challenging, or abstract the intervention.

The above invocation of Graff is more than arbitrary. Amongst the handful of established academics to squarely address the problem at hand, Graff stands out for his attribution of the impasse in question to our own failure, as theoretically informed academic humanists, to effectively apply the results of our most advanced avenues of research to the *teaching* of these results—our failure, more specifically, to develop pedagogical practices consistent with (and adequate to) the cultural conditions of contingency and difference that we so carefully formulate in our publications and lectures. As such, this thesis of Graff’s (most forcefully delineated in his book *Beyond the Culture Wars*) provides a key reference for my inquiry into the cultivation of a literary pedagogy fully attuned to the dispersionary ontological and ideological

² Remark made by Graff following his keynote talk at the annual meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Minneapolis, November 14, 1995.

conditions inherent to electronic-age America. For while Graff may not explicitly link the emergent cynicism toward the academic humanities to the advent of a specifically *digital* ontology, I would nonetheless argue that his work prompts and facilitates such a connection precisely through its underscoring of the disparity between the emergent conditions *recognized* by cultural critics and the pedagogical modes *employed* by this same community in the dissemination of its findings. Were Graff's focus reducible to a simple matter of consistency within our professional field (were it reducible, for instance, to a matter of pedagogical correlation of form to content), the relation of his project to the issue of digital ontology would indeed remain undefined. But Graff's concern extends to the disparity between academic modes of inquiry and the many other discourses with which the academy necessarily competes in the production of cultural standards. In other words, Graff characterizes our pedagogical methods as not only inadequate to the key *contents* of our own curriculum (inadequate, that is, to the topics of difference, contingency, the primacy of the signifier, etc.), but as falling short, as well, with respect to the new *forms* of entertainment and information now permeating the cultural field (the list of which would include not only the emergent digital technologies but also the various mediums that employ them).

In this way, then, Graff's demand that we take our observations concerning difference and contingency more seriously could be said to reach its logical apex in the exploration of new forms of academic discourse more precisely indexed to contemporary ontological contexts and tendencies. To put it another way, while Graff himself focuses largely on the problems inherent to institutional structure (e.g., the compartmentalization of areas of expertise and the attendant mystification of fundamental disciplinary debates),

his project can nonetheless be read alongside (or perhaps as logically prior to) certain efforts to establish new forms of *textuality* better indexed to the cultural and ontological contexts of the electronic age. One of the purest examples to date of this latter inquiry into a properly contemporary mode of (or successor to) textuality would be Gregory Ulmer's development of an academic genre indexed to *euretic* conditions (Ulmer's neologism for the dispersionary, non-teleological tendencies held to be common to both oral and digital culture and suppressed, in Ulmer's view, under the hermeneutic conditions inherent to the modern auspices of literacy). In his book *Teleteory*, Ulmer adumbrates an electronic-age academic genre which could be produced in any medium (including writing), but which would eschew the linear qualities usually associated with literacy in favor of the polyvalent signifying tendencies foregrounded by digital technology. (Ulmer cites the multi-track capabilities of video as one of his primary models, but one might just as easily point to the alliterative properties of rap lyrics). The point, for Ulmer, is to prompt an electronic-age counterpart to the Renaissance-age creation of the essay—and to thereby re-synchronize the humanities curriculum to the cultural and ontological fields in which it resides. Thus, just as Renaissance scholars proffered the essay as the pedagogical and epistemological expression of an emergent alphabetic ontology, so too, argues Ulmer, must contemporary academics cultivate a new genre expressive (and constitutive) of the euretic tendencies inherent to our time (xiii-iv).

To return, then, to my inquiry, I take the following correlative insights from Graff's and Ulmer's otherwise disparate works as my primary points of entry: First, I view the rising incomprehensibility of the contemporary humanities disciplines as something more than yet another manifestation of the general proliferation of information

and specialization that marks the era of late capitalism; instead, following Graff, Ulmer, and others, I attribute the problem of this incomprehensibility to our own institutional declension from the ontological contexts of the contemporary American scene. Second, in conceiving of a way out of this impasse, I reject the conservative call for a return to an allegedly “lost” cultural and curricular consensus; like Graff and Ulmer, I pin my hopes instead on *further development* within the fields of critical theory and cultural criticism (on a more effective invocation, in other words, of the very sorts of work that have become so difficult to explain and justify to our public).³ And third, then, like Graff and Ulmer, I predicate my inquiry on a distinction between the mere *description* of emergent ontology and the effective *enactment* of it.⁴

In basing my argument upon these premises, however, it is my intention to shift them onto different terrain. The realization of a problematic difference between what we *know* (as critics and theorists) and what we *do* (as writers and educators) is indeed crucial to my study and, as I say, drives my inquiry into the status of (and relationship between) literacy and democracy in the digital-age United States. But whereas Graff, Ulmer, and others can be understood to ascribe this gap to a continued pedagogical subsidization of a bankrupt ontological mode, I contend, in contrast, that the problem in question concerns an emergent tendency toward the *foreclosure* of this gap—a proliferating tendency, more

³ In his book *Professing Literature*, Graff documents the fallaciousness of any contention of former consensus within the American humanities curriculum, emphasizing, in the process, the vast philosophical and methodological differences between the fields of philology and literary criticism (the two distinct factions which vied for control of most English departments in the early years of the discipline’s institutionalization on American campuses). For an even more illuminating account with respect to this point, see *The Origins of Literary Studies in America*, an anthology of primary sources co-edited by Graff and Michael Warner.

⁴ David Wellbery provides a clear yet concise illustration of this point in his characterization of Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks* as a distinctly *post-hermeneutic* representation of the waning of hermeneutic meaning: “Kittler’s book is not about post-structuralism, does not take post-structuralism as its theme. Rather, it presupposes post-structuralist thought, makes that thought the operating equipment [...] with which it sets out to accomplish its own research program” (viii).

precisely, toward the pedagogical *dissipation* of the space between knowing and doing, the very space which would otherwise authorize the emergence of social agency.

My point can be opened up through a quick consideration of the modern science disciplines. Epistemologically oriented observers have long noted not only the non-linear trajectory inherent to scientific research (as illuminated, for instance, by Thomas Kuhn's analyses of the irreducible role of capricious, extrinsic circumstances in every scientific breakthrough), but also the *expunging* of this quality through the retroactive inscription of each new discovery as the next logical step in a progressive aggregation of immutable fact (this latter process of reification being visible in both the technological replication and the pedagogical dissemination of scientific discovery). And while this type of analysis might seem at first glance to parallel (and thus corroborate) Graff's and Ulmer's respective suggestions that our own insight into post-hermeneutic conditions becomes reified through our residually hermeneutic pedagogical apparatus, I argue that any such analogy would merely reproduce an incomplete premise. For while Kuhn and others have indeed noted the role of education in the obfuscation of non-linear anomaly,⁵ Kuhn, for one, nonetheless characterizes the tension between irrational insight and rational discourse as *integral to the practice of science as such* (rather than as the result of a subsequent pedagogical representation). What Kuhn suggests, in other words, is an educational reification *of this very gap*, a pedagogical repudiation not simply of extra-rational anomaly, but of the foundational tension *between* this radical element and the rational modes of disciplinary conviction which it drives. Following from this insight,

⁵ Lewis Thomas, to point to another well-known example, addresses the problem of a "reification of science" as it pertains to the American medical profession. In *ssssss*, for instance, Thomas associates various negative trends in contemporary medical practice to the gradual elimination of humanistic study from the academic training of American medical students (and to the rigidly hermeneutic picture of science and technology which he argues has resulted from this elimination).

then, my inquiry concerns not only the centrality of this tension to the function of modern meaning, but also the enactment of pedagogical methods which effectively engage this constitutive gap in its entirety.

Hence, regarding the navigation of the impasse associated with the culture wars, I would contend that the homology between the science and humanities disciplines pointed to above suggests a here-to-fore unexplored avenue of inquiry: If the growing inadequacy of our pedagogical apparatus to its digital contexts would seem to warrant the exploration of modes of research which *enact* the technologically facilitated tendencies which they so avidly chronicle, then an attendant recognition of the irreducibility of this tension to the signifier as such would seem, in turn, to call for the development of a humanities pedagogy which is *fully literate*. To put it another way, it is my contention that one possible means of cultivating a viable electronic-age academic discourse would be to foster the realization that literacy itself is always-already electronic. Ulmer comes close to suggesting as much in his eschewing of the reductive equation of electronic discourse to its material embodiments. As he adroitly notes in *Teletheory*, “the desire, the love of knowledge that drives academic discourse, is not medium specific”—by which he means not only that the hermeneutic apparatus of literacy may be giving way to euretic (i.e., non-linear) modes of cognition, but also that the euretic production of knowledge would be just as achievable with pen and paper as with computer or video hardware (1). Starting, however, with the premise that every instance of rational meaning must be founded upon an inscription of its own impossibility, I argue that any ascription of this gap to a binary opposition of hermeneutic and post-hermeneutic ontology runs the risk of feeding the condition that it seeks to displace. In comparison to Ulmer’s work,

then, my interest lies in supplanting the idea of a literate *suppression* with a productive engagement of the proliferating and paradoxical mechanism of *repression* (the mechanism which is at the same time both foundational to literate-age meaning yet vulnerable to repudiation by our pedagogical apparatus).

With respect to my argument, one of the most pertinent expressions of this constitutive aspect of repression would be Jacques Lacan's formulation of the rift between traumatic knowledge and conventionalized belief, the irreducible split which Lacan posits as the means by which every modern position of identity avoids an overly direct encounter with its own antagonistic and contingent origins. And whereas Kuhn's homologous delineation of the irreducible tension between aggregate and anomaly might be said to have developed in tandem to Lacan's teachings, more recent scholarship in the field of political theory has directly engaged the Lacanian structuring of psychoanalytic theory. In her comparative analysis of totalitarian and democratic forms of law, for instance, the legal philosopher Renata Salecl observes that every society is necessarily founded upon an antagonistic outburst falling beyond the fold of any concomitant regimes of logic, morality, or common sense. The difference, then, between totalitarian and democratic society resides in how each respectively guards against any subsequent encounter with its own violent and excessive origins: Democratic nations, as Salecl demonstrates, achieve this elision through a structural recording of an intrinsic, forever contemporaneous discord (the legal tenet of due process, for instance, as an infinite regression of the final implementation of the law—an on-going complication “in the real” of the symbolic codes of justice). And the alternative to this condition of deference, in turn, would be the totalitarian reduction of the letter of the law to a condition of full

plenitude—a state of affairs whereby the *inscription* and the *enforcement* of the law become collapsed into one concomitant gesture (as in the case of martial law, in which the police are accountable only to themselves and the antagonistic element subtending society is *directly embodied* in the various “enemies of the state”) (Salecl 23).

Alongside other continental theorists focusing on the epistemological foundations of democratic society, then, Salecl delineates democracy as the founding of a signifying aggregate upon a certain element of self-difference. In other words, democratic society can be defined as that which is founded on the element which Jacques Alain Miller (following Lacan’s suggestion) denotes as *extimate*: an element which resides not in the space between the community in question and its extrinsic others, but which, on the contrary, remains internal to (yet unoccupied by) the community itself. And my thesis is that, as such, the relation of democracy to the problem of electric-age literacy becomes more than allegorical: I argue that the perspective opened up in recent years by Salecl and other political theorists warrants the delineation of a distinctly democratic form of academic discourse—by which I mean *not* the mere direction of thinking, reading, and writing skills toward the issues pertinent to (or obfuscated by) contemporary democratic life, but rather, the cultivation of textual forms which mimic (and therefore effectively engage) the epistemological *structure* inherent to democracy. Like Ulmer’s formulation of a post-hermeneutic pedagogy, a radically democratic textuality would lie beyond the logic of critique (a logic which must ultimately subordinate language to a pre-existing political truth, as manifested in the frequent glossing of issues such as syntax, grammar, or mechanics in the classrooms of many progressive composition instructors); for as Salecl demonstrates, the various bureaucratic enactments of democratic culture function

not as hermeneutic interpretations of an egalitarian essence, but rather, as the continual re-inscription of a foundational antagonism. Here again, though, my inquiry must be distinguished from Ulmer's: Whereas his model of euretic discourse could be said to replace the tenet of critique proffered by historical materialism with a cultivation of the materiality inherent to the *signifier itself* (e.g., the cultivation of the polyvalent potential of multi-medium discourses, of the metonymic or associative relationship between signifiers, etc.), I will argue instead for the cultivation of what, following Miller, I denote as the condition of *exti-materiality*—the inclusion within the signifying chain of its own impossibility.

The implications of my argument can be further developed through a return to the example of the Camas Prairie. With respect to the question of an extimaterial concurrence of contemporary democracy and electronic-age discursivity, the first thing to note about the Prairie residents' struggle against economic displacement is the function of this crisis in the elision of the foundational antagonisms which, as Salecl would suggest, *necessarily subtend the ranchers' own community*. Soldier Mountain, the namesake and geographical site of the local ski resort purchased and developed by Willis and Moore, takes its name from the garrison of US cavalry troops detailed to the Camas Prairie in the early 1870s for the purpose of policing the Bannock peoples, who had traditionally visited the area each spring to harvest the Camas lily (the bulb of which was made into a flour which served as a primary winter staple for local Native Americans). Despite having been guaranteed access to the Prairie by treaty, the Bannock were driven from the area in order to placate nervous white sheep ranchers and were forced onto the Fort Hall Reservation, situated approximately one-hundred miles away on an arid and desolate

stretch of Snake River bottom land. In 1878, driven to a state of starvation and illness through the failure of the federal government to deliver promised food and provision to the Reservation, Bannock warriors led a party back to the Camas Prairie for a final (and largely fatal) encounter with the US troops. Vanquished, the survivors were returned to Fort Hall, where many members of the Bannock tribe continue to reside.

With respect to the *present-day* condition of the Camas Prairie community, then, the pertinent question concerns the role of the current struggle between the Prairie ranchers and the Sun Valley real-estate developers in the elision of the ranching community's various foundational antagonisms (including the killing and displacement of local Bannock populations, the discursive transformation of the high prairie ecosystem into a territory "naturally" suited to live-stock grazing, etc). Lacan emphasizes the need for foundational antagonism to be re-inscribed in the present, in the form of a seemingly arbitrary, extrinsic disruption.⁶ And in the case of the Prairie community, this function could be said to be embodied in the form of Willis and Moore as financial transgressors. From this perspective, then, the two film stars can be seen as working together to perform for the ranching community the role of the object-cause of desire: the ranchers' ascription of woe to the pair of meddling celebrities actually *prompts* the collective longing for an unfettered Prairie scene—and it is this longing, this resultant vision of a necessarily deferred state of being, which allows the elision of underlying contingency and which effectively comprises the community per se as symbolic edifice.

Having noted the necessity of this obfuscation of the community's foundational antagonism, however, the second thing to note about the discourse of the Prairie residents' struggle is the manner in which it nonetheless flies in the face of the structural

⁶ See, in particular, Lacan's discussions of alienation and separation in *Seminar XI*.

features which Salecl attributes to properly *democratic* forms of society. For instead of predicating itself upon an intrinsic “non-part” (as in the case of democratic law, which, as Salecl observes, preserves the split between belief and knowledge through its predication upon a “non-utilitarian” foundation of intrinsic yet necessarily unfulfilled ideals (23)), the Prairie community instead avoids its own impossibility by attributing this structural deadlock to *another* (or, precisely in the Lacanian sense, *an Other*) *chain of causality*. Like that of the totalitarian state, the discursive structure of the ranchers’ struggle ascribes the community’s intrinsic impossibility (i.e., its fundamental “inability to be itself,” as the political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe would put it) to a *real object*, to a flesh-and-blood agent of disruption. And hence, as with the totalitarian state, the configuration of the ranchers’ struggle entails a collapsing of the constitutive gap between the symbolically inscribed code (i.e., the official “letter of the law”) and its real implementation (in the case of democratic law, the inescapably contingent and situational act of *judgement*).

It should be noted that the point here is not to question the legitimacy of the ranchers’ cause, but rather to underscore the anachronistic inadequacy of any such wholesale display of subversive strength in an age marked by dispersionary forms of power—a kind of inadequacy which, as Michelle Lekas has noted, “calls up a picture of horses charging against tanks or protestors marching through poisonous gas in age that no longer recognizes tragedy.” And in light of this anachronistic mismatch, the analysis of the Prairie real-estate crisis—like the consideration of electronic-age literacy and democracy which this reading is serving to introduce—demands that the act of *synchronic* comparison (i.e., Salecl’s distinction between democratic and totalitarian law)

be accompanied by an awareness of the *diachronic* development of the modern cultural field. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, to point to a pertinent model, Laclau and Mouffe underscore the historical transition within western societies from *populist* to *democratic* forms of political struggle: Populist struggle, as Laclau and Mouffe observe, emerged in response to purely extrinsic threats (those posed, for instance, by foreign national powers), whereas that which Laclau and Mouffe denote as *democratic* struggle appeared later, with the subsequent *internalization* of the threatening element (as in the purging of the domestic *ancien regime* by the proponents of the French Revolution) (133). From the perspective cultivated by Laclau and Mouffe, the fundamental significance of the transition in question can be seen to reside in the condition of constant ambiguity and instability which thereby comes to permeate the frontier of any given political struggle. This condition precludes the existence of specific struggles and/or identities *prior* to the discourse by which they are articulated—but even more significantly, as Laclau and Mouffe demonstrate, it also demands that any viable struggle be articulated precisely as the site of *failure* of an extrinsic mediating principle: In the example of the French Revolution, national identity comes to be expressed as the incompleteness of a new chain of equivalence; the under-classes become the subject(s) of disruption of the emergent, discursively articulated community of “the people” (119-34).

As such, then, the thesis forwarded in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* corroborates Salecl’s assertion of the “non-utilitarian” essence of democratic law: both projects emphasize the dependence of every position of identity on the presence of something which is, strictly speaking, *not present* in the discursive realm of the here-and-now. In contrast to Salecl’s comparative study, however, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize

the historical continuum within which this structure appears; and in this manner, Laclau and Mouffe's work allows a more precise analysis of the problems inherent to the Prairie ranchers' discourse. Like the forms of populist struggle which Laclau and Mouffe ascribe to the initial advent of modern political life, the ranchers' discourse seeks to establish itself in collective opposition to an extrinsic, fully embodied threat. And my point, to reiterate, is that in the era of late capitalism, any such position of resistance will tend merely to feed the structures of subordination it seeks to combat. It must be added, however, that it will not suffice to view the Prairie community as a *residual* form of society; as the story of the Bannock tribe reminds us, the present-day residents' "organic" relation to the land is no less a function of contemporary discourse than are the "invasive" claims to authenticity of the Sun Valley developers. Rather, the point is that the futility of the present resistance stems from a structural *foreclosure* of the extimaterial function of the "non-part"—a function which proliferates on the electronic-age Prairie (as it does across the rest of the cultural landscape of the digital United States), but which suffers new forms of vulnerability in the process.

As I have already indicated, this same proliferating state of vulnerability subtends not only the act of democratic struggle but also that of literary meaning. Before moving on to some final thoughts on this confluence, however, I want first to simply juxtapose the "anachronistic" instance of the Prairie residents' attempted resistance to economic transgression with an example of a more successful local intervention, this one effectively indexed to the proliferation of internal frontiers inherent to electronic-age America. In December of 1989, several years before my long-term relocation to the Camas Prairie, I visited the area for the holidays. Through a regularly enacted family

ritual, I was talked into attending Christmas Eve mass on the premise that the service would comprise an important gathering of the local community, a much-anticipated opportunity to visit with friends and neighbors. What I failed to anticipate, however, was the manner in which the structure of the sermon itself would facilitate a specifically *democratic* instance of community. The priest, a sort of roving cowboy cleric named Father Bill, administered several parishes and would travel a huge swath of southern Idaho before the night was through, churning through hundreds of miles of snowfall in an old Ford F-150 pickup truck. Despite his idiosyncrasies, though, the Father began with the usual invocations—and so as I glanced at the obligatory nativity scene in the corner behind the altar, I anticipated one form or another of the usual holiday-season lamentation of a holy spirit besieged by material degradations.

But the Father had a different topic in mind. He referred, instead, to the US invasion of Panama, which had been initiated just days before and which would shortly result in the extraction of Manuel Noriega. The Father began with a recap of the casualty reports related by the US media and with an allusion to the US government's claims of surgically precise implementations of force. He then mentioned having recently completed a two-year missionary assignment in Panama, and went on to point out that he knew very well the landmarks referenced in the brief tactical accounts provided by American sources. More specifically, he noted his familiarity with the El Chorillo neighborhood where many of the so-called "military" targets were situated—and he observed, matter-of-factly (and accurately, as it turned out), that bombs dropped on this impoverished residential area would certainly mean death for great numbers of civilians, including children and elderly residents. And finally, after a brief pause (the entire parish

sitting in rapt silence), the Father observed that these innocent, unreported victims *were Catholic*.

The affect was remarkable. In attempting such an intervention, the father had faced a tough audience, to say the least; for as in other parts of the rural western United States, hard times and geographical isolation had rendered many Prairie residents disengaged from the effects of US policy upon foreign populations. And yet, in the many conversations prompted by the Father's Christmas Eve mass, the topic of the Panama invasion seemed to have been palpably (and instantaneously) transformed from a matter of military enforcement of international justice to a matter of the violent betrayal of the purported aims of our nation's foreign policy. In other words, what had generally been regarded as the subordination of an unruly despot was now effectively perceived by many as the military oppression of an innocent population. With respect, then, to the question of a viably democratic epistemology for the electronic-age United States, the point not to be missed in all of this concerns the manner in which the Father effectively articulates a new line of political demarcation *not* through the assertion of emergent threat to an essential or a priori identity, but rather through the invocation of a distinctly *new and extrinsic discursive field*: namely, that of the officially stated US foreign policy. The Father's intervention consists of a positing of the Catholic community as the point of rupture of the official American agenda; the identification of Camas Prairie Catholics with the victimization of their Panamanian counterparts rests on their collective articulation as the site of *incompleteness* of the purported US investment in values such as global peace, human rights, world democracy, etc.

Hence, while the Church's own specious history within the arena of human rights would seem to preclude the invocation of Catholic identity as the basis for a radical democratic intervention, the point, to reiterate, is that the Father's intervention in no way rests on the assertion of Catholic essence, but rather on the articulation of its *extimateriality*. Far from bemoaning the vulnerability of the eternal Holy Spirit to the political vicissitudes of the here and now, the Father's intervention posits the Catholic fold as the *limit* of a newly invoked discourse, the point of failure, to repeat, of the purported ideals of the US administration. And thus, what spares the Father's intervention from the futility of the anti-development stance is the positing of identity upon a newly articulated antagonism—i.e., as the internal limit of a previously extrinsic chain of signification. To return, then, to the central tenet of my project, I maintain that the act of articulation—the mobilization of the mechanism of repression toward the establishment of extimaterial identity—can serve as an important model for the development of a democratizing humanities pedagogy for the electronic-age United States.

In *Heuretics*, Ulmer continues his intervention into the modern phenomena of “academic mourning,” his term for the teleological aggregation of facts inherent to our academic apparatus (and to the various modes of research and education which it supports). One of Ulmer's purposes in doing so is to address the connection between the retroactive construction of history and the discursive positing of foundational debt which has driven modern identity (e.g., the observance of the soldier's sacrifice, in the case of the national community). Ulmer's concern, more precisely, lies with the emergent *dysfunction* of this mechanism: In the wake of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, and of the

genocide of the Native American, this element of original culpability becomes fixed in the present, a moribund embodiment in the here and now which is paradoxically unavailable to living survivors (109-113). This schema resonates all too well with the present-day scene of the Camas Prairie, where the presence of the Bannock is largely limited to the historical markers placed by the state (one of which I paraphrase in my earlier description of the Bannock's conflict with the forces of the 1st Cavalry Division)—the point being that the more candid and inclusive this historiographical narrative becomes, the less room it seems to leave for the flesh-and-blood Native American.

What Ulmer's eulogy of mourning overlooks, though, is the foundational role of the non-part to *every* viable identity—including those that we would mourn as the victims of our own culpability. In other words, whereas Bannock identity is precluded by the form of mourning embodied in the state monuments, it is nonetheless effectively staged by the tribe's current invocations of various democratic tenets: the legal contestation, for instance, of the federal use of reservation land for the transportation and storage of radioactive waste. Through the invocation of extrinsic discourses, the Bannock—like the Father's Catholic fold—are re-inscribed as the contemporary point of antagonism in various signifying chains. Thus, in contrast to the distinction between literate teleology and digital creativity, the theorization of antagonism suggests a proliferating need for the democratic articulation of political frontiers. The emergent public cynicism toward the humanities disciplines stems, I would argue, from our institutional repudiation of the process of articulation—a process which resides, ironically enough, in the production of

narrative. This cynicism, then, bespeaks an aversion to signifying plenitude—an aversion which can be productively placated only through the discursive staging of the non-part.

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