Notes on Comp: When "WPA" Work Hints at Suspicion

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I am writing to offer a perspective and a provocation. My topic is the concept of suspicion as it pertains to WPA work and scholarship. My hope is to suggest ideas and contexts worthy of conversation and debate. To begin, I draw from the work of two scholars.

Wary and Suspicious

The first is writer and lawyer Nathalie Sarraute's critique of the traditional novel's reliance on clearly delineated character and plot. In her 1956 collection of essays *The Age of Suspicion*, Sarraute attacks nineteenth-century canonical literature. She targets great books that feature clearly delineated characters, elaborate plots, and explicit symbols and images that add up completely. She characterizes these vaunted works as calcified, boring, and so predictable that they do not communicate as persuasively as they used to or, to put things more skeptically, as they were said to do.

Disdainful of such monuments, Sarraute indicts them as over-determined and overdone. She also finds that in terms of their alleged ability to embrace—much less express—new ideas or vanguard, complicated thinking they are just plain done. She argues that the great novelists' style and approach have become so obvious and declarative that they have created benign and boring artifacts that are bereft of sophistication, critical thinking, or innovation. To buttress her critique, Sarraute quotes Stendhal's famous statement "*Le génie du soupçon est venu au monde,*" which is translated as "the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene" (57).

Calling suspicion a "sophisticated" (57) reaction to such declarative and moribund discourse, Sarraute outlines the grounds of readers' resistance. "To begin with, today's reader is suspicious of what the author's imagination has to offer him" (57). Weary of overdrawn texts and their obvious messages, the reader "is wary of the abrupt, spectacular types of action that model the character with a few resounding whacks; he is also wary of plot,

which winds itself around the character like wrappings, giving it, along with an appearance of cohesiveness and life, mummy-like stiffness" (61). Such reactions are holistic in that "the reader has grown wary of practically everything. The reason being that, for some time now, he has been learning about too many things, and he is unable to forget entirely all that he has learned" (61).

Sarraute notes that such wariness is healthy and reciprocal: "But that's not all. However strange it may seem, the same writer, who is awed by the reader's growing perspicacity and wariness, is, himself, becoming more and more wary of the reader" (67). This mutuality works because "It shows, on the part of both author and reader, an unusually sophisticated state of mind. For not only are they both wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other" (57). This project has an endgame. "Suspicion, which is by way of destroying the character and the entire outdated mechanism that guaranteed its force, is one of the morbid reactions by which an organism defends itself and seeks another equilibrium" (73-4). Championing that equilibrium, Sarraute writes that "We have now entered upon an age of suspicion" (57).

Another scholar I wish to cite is author and activist Susan Sontag. In 2003's *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Sontag writes about viewers' reactions to photographs of war and travesty. She asserts that such photos' credibility stems from a shared acceptance that they are fact-based, "Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt" (26). Sontag acknowledges that there are complications because "those who stress the evidentiary punch of image-making by cameras have to finesse the question of the subjectivity of the image-maker" (26). She notes that image-makers are engaged in persuasive projects and adds that "photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus" (6).

Of course consensus of intention (how makers intend their words and images to be seen, interpreted, and used) can be undermined by the vagaries of public reception. Sontag attributes that to circulation. "Normally," she writes, "if there is any distance from the subject, what a photograph 'says' can be read in several ways. Eventually, one reads into the photograph what it *should* be saying" (29). She explains that "The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it" (39). Further complications inhere as viewers evince wariness. Once images go public—I am thinking here about the visual, graphic, and aural texts in the 2009 NCTE National Gallery of Writing and CWPA's wing in it, and about the public discourse that we

who pursue WPA work produce for public arenas (e.g. web sites, campus, and other scholarly venues)—their intended intellectual and truth value is contested and their evolving reception is insecure. As Sontag notes, "The truth is they [the images and captions] are not 'simply' anything, and certainly not regarded just as facts" (26). Beyond that, "As important as people now believe images of war to be, this does not dispel the suspicion that lingers about the interest in these images, and the intentions of those who produce them" (111). It is true that, engaged in the project of seeking and cultivating public attention (Lanham) for our work, we experience a loss of control because we cannot completely stage public perception or reception. Sontag hints at this when she discusses gallery installations and says that "A museum or a gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented on" (121). Such situations derail when viewers' gazes decenter. This is no surprise because "Most depictions of tormented, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest" (95).

Prurience, sometimes characterized as wanton interest and restless desire, has a place in public discourse. For a quick example, one might notice the coverage of Matt Gutman, "hottie-of-the-oil-spill." [1] If we entertain the idea of looking and desire beyond the strictly erotic sphere, we might consider visual and graphic texts that plant multiple ideas and images in viewers' minds. Such examples would include Salvador Dali's famous double paintings. [2] These texts have the capacity to convey multiple things at once with images that are terrifically and, at times, terribly suggestive.

In "Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory," holocaust scholar James E. Young discusses the ethical issues involving texts that draw and attract unwelcome desire. Young discusses *Yad Vashem* and how spectators' desire undermines any museum's noble goals. He adds that "At the same time, despite the museum's stated aim of maintaining the exhibit's historical integrity, the institution may have refused to acknowledge another historical reality: the possibility of visitors' prurient gazes" (1783). Viewers routinely take from images what they want and need to see. That act has implications for image makers and gallery curators: "For the line between exhibition and exhibitionism remains as fine as it is necessary, even when historians and curators are scrupulous" (1783). Describing the tension between the intended and delivered viewing experience, Young asks an important question, "Can curators vouch for the integrity of every museum visitor's gaze" (1783)?

Let's think about longing—those desirous, covetous looks that can undermine WPA work and workers in campus and online contexts. I am going to suggest that unwelcome desire and unwanted looking/reception

are often characterized as prurience—a sordid and covetous presence that forces itself on the wholesome and the good. The key trait about those criminal looks is that they seem to belong to others. Thinking of WPA work, WPAs, CWPA, and the many productions we engender and endorse, the question I would ask is this: *is our gaze ever prurient?* My answer would be yes, at least as our detractors might see it. I would add that striving to understand suspicion of our work can offer valuable perspectives and strategies if and when our public projects do not work out as well as we hope they will.

The Integrity of Prurience

If we accept suspicion into our intellectual and working lives, some questions arise. They include: In looking at our projects, what might our detractors see? What might be there for them to see? Here I would like to try a turn and offer some thoughts that may lead to strategies for enacting and pursuing WPA work.

First, we might try seeing ourselves and our work as *spectacular*. In using that term, I am thinking of Liz Conor's work on gender and celebrity.[3] Along with many fine celebrations of student writing and composition instruction, spectacle occurs on campus with the intersections of WPA work and the idea of casting. Many academic units (often "departments" in two-year and smaller colleges and "programs" at larger schools) have a large *cast*, if not a budget, and feature (year-to-year with adjunct status) significant numbers of self-perceived institutional *extras*. The ideology of the spectacular pertains as we engage in work and productions that are meant to be seen, admired, and emulated by many. This would include the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition" (replete if never complete with its technology plank), assessment galleries, and a National Gallery of Writing. Such projects are rightly designed to be seen, to make noise, and to have an enduring impact. Such work is always rhetorical and often emblematic. As Sontag notes, "Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes; sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan" (85).

Spectacle pertains to our public discourse as we work hard to solicit, compel, and control attention. We cannot control viewers' gazes, but we can see and question the idea of positioning these projects as such spectacular, formidable, shellacked, consensual, and invincible texts. Here, it is good to remember Young's suspicion of a public exhibition because of "its conversion of victims into *objets d'art*" (1778) which then "become part of the iconic currency…" (1781). Creating such currency tempts "the propensity

to idealize" (1781), which leads to "hardened idealizations" (1778). Those idealizations soon become emblematic; they "serve as fixtures around which other survivors' stories are told" (1778). A potential problem with designing emblematic artifacts (e.g. "best practices" and outcomes statements) is that they can suppress diversity while modeling and inspiring the intellectual calcification that come from unity of thought, practice, or approach. The trouble with purveying and defending such concepts and practices unilaterally is that those texts have become naturalized so that they are difficult to question or even see. By adhering to such monuments—the artifacts and their expressed certitudes—we might imagine that we are a collective "we" (WPAs or CWPA) who are always right.

Questioning such certitudes helps me wonder, if in reaching for big attention, we are—to play a bit with Sontag's title—*disregarding or dismissing the disdain of others* to our and our causes' detriment? I invite you to re-read our profession's many position and outcomes statements. Witness their clarity and self-evidence as their participants' collective voices resound in unity. In such work, "we" exist. Moreover, we're (we who are so bonded that we can employ that contraction) are sure enough to use emphatic, declarative discourse. To be clear, we rightly put ourselves and our ideas out there in such public texts. My question is why, once we employ such emphatic approaches, are we surprised and angered when its meets with resistance, critique (sometimes "savage," another quality of the prurient) or worse, silence? We sometimes crave a spotlight, but we might understand that it may not always be the flattering follow-spot we seek. Some lights roam; others glare. But must they blind? My question—and it is a suspicious one—is this: In describing our work and goals, could "we" become more self-critical than self-valorizing or satisfied? Doing that might leave room for important and game-changing questions, dissent, advice, resistance, and innovation.

Questioning further, what could it mean to engage skeptical gazes as credible, rather than ignorant, recalcitrant, or prurient? For one, it might mean not assuming that the spectacles we stage are always as persuasive as we intend them to be. A major trait of WPAs is resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity and work effectively with change. Perhaps we could combine resilience with a sophisticated receptivity—note just rebuttal—to critique? We might look suspiciously at our projects to see if (and how) our campus, public, and scholarly activities may appear capricious, detached, or self-indulgent. We might ask ourselves skeptical questions instead of waiting for our detractors to pose them, so we can form our individual and collective responses. Working warily, we could anticipate the critique and its echo by asking ourselves, what *are* we doing with issues

such as technology, service learning, and portfolios, and why? Doing this effectively means developing the ability *to see and to see through our work.*

Transparently Reflective

The project of seeing and seeing through our ideas and work relates in part to staging. Here it is good to remember Sontag's claim that "the practice of inventing dramatic news pictures, staging them for the camera, seems on its way to becoming a lost art" (58). WPAs often stage big time, but it is how we stage that merits discussion. Too often, we assume that our projects speak for themselves and that viewers will see what we see in them. This thought reflects traditional notions about perspective. For example, "The photographs [Virginia] Woolf received are treated as a window on the war: transparent views of their subject" (Sontag 31). We sometimes compose and treat our projects as if they offer perfectly clear and transparent views on their topics. If we call that strategy and its utility into question, we might shift our approach from clear and transparent to distanced and reflective. That means resisting the lure and lore of transparency by creating texts that are at once clear, opalescent, and reflective.

This idea stems from Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala's *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency.* Bolter and Gromala link transparency to the idea of cinematic forgetfulness. Many popular films are built to absorb viewer attention and keep us from detecting, much less questioning, the design elements and rhetorical strategies at work. This smooth discourse experience is a popular storytelling strategy, one that some digital projects still emulate. As Bolter and Gromala note, "When designers are building a complex new system . . . the user is not supposed to become conscious of the interface" (43). Accordingly, "When we watch a film, we can sometimes get so absorbed in the story that we temporarily forget about everything else, even that we are watching a film at all" (27). I would point out a parallel between such smooth storytelling and similar moves made in academe. I am referring to what I call "fast car scholarship," where authors preface and/or bolster their arguments by saying "studies show" and present parenthetical references to make quick work of the "studies" and of the complications of conveying in-depth (in-text or in detailed notes) what the sources they are referencing actually said (in context) and how the authors are making use of their words. Such moves make for smooth and fast storytelling, but does this foster serious and persuasive scholarship?

Bolter and Gromala contend that digital work has the potential to highlight the interface and interrupt the pleasure, adding that introducing ten-

sions that complicate and disturb the storytelling is a goal: "As designers, we want the interface to disappear for the user for part of the time, but not completely and not irrevocably. At some subliminal level, the user must be aware of the interface at all times" (53). For an analogy, think of enhanced DVDs and CDs in which voice-over commentaries, outtakes, extended scenes, and games disrupt the text in order to draw attention to the details of the artifact's history, tensions, and composition. Bolter and Gromala recommend letting viewers see the strategies, decisions, and decision making, adding that rhetors "must mix strategies and create an interface that is both transparent and reflective" (68). They remind us to expect viewer curiosity: "The film as an interface has become transparent for us. Sometimes, however, we want to step back and appreciate how the film was made" (27). From this provocation, I take two ideas. The first is that viewers want windows into projects and their storied horology.[4] Another is that readers will not always assume that rhetors' views are clear and transparent. Intelligent readers and viewers are skeptical and curious; they have design questions and want to see their needs and issues reflected in the design. Bolter and Gromala suggest that we reward that curiosity. They note that "Every digital design functions as both a window and a mirror" (27), adding that "This is a contemporary alternative to transparency: it is the mirror rather than the window—the strategy of reflection, multiplicity, self-awareness in action." (66).

To help us achieve this sensibility, the authors suggest a tool and a strategy. They contend that "Looking into a silvered mirror is an experience of looking at and through at the same time" (34). They go on to say that "We are really looking at the surface of the mirror, and what we are seeing is a reflection of ourselves and the world around us" (34). The silver is contributory to healthy, if dissonant, perception because it underscores the idea that no medium or perspective should be perceived or purveyed as "exclusively transparent" (27). The silver reminds us that our lenses have accretions, floaters, slivers, residue, and dark, sedimented spots. It makes us wonder if we saw everything and undermines the fantasy of having a transparent, omniscient view of anything.

My ideal WPA working mirror is a silvered one that lights up and is capable of being hand held. First, the lights offer a big surround; there is no one spotlight on anything. All those lights create an afterglow (the image in our eyes) that helps us see double. One example is Prada's New York's epicenter digital mirrors where you can look and see yourself looking and being seen. Another example is the Marianne Boeskey Gallery's I.G.Y. exhibition, which features mirrors and windows.[5] Such seeing is valuable because it is multidirectional; it provides angles and insight we might not

otherwise have. Pertinent to WPA work, hand-held mirrors are portable, with the potential to be taken places. Think of how our "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" suggests portability and applicability (designed for use in Writing Centers, HBCUs, and two-year colleges). Best of all, more than one person can look into mirrors at once. In terms of reflections, everyone looking is engaged in them (the gazing and the reflecting) with us. There is no periphery and no one is relegated to frame status. Everyone gets to look, to see, and be seen looking. Thinking of WPA work, I would ask: whose and which gazes do we see and characterize as prurient, pedantic, or predatory? Whose gazes have we screened out? This awareness of surface—the sense that the windows we look through could also tell us some things about ourselves, challenging us to see what we fail or cannot yet bear to countenance and discuss—could help us encounter and engage, rather than just rebut, our detractors' views. That awareness could yield a double-seeing that accepts the look of others without seeking agreement or conveying castigation. Multidirectional looking (reflecting and receiving) gets us past the kind of looking in which "the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (Sontag 72). The other is now someone who has a right to see and to see differently, critically, and even suspiciously.

Multidirectional Looking

Building on these ideas, I wish to suggest some philosophical approaches and compositional strategies, not as maxims but as notes aimed at stimulating conversation.

1. We could become wary of declaration as a default rhetorical strategy for our public discourse.

I devote this section to our public discourse, which includes "best practices," outcomes statements, and white papers. In composing and circulating such projects, declaration and unity are the prestige rhetorical stances, the *ne plus ultra* of academe. But is there *ne plus autre*? I understand the temptation for us to speak in unity in public through such texts, yet suspect that they (the texts and the above-mentioned strategies) represent less than optimal modes of communication. In this section, I will explore the limitations of declaration.

I do not doubt that presenting a unified front helps us play big. Declaration helps us compose a public shout out—a collaborative *tour-de-force* that lets everyone know which ideas and practices we think are dangerous and which are "best." But what if their force seems forced? For one thing, such

texts often fuel their wording with memorable sound bytes. Such bytes can, in turn, sound bromidic and bereft of nuance. Moreover, they can sound reductive rather than reflective of complicated thinking. They can also sound clichéd and a bit canonical. Expressing ourselves through collective certitude (e.g. "as teachers we are committed to . . . "), we risk invoking platitudes which may not impress skeptical readers as complicated, progressive, or even open-minded thinking.

The goals and habits of communicating emphatically lend themselves to the language of certitude and the superlative (e.g. the "best"). Both the content and terminology of "best" practices can make readers wary. Sounding somewhat dogmatic, their strength relies partly on our assent to various clichés about students, their writing, and their interests. Moreover, such documents and terminology can be perceived as having an insistent, even coercive and mandatory resonance. Such texts, whatever their stated and intended dialogism, can reveal a tendency to stipulate. They somehow convey the ideas "this is best" and "do it something like this." Employing certitude can offer control, but it can sound controlling. Insistent and invincible, such texts invoke collective, pedigreed authority and may resemble the finished, shellacked, and "hardened idealizations" Young critiques (1778). Epic, spectacular, and perhaps overdrawn, such documents may also let us appear calcified and close minded in our thinking, leaving little room for the conversations we seek to inspire.

In addition to undermining complexity of thought, the univocality of best practices can occlude and efface diversity. Such statements tend to evoke "students," "teachers," and "literacy practices" in normative and stereotyped ways. I understand the need for such documents. But in composing or "best practices" and white papers (that's an interesting term when we consider why our attempts at diversifying our organizations do not always play out so well), we might ask: best for whom? United and univocal, such defining documents belie good intentions. For example, are we truly including, via research and the sustained input and expertise of our two-year colleges, writing center colleagues, and teachers of English language learners, or just speaking for/to them? Worse, have we included "representative" (perhaps perceived as token) members as "contributors" and signatories because we have a moment? When we offer proclamations of unity and agreement, declaring that readers should fund or support programs so teachers can teach in certain ways, should we continue to register surprise or dismay at the suspicion that we may be proffering a unity which upon further inspection, is not otherwise in evidence? Again, there are benefits for appearing to be "on the same page" or screen, but I wonder if such in-league scholarship can lead to the like-minded being perceived as a bit sim-

ple-minded or worse as falsely and temporarily united to gain strength in unity. In discerning the limitations of declaration as a rhetorical strategy, the next time we prepare to say things with great and shared strength of opinion, we might evince suspicion and wonder: Who are we perceived to be persuading, silencing, effacing, or kidding?

Another thought is that these texts' clarity and declarative qualities can appear (and here I think of Sarraute's admonition of literary monuments) staid, static, predictable, and dull. Such documents are expected, and readers brace themselves for them. Once braced, they may stop listening. Simply put, such documents may have become rather common and generic: yet another text that expresses similar ideas in familiar ways. This is a naturalized strategy; the idea of teachers speaking collaboratively and declaratively to audiences is a familiar practice. But is it an effective one?

2. We could evince double-seeing by becoming distant from our work itself and in our public explanations of it.

Seeing our projects from a distance might help us compose them more effectively. One strategy would be to become less emotionally involved in our work; that means seeing it from the perspectives of the skeptical and unconvinced. In "Unpopularity of the New Art," philosopher José Ortega y Gasset contends that "Seeing requires distance" (28). He adds that clarity comes from "the emotional distance between each person and the event they all witness" (15). I would add that our events – our spectacles—are best seen from a distance. Like a film presented in DVD format, they can be letter-boxed. In preparing our spectacles, why wait for others to suspect us? We might engage *focus groups* of believers and non-believers. We might imagine a very critical reaction before it happens. Picture this as an activity in WPA seminars: "If this (anticipated or unsolicited) email or statement appeared in your in-box, what would you see? What would it need to become more effective or persuasive?

Consider our campus work. In pursuing WPA work, we might stand back and remove ourselves from the action. What if we weren't so involved in the situation under discussion? Would our words, actions, and artifacts still make as much sense? Remember that in public discourse, there is no uninterrupted monologue without critical reaction, response, and interruption by readers and viewers. Sontag links that to editing and adds, "Splice into a long take of a perfectly deadpan face the shots of such disparate material as a bowl of steaming soup, a woman in a coffin, a child playing with a toy bear, and the viewers . . . will marvel at the subtlety and range of the actor's expressions" (29-30). Consider the WAC or writing center faculty

workshops that some of us lead each term. What if we began them by welcoming and addressing our colleagues' counter-arguments and incredulity about the efficacy of our goals and work? That might be an intriguing and persuasive place to start, rather than extolling the self-evident virtues of our perspective and work.

This raises another point. It strikes me that in our campus and public discourse, and in our scholarship, we can sometimes be more than a bit insistent and directive. To my mind, there is too little public and even less dignified place for disagreement. Once known for outsider independent thinking, is WPA work and scholarship falling prey to engendering and disseminating a bit of a "party line"?

3. We could consider meeting suspicion with irony.

Sarraute suggests that suspicion is contagious. She notes that having infiltrated the literary arts, "the cinema too would appear to be threatened. It too is infected by the 'suspicion' from which the novel suffers" (73). Ortega reiterates this view, arguing that infected by irony, "the new art ridicules art itself" (48). Even if we define WPA work as a relatively new art, it would seem odd to suspect ourselves. After all, we often have enough critics and detractors ready to ridicule our work. What's more, we have learned that self-effacement does not get us far.[6]

But if we turn the metaphor, we might see WPA work as not infected but *inflected* by irony. Many people (students, colleagues, government officials) are already suspicious of us. Let's anticipate the mockery and the parody as we compose our public projects and discourse. Let's see and see through our ideas and work to envision their sometimes ripe potential for parody and ridicule. Here I remember Sontag's discussion of Oscar Wilde "when he announced his intention of 'living up' to his blue-and-white china" ("Notes" 289). As a member of CWPA and NCTE, I wonder, can we live up to our guidelines, galleries, outcomes and position statements? Can we live them down? The joke, the critique, the parody, however incisive, need not always be *on* us. We might want to participate in them. A question then becomes: can we see ourselves becoming our own print and online ironists?

4. We might internalize irony to welcome skeptical looking and to look suspiciously at our work and projects.

Instead of demonizing or combating audience incredulity, we might anticipate and counter it with irony and self-reflection. We might acknowledge publicly that no idea or practice is absolutely, right, best, clear, transfer-

able, or beyond quibble. My favorite counterargument belongs to a friend who rebutted a colleague's critique by saying: "Yours is a fact-based attempt to colonize my interpretive practice." Using skeptical outsider logic, that response has merit. Looking skeptically at our projects and pedagogy might mean taking a less dispositive approach and making our suspicion about our work more visible. Evincing the vulnerability to think and compose beyond certitude could help us envision valuable critiques and parodies of our work. By anticipating and acting on that input, we could

- compose our proposals, syllabi, articles, grants, videos and web sites in multiple ways;
- become more aware and in control of our performativity;
- wonder aloud if it is even arguable that we as campus WPAs or as an organization are not doing everything well all the time;
- explore how our titles and key terms (e.g. *Council* of Writing Program Administrators) can sound judgmental, censorial, and foreboding, thus complicating projects of making our organization more inclusive and diverse. (For the more ecclesial readers among us, calling ourselves the *Diet* of Writing Program Administrators could make us sound even more foreboding.)

5. We could come to understand that some people suspect us of self-interested editing and elision.

Most public texts are heavily revised and edited before they are released. There are almost always versions and outtakes. Young notes this phenomenon when he describes the purposeful edits that were made to the *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Young suggests that they were rhetorical and related to storytelling: "There was also no place for Anne's early sexualization in her father's nonsexual remembrance of her . . .he split off her necessarily gendered experiences from the universalized notion of her martyrdom" (1780). Our admirers and critics are perceptive; they know that we are telling, releasing, and circulating a version and parts of "the" story. They suspect us of amplifying, editing, and eliding some things. They also know that we left things out. We should not be surprised when such elisions and edits receive amplified attention in written responses or when online rhetors edit our work and place that material (to their minds) back in (think of YouTube response videos).

6. We might see our work, our roles, and our identities in quotation marks.

In "Notes on Camp," Sontag writes about a sensibility that "sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'" (280). She explains that "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (280). As a thought experiment, what would happen if we looked into our working silvered mirrors and saw our work, identities, titles, and organization not as WPA, but as "WPA?" Are there differences between working in a writing center and "writing center"? By taking a distanced view, we might see and appreciate the driving metaphors and labels of our lives and work as others perceive them. That could help us enact them with less of the earnest, stress-producing emotions that can complicate and undermine effective and rewarding performance.

7. We could anticipate the idea that discourse travels and participate in its reframing.

In *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences' Expectations,* John Schilb reminds us that discourse travels. This is especially true with the Internet, where discourse is said to roll. Such rolling underscores the idea that any text "will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it" (Sontag 39). Describing the complexity of divining or guiding such uses, she writes with prescience about the difficulty of "creating a perch for a particular conflict in the consciousness of viewers" because the fact that those viewers are "exposed to dramas from everywhere requires the daily diffusion and rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict" (21). Discussing Internet culture, she adds that "Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround . . . " (22). It is true that there is not just one camera or angle of perception. On the Internet, there is no point zero of perception. The same text (statement, white papery, gallery) is changed (with elements amplified and/or minimized) in its appearances on *Inside Higher Education* and the online version of the *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Visual rhetoricians and narrative theorists reiterate that there is no one discursive "perch" (Sontag 21). Any story is fair game for extraction and multiple reframings on sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, and Towleroad. Perhaps our WPA seminars, institutes, and workshops might become places to explore how such surrounds can mentor and affect intended stories and their evolving permutations?

8. Remembering that discourse travels, don't let it travel alone.

Traveling discourse is vulnerable discourse. In composing for viral venues, we would do well to anticipate our work's migrations without presuming that our artifacts are so artful and articulate that they will speak, persuade, and multi-task by and for themselves. They may need companion texts and commentaries to elucidate and further their designers' purposes.

9. In designing a project's companion texts, don't assume that prefaces, however eloquent, can do all the persuasive work. They may need embedded and infused companion texts.

In *Pretexts of Authority: The Rhetoric of Authorship in the Renaissance Preface*, Kevin Dunn describes the aims of prefatory rhetoric. Discussing the texts that introduce and frame major works, he calls them a "starting place for considering the rhetoric of self-presentation" (1). Such "authorizing strategies" (1) can include prefaces, preambles, introductions, and other "introductory materials" (xi). Dunn examines the limitations of such texts and notes that prefatory rhetoric can succumb to "parodic redactions" (150). He adds that "the prefatory threshold has become little more than an ornamental façade, a façade that shows in its pillars and tracery the vestiges of a once functional structure of rhetoric" (154). In composing our work for ongoing and possibly viral interactions, we need more than introductory prefaces to explain, contextualize, and persuade viewers of the value of our work.

10. In composing companion texts, we would do well to think virally, beyond "frame" strategy and ideology.

We could learn from DVD bonus content which offers effective models of infusing and embedding visual and aural texts within projects. Those projects feature pop-up screens, and running commentaries (not just in English), director's cuts, games, and outtakes to contextualize the text. To move beyond frame ideology (a prefatory text that appears cursory, defensive, and easy to dismiss), we might consider activities such as *weaving, threading, and infusing.* We could use evolving media to thread the counter-arguments and our responses to them into our work. We have the technological capacities, and many of us are working with graduate and undergraduate students to improve their rhetorical acumen in these arenas. Let's consider importing more of these strategies into our scholarship.

"Seeing" Self-Awareness in Action

I would like to point out some examples of suspicion in purposeful action. They feature scholars who have used vision, irony, and courage to discuss the complexity of WPA work. I begin with two CWPA Conference plenary speeches. In 2007, Jaime Armin Mejía discussed diversity in "Mentoring and Preparing the Next Generation of Latino Teachers and Scholars of Writing." He alluded several times to what he could not say "in polite company." In 2002, then CWPA immediate past President Barbara Cambridge gave a plenary address in which she hinted at the power of backstory: "Be ready for unexpected opportunities to catalyze enduring commitments." Both scholars alluded to within (not behind) the scenes fissures to illuminate the cross-action instead of just spotlighting a finished artifact; they invited us to go *there*. Here are some other scholars that have undertaken such work:

> In "An Agenda for the New Dissertation," MLA President Sidonie Smith questions the naturalized aspects of genre and asks, "How might the dissertation be reimagined as an ensemble of forms"?

> In a disruption of self-satisfied outsider "celebration," Judith Butler refused the Berlin Pride Award arguing that "racist complicity" undermines the goal of diversity.

> In a 2010 virtual conference "Extending the CCC Conversation with Cindy Selfe and Doug Hesse," Selfe and Hesse led a conversation about the convergences of print and digital literate practices. At one point, a caller suggested that teachers might tell students that there are "better ways" (either print or digital) to compose a given text. Selfe wisely countered and questioned the concept of better ways. To my mind, Selfe was right. If artists like Billie Holiday subscribed to "better ways" thinking, she might not have sung behind the beat, thereby changing and advancing ways of performing and hearing popular music. Shall we have a Billie Holiday—a transformative voice—in WPA work? Could we?

> Another example is Harry C. Denny's *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*. Describing efforts to transform writing centers into sites of diversity he becomes admirably self-critical, and adds, "I tend toward warm and fuzzy conversations about diversity that raise con-

sciousness but rarely upset or threaten—especially myself" (33). Denny adds, "The trick to pulling off that sort of conversation is honoring experience without the student coming to feel objectified or patronized" (79). This candid narrator engages in self-scrutiny to reveal his situated presence and his imperfections. [7]

Denny's scrupulous self-provocation brings me to Michele Eodice's 2009 WPA plenary address where she took CWPA to task for its quest for power and suggested that we are on our self-interested way to becoming a mighty WPA "plow."

A fine example of critical thinking is John Schilb's suggestion that Compositionists should consider re-allying with rhetoric, an idea he expressed at the 2009 Modern Language Association's annual convention (a site to some of WPA naissance and to others of annoyance) and that was debated online in *Inside Higher Education*.[8]

The tendency toward debate and self-critique also appears in the most recent issue of the *WPA* journal where the editors publish ongoing and sometimes contentious conversations about diversity in WPA work.

The brave and continuing conversations such as those mentioned above do not strive for closure. Instead they, like conversations on the WPA-Listserv, enact "the daily diffusion and rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict" (Sontag 21).

A final and very public project that comes to mind is the *Common Core State Standards Initiative* web site. The site enhances its project's credibility by being both transparent and reflective. Its designers take the time to explain the work's history and share windows into the document's process of composition and revision. The site features streams of input including "Voices of Support" (with video testimonials from teachers, politicians, and administrators), and other pages such as "News" and "Get Involved." Deliberately dialogic (which enhances the creators' ethos), it offers a button called "Have something to Say?" that invites people to "Click here to upload your own video." By including these participatory portals (along with examples of "Feedback Groups" and commen-

tary), this site presents itself as an act of honest and transparent storytelling. Its visible interface reveals the document's many edits and revisions. By inviting viewers to see inside the evolving story, the site offers inside views of the interface and the "surround" (Sontag 22). As a public performance of transparency in action, this site seems both candid and canny.

All of the above-mentioned authors and projects offer hints for expressing the complexity and depth of WPA work and scholarship. These rhetors move beyond declaration and revelation to unpack the investments and processes. Like those multi-tasking Prada mirrors, their arguments comment and reflect in multiple directions. These rhetors also think beyond frames; their windows are telling and observant mirrors that we can look at and through. These individuals use their suspicious and scrupulous voices to engage in complicated—and I would add—generative acts of wary storytelling.

Drawing Conclusions while Sketching a Future

Here I must suspect my own thoughts; all of these ideas put WPA work and storytelling at risk. Life and public persuasion are messier without the controls of certitude and declaration. Evincing suspicion is a time-consuming and high maintenance activity. To our detractors, our enactments of wariness may appear precious and pesky. Self-awareness may seem studied and self-conscious; it may evoke nostalgia for more naïve and uncontrived times and discourse. Evoking nostalgia leads me to evoke a term from art history, that of the *primitive*. That word, which refers to fifteenth and early sixteenth century Flemish and Italian painters, is a loaded term. Yet in art history its use is not pejorative, but laudatory. Consider this description:

> This rather misleading name for what is, for the most part, a highly accomplished body of late-medieval and pre-Renaissance paintings, arose in the nineteenth century. It expresses the Romantics' sense of nostalgia for the pure, spiritual and innovative character of this monumental, technically innovative and highly skilled school of oil painting.[9]

Sontag relates nostalgia to war photography. She mentions the naïve artists who, if they were "untrained and inexperienced" were the talented precursors to contemporary artists (28). Such artists had perspectives and value. In fact, "The less polished pictures are not only welcomed as possessing a

special kind of authenticity. Some may compete with the best, so permissive are the standards for a memorable, eloquent picture" (27).

Nostalgia and dignity make me think of our forebears—our colleagues who first undertook and then named WPA work.[10] Their creativity fit the celebratory definition of the primitives. They were the first to see; they saw differently; they saw double; and they saw the work that (whatever the cost to their lives and careers) needed to be done. On campus and on guard, they were resourceful and inventive breakthrough artists (teachers, leaders, and scholars) who worked very hard creating methods and strategies to make WPA work happen. With limited resources or models, the WPA primitives worked before us and for us. Furthermore, many of them inspired, mentored, and taught us.

But turning from tribute back to suspicion, it strikes me that there are two guiding assumptions about this generation of artists (and our forebears). First, the primitives are inventive and influential. Second, the primitives are always someone else. Of these beliefs, I would ask: What if we are earlier in the story than we think we are? What if, in our understanding and practice of WPA work, we are all "the primitives?"

Discussing terms such as primitive, vanguard, and contemporary reminds me that experiencing so many transformative ideas and evolving technologies can make life feel as if we were living in an existential jump cut between ancestry and legacy. Besides (and in some schools working literally beside) the inventive primitive, there are multiple permutations and versions of forbears. These would include the accidental WPA, the evolving WPA, and the intentional Writing Program Administrator. Today, we salute what I call *Born WPAs*—those who choose by their degree program to make a life and a living pursuing such work. With all of these colleagues at work, it is an interesting and a complicated time for communication among generations. What do forbears owe the young? Do the born WPAs bear any enduring responsibility to their elders, their peers, or ensuing generations? If you accept my comparison of born WPAs to the new artist, a conviction Sarraute repeats—despite its masculine language—might ring true. Sarraute heralds the artist's "'deepest obligation: that of discovering what is new.'" She says it results from "'his most serious crime: that of repeating the discoveries of his predecessors'" (74).[11] That tension between repetition and innovation leads me to ask something of our WPA knowledge and experience, of our legacies and inheritance: What shall we keep, use, renovate, and jettison? Perceptions of experiential links and disconnects can too easily undermine the conversations among generations. Ortega hints when he writes, "Or to put it differently, an ever growing

mass of traditional styles hampers the direct and original communication between the nascent artist and the world around him" (44).

I am interested in mentoring such communication. This returns me to the words "*Le génie du soupçon est venu au monde*" which were translated earlier as "the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene" (Sarraute 57). It is worth noting that other translations are possible. In one of them, *génie* is genie, someone that can change. *Soupçon* is a drop, suggestion, a *hint.* If the "scene" can be expanded to include moments of WPA preparation, development, mentoring, scholarship, and practice, what hints would we offer to the *Born WPAs*? What hints would we prepare for the *WPAs Yet Unborn*? What would we confide in and ask of them? To evince wariness, one question might be, born of what and of whom? Born to do . . . ? Using our memories to make the past WPAs and CWPA part of an ongoing project, which hints would we offer, seek, take, and privilege? Out of all the hints sought and surrendered which ones shall we circulate? Which shall we cherish?

Looking back, we might say we know why "they" (the oppressive colleagues who made martyrs of many of our forbears) had WPAs: to do the dirty work. But now we might wonder why do they keep having WPAs? Our silvered mirrors might help us ask: Why do we keep having WPAs? Are there ends to "WPA" work, courses, identities, and scholarship? How long shall we keep doing that work? Can there ever be tipping points? Will we ever have enough WPAs? How will we know? Who counts as we?

If "we" were to participate in suspicion, what ideas or activities might we hold suspect? What do we feel secure about and what might we rethink? Things we could suspect – and activities and artifacts we might put in quotation marks—could include programmatic and institutional portfolios and the pressures to tell a good (happy and successful) story, self-sponsored literate activities, celebration, technology, diversity, mentoring, assessment, professional development, WPA work in two-year college contexts, WPA work in smaller-size institutions, visual rhetoric, writing center work, WAC, and readiness. Another term we might explore is *pertinence*. We might wonder about "best practices" normalizing and effacing diversity by overstating community and driving multiple constituents toward expressing document-worthy textual agreement and closure. We might think beyond the job title "WPA" and learn about leadership/administrative roles in their various situated deployments. Also, we might not assume that the old research-one model pertains across institutions and campuses.

Instead of making finished public arguments and telling stories in ways that limit readers and viewers only to listening and viewing, we might compose more telling stories in more ironic (and perhaps more credible)

discourse that envisions and deploys strategies of viral thinking and travel-ing, evolving, and sometimes splintering texts. For example, at WPA and CCCC, I have heard fine presentations about evocative objects of WPA work and identity. I wonder what could happen if we discussed objects of *agida* —the lousy, dispiriting, and perhaps incriminating object or email we receive, keep, and send?[12] We might test our work on focus groups of un-persuaded constituencies; doing that could help us see how vulnerable our arguments may appear to others. Looking at and into such silvered mir-rors would remind us that the idea, problem, strategy, statement, or prac-tice may have been around for a while and that others can be articulate (if wrong-headed) in their objections to our take on it. Moreover, silvered mir-rors remind us that ours is not the only bright light on campus or in aca-deme. Others want to shine, too. In composing WPA scholarship, could we find ways to include versions and permutations of our work? We could use online tools to discuss our assumptions and outtakes. Including a rhetor's commentary that shows the germinal ideas, revisions, and edits, including feedback by reviewers and editors, could offer us ways of discussing the thinking, tensions, and commitments within our published artifacts.

These are but some of the anticipatory and reflective moves WPAs and CWPA could make to explain what we are doing for, with, and to under-graduate and graduate students. Articulating such moves could help others notice how we are building a future. Stewart Brand takes up this idea in *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built,* where he outlines "steps toward an adaptive architecture" (190). Brand argues that spaces— and I would add disciplines and organizations—are best redesigned by those who live and work there. He adds that ethical builders feel mandates to become responsible long term ancestors. In other words, what we (don't) do now impacts future generations. Thus, in building for the future, we can use materials like bronze and marble, "which age well and take advantage of deep experience" (190). Thinking about how we might work to become more credible and helpful ancestors to the born and as yet unborn WPAs who will need to chart their own experience, I advocate using perspec-tive, suspicion, and irony as *permeable materials*, which help us build ideas, beliefs, and practices that seek to become superseded.

Yet in valuing permeability, there is still much work ahead. Seeding ideas that travel and morph involves questioning the WPA lessons we have learned too well. Such work can seem both unproductive and unsettling. But I take wary solace in Tim Dean's idea that "Once you commit to fol-lowing a train of thought irrespective of where it leads or how risky it seems, then you may find yourself thinking new thought and discovering spaces that you would not have come across otherwise" (28). *Risky* carries vivid

viral resonance here because Dean's topic and title are *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking.*

How can we chase and cultivate unlimited WPA work? One way is to look within and beyond celebrated ideas to see if they have become sedimented ideations. Another way is to hold suspect—rather than dear—our philosophic and pragmatic inheritances. Yet another is to keep developing our capacities for intellectual suppleness, something I equate with scrupulousness. Pursuing WPA work without presumptions of certitude, declaration, or automatically credible and viable legacy can mean investing in a little less product and welcoming a complicated sense of project. It can also mean seeing our drawing board as just that and as one of many. When "WPA" work hints at suspicion it invites us to see ourselves drawing and to grow from becoming wary of both the board and the boring.

NOTES

1. See http://www.towleroad.com/2010/06/matt-gutman-breakout-news-hottie-of-the-oil-spill.html.

2. See http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/VSALM/mod/jung/dali.htm for images of some of Dali's double-sided paintings.

3. Conor posits the idea that early film stars were depicted in public media as representing spectacles of feminine beauty and talent that merited, yet eluded, viewers' emulation.

4. Horology refers to the inner workings of instruments used to measure time. See http://watchinghorology.com/ for discussions of some timepieces that are outwardly simple, yet internally very complicated. One entry "Grand Seiko Fan Event 2010" reads: "Here is a series showing Masuda-san demonstrating the assembling [of] a Grand Seiko Spring Drive movement. She uses the microscope only to check that alignment is perfect.» These windows into processes, details, and histories of composition-which I hope we will build into presentations of our public projects—illustrate what I mean by the term "storied horology."

5. Consider the multidirectional mirrors in Prada's New York epicenter where you can look at yourself from the front and behind, and where you can see yourself looking and being seen. http://archive.aiga.org/index.html?s1=2|s2=1|eid=8942. The Marianne Boeskey Gallery's I.G.Y. exhibition features images of mirrors and windows in which viewers are never quite sure who is doing the looking http://www.marianneboeskygallery.com/exhibitions/2010-05-22_igy/.

6. I am not seeking to re-inscribe the vulnerability of WPA work and identities, but to preserve the value of outsider thinking and to suggest that no idea, however circulated or celebrated, is beyond quibble. For the record, I do think that vulnerability can be a source of bravery and strength. There is truth in John Waters' words "Damaged people make the best warriors, so get busy" (275).

7. Denny's candor and approach comport with Sarraute's idea that first-person narration is the most ethical approach to writing fiction. Sarraute explains that the author "realizes that the impersonal tone, which is so well-adapted to the needs of the old-style novel, is not suitable for conveying the complex, tenuous states that he is attempting to portray" (65). Wary readers wonder "Who said that?" Thus "A story told in the first person satisfies the legitimate scruples of the author. In addition, it has the appearance, at least, of real experience and authenticity, which impresses the reader and dispels his mistrust" (66).

8. See Scott Jaschik's "What Direction for Rhet-Comp?" *Inside Hider Education*. December 30, 2009. http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/12/30/comp. See the "Comments on" section for a very interesting discussion of various perspectives. More recently, in "Turning Composition toward Sovereignty," Schilb offers another idea. He suggests that "We ought to ask ourselves, then, whether we take Foucault's notion of power too much for granted" and should question our over-reliance on "agency" as a critical concept (3). Moreover, Schilb contends that "our scholarship on sovereign discourse should increase" (5).

9. The full text of this praise can be found at <http://www.casa-in-italia.com/artpx/flem/Bruges.htm>. The "Description of Early Flemish Altarpieces" at <http://www.wga.hu/tours/flemish/index.html> offers an especially reverential view of these artists:

> The dawn of the 15th century saw the beginning of a new era in Flemish art. In 1399, an altarpiece painted by Melchior Broederlam was delivered to the town of Dijon. This work defines the moment at which the technique of illumination, the finest exponents of which were the Limbourg brothers, yielded its supremacy to the art of painting on wooden panels. Miniaturists were no longer in the vanguard. Their place had been taken by a new breed of artist—the painter.
>
> Broederlam's Dijon altarpiece was the first fruit of this new art, and the first work to embody a new set of conventions. His style derived from the International Gothic style. It was imbued with a natural elegance and refinement, and its rich textures can be seen as the pictorial equivalent of the values of the European aristocracy. It was a large-scale art, that rose to the challenge inherent in its dimensions; but above all, it entirely superseded the essentially decorative approach of the miniaturists. Miniature work, by its very size, could only incorporate a few isolated details. Henceforth the subjects of art, although still predominantly sacred, would be approached in a comprehensively realistic manner. Painting was to be an art firmly rooted in the world. A pictorial revolution was born.

I wonder if people will ever discuss WPA work in such terms, as a "vanguard" accomplishment and a "revolution."

10. It is interesting to note that our forbears designed the organization's name as "Council *of* Writing Program Administrators" rather than "Council *for* Writing Program Administrators."

11. Sarraute is quoting Arnold Toynbee's description of novelist Gustave Flaubert's teachings.

12. *Agida* denotes the pain that comes from aggravation and stress.

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