

## Review:

### *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*

Eds. Jonathan Alexander, Susan C. Jarratt, & Nancy Welch.

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What do rhetorics, both those of the past and those circulating in the present, have to teach us about overcoming impediments to democratic participation? Questions like these are explored prominently by Jonathan Alexander, Susan C. Jarratt, and Nancy Welch (2018), who extend the disruptive capacities of *unruliness as rhetorical tactic* in their edited collection *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*. It's no new observation that activists wishing to disrupt or resist accepted, status-quo systems must frequently turn to practices that are deemed unauthorized, unsanctioned, and *unruly* by the institutions empowered to publicly define what is deemed permissible in a specific forum or society. In recent years, some rhetoricians have been greatly invested in exploring how dissenting voices upend the status-quo, how some rhetors articulate beliefs that circumvent dominant hierarchies and ideologies, and how these rhetorics are sometimes able to disrupt structures which

tacitly (and explicitly) benefit ruling normativities maintained through the suppression of dissenting voices (Baca and Villanueva 2010; Buchanan and Ryan 2010; Ruiz and Sánchez 2016). Activism, public assembly, and political activity have always been connected to the action of rhetoric, action that is directly felt in our classrooms, in our communities, and in our public forums (Hess 2010; Morris and Browne 2013). In probing these values, *Unruly Rhetorics* proves an insightful collection containing essays well-equipped to enrich and update conversations surrounding the connections between rhetoric, literacy, and civic action.

*Unruly Rhetorics* extends recent scholarly interest in exploring the refusal of particular rhetors to accept structural injustices, in probing the public disavowal of social and political inequalities, and in exploring the public refusal to silence galvanized voices of resistance, advocacy, and dissent (Ackerman and Coogan 2010; Kahn and Lee 2011). To more fully probe ways in which rhetorics might be designed to pursue social and democratic ends, a degree of strategic *unruliness* oftentimes proves a productive strategy toward critiquing enmeshed power structures. Authors contributing to *Unruly Rhetorics* have previously explored rhetorics of sexuality and queer publics (Alexander and Rhodes 2016), advocated for increasing attention to public rhetorics surrounding homelessness and structural impoverishment (George and Mathieu 2009), and probed the envelopment of higher education by neoliberalism and precarious labor practices (Welch and Scott 2016). Ultimately, the essays comprising *Unruly Rhetorics* propose an array of disruptive rhetorical strategies as a means of empowering marginalized communities to disrupt, resist, and respond effectively to situations in which they might otherwise be silenced.

Rhetoric's capacity to instigate change, which often necessitates some level of urgency or disruption, is productive for citizen-activists well beyond Aristotle's traditional definition of the *available means of persuasion*. Instead, drawing upon the work of the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999), the editors and the essays in the collection postulate rhetoric's capacities as the "available means of *disruption*" (7; my emphasis). They draw upon Rancière's assertion that political activity is "whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it,"

anything which “makes visible what had no business being seen” or “makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (30). Indeed, in just the past few years, rhetorics willing to disrupt existing socio-political structures utilizing a degree of *unruliness* have proven capable of drawing attention to environmental responsibility and land rights of indigenous peoples (the Standing Rock Dakota Access Pipeline protests of 2016), of interrupting and rerouting media narratives (such as football star Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling on one knee during the American national anthem to protest police violences against unarmed African-American citizens), and of seizing the global conversation surrounding mass gun violence (such as the *March For Our Lives* demonstration responding to the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting). *Unruliness*, as tactic for resistance and advocacy, demands attention. *Unruliness* insists upon serious deliberation, forgoing politeness and decorum, and instead communicating vividly and vociferously with the urgency and obtrusiveness required when status-quo discourses pose lived, embodied dangers to marginalized communities.

The fifteen individual chapters in *Unruly Rhetorics* utilize the connecting thread of *unruliness* as a heuristic to animate specific instances of people and rhetorics straying outside dominant social codes, conventional legal modes, and typical “academic” values to assert a dynamic collective argument; *unruliness* is a rhetorical strategy that can be employed in various ways to inspire and achieve social change in situations in which civility, decorum, and politeness serve to maintain hegemonic ideologies. The collection showcases how these dominant practices and conceptions can infringe on a woman’s legal right to control her own body (Dana L. Cloud), shut down academic freedom through fear and intimidation (Matthew Abraham), make invisible indigenous bodies and voices (Joyce Rain Anderson), shame and make spectacle of feminine sexuality (Jacqueline Rhodes), and maintain unfair and exploitative labor conditions (Nancy Welch). Additionally, *Unruly Rhetorics* testifies to the ways in which existing structures function to censor dissident press (Diana George and Paula Mathieu), to attack collective bargaining rights (Kevin Mahoney), and to uphold racist, superficial pacification strategies utilized at a number of major research universities (Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich). Lastly, the collection showcases attempts to dissolve progressive political coalitions (John Ackerman and Meghan Dunn),

as well as demonstrating how human rights reform efforts in places like Syria and Iraq are undermined by rhetorics associated with academic discourse and global neoliberalism (Steve Parks et al.). From beginning to end, *unruliness* demonstrates itself to be a viable rhetorical tactic when the grounds we stand on need to be shaken if they are to be made more equitable, more just, and more humane.

Prominent among the stand-out essays assembled in *Unruly Rhetorics* is Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich's "The Tone It Takes: An Eighteen-Day Sit-In at Syracuse University." Rodríguez and Kuebrich chronicle a civil disobedience effort they helped enact at their university, which grounds an examination of public relations campaigns common at universities across the world. Rodríguez and Kuebrich identify civility rhetorics pedaled by universities which reduce legitimate, historically-maintained social injustices into sanitized, watered-down narratives that fail to encapsulate the full, lived injustices these narratives attempt to mask. Far from enacting goals of social justice, these public relations campaigns represent what the authors term an "inclusion delusion," the *appealing-but-not-satisfactory* discourses of empowerment related specifically to campus racial diversity, accessibility, gender, and sexuality that do little or nothing to address lived, embodied problems on modern campuses (169). They remind us that parameters of acceptable public exchange ("civility") are never determined through equal determination, but rather are always structured to favor dominant and entrenched power relationships. *Civility* in Rodríguez and Kuebrich's case becomes a *rhetoric of superficiality*, a rhetoric which attempts to pacify and quiet a responsive, subjugated counterpublic with pleasant niceties, but which masks serious inaction in social circumstances that pose lived dangers, especially to marginalized peoples and bodies. *Unruliness*, Rodríguez and Kuebrich outline, is one way in which to address these "superficial rhetorics of diversity and dialogue" that refrain from taking more tangible action toward addressing injustices, and to "reveal the existing divides of structural oppression" maintained by many modern institutions of higher education (170).

Also demonstrating clear *praxis* of *unruliness* is Dana L. Cloud's "Feminist Body Rhetoric in the #UnRulyMob, Texas, 2013." Cloud calls upon theorists such as Hélène Cixous (1976) and Kenneth

Burke (1954) to elucidate the “people’s filibuster,” an uprising of “thousands of Texans against a draconian omnibus anti-abortion bill in the Texas legislature” (28). Cloud calls attention to the paradox at the heart of much of the legislation and discourse surrounding women’s bodies in the United States, which posits those bodies not only as sites of public political and ideological conflict but also as private sites of everything “dangerous, disgusting, and out of bounds in politics *proper*” (28; my emphasis). Here, what is proper serves to deflect and divert attention from the embodied violences *proper* discourses wage on the bodies of women. Tellingly, after the protesters deployed tampons, sanitary pads, and other menstruation-related items as an *unruly* rhetorical tactic in the courtroom, the items were promptly banned from the space in an effort to maintain the “rules of decorum” that, for Cloud, demonstrate how women’s body parts and the “formalities of neoliberal rule” are increasingly at odds (37). This ban in the male-dominated legislature, ultimately, functions to draw attention to just how little the normative practices of democracy are willing to tolerate the bodies of women. In this vein, Cloud outlines various ways “conventions of politeness and decorum” can veil and obscure power relationships. Positing *unruliness* as a method with which to insist upon and publicly affirm the agency of the protesters’ bodies, voices, and rhetorics in a democratic forum which traditionally excluded them, Cloud is able to realize the editors’ vision of employing the *unruly* to “rethink the time and space of the political itself, of assembly, and of rhetorical action” (22).

Further works in the collection continue to probe potentials for public resistance, including Deborah Mutnick’s inquiry into connections between literature and contemporary political demonstrations in her essay “Answering the World’s Anticipation: The Relevance of *Native Son* to Twenty-First Century Protest Movements” and John Trimbur’s articulation of the institutional responsibilities incumbent upon professional organizations in “The Steven Salaita Case: Public Rhetoric and the Political Imagination in U.S. College Composition and its Professional Associations.” Contributions from Londie T. Martin and Adela C. Licona concerning queer remixing practices and from Jason Peters on public institutions and unruly languaging practices close out the essays assembled in the collection.

*Unruliness*, so commonly condemned by civility organizations, by universities, and more broadly by populations benefitting from existing, status-quo systems, rises to be far more than just a slogan or buzzword in this collection. Through each iteration, *unruliness* is demonstrated as a powerful, versatile rhetorical strategy to help disrupt or resist embedded cultural standards, conventional social expectations, and privileges divided unequally on the basis of race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation. *Unruly Rhetorics* amasses a collection of voices demonstrating rhetoric's role as agent of *disruption*, as facilitator of activist literacies, and finally as a call to action for further scholarship that unabashedly pursues social justice with the rhetorics of *unruliness* at their disposal. I am confident that *Unruly Rhetorics* represents a valuable and timely addition to conversations surrounding rhetoric and social justice, and will be likely to offer generative scholarship to anyone with interests in civic rhetorics, in advocacy, or in the rhetorics of social protests.

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