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Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics

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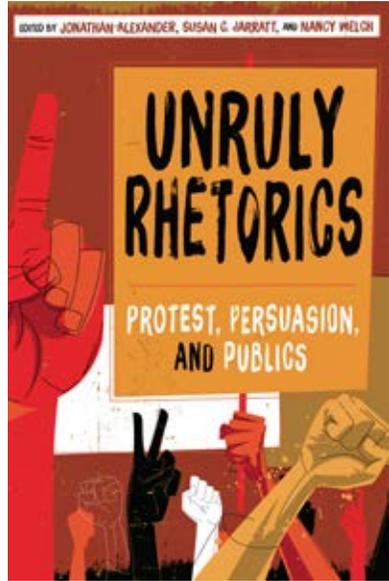
Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics

Jonathan Alexander, Susan C. Jarratt, and Nancy Welch, eds.
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. 326 pp.

Reviewed by Katelyn Lusher
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Since the 2016 election, activism and protests have garnered increasing media attention. At the same time, the conduct of individuals involved in social movements is intensely scrutinized by politicians and the public at large who label these protests obscene, unruly, or even violent. The edited collection *Unruly Rhetorics* attempts to address the fraught implications of “civility” in an age characterized by political tension and the rise of neoliberalism. *Community Literacy Journal* readers will find this collection to be an important resource for community organizing and deliberative rhetoric as many chapters discuss the rhetorical power of dissent. Activists and community organizers will also find that *Unruly Rhetorics* gives credence to the struggles they face every day in the public eye as they fight for equality and justice.

Part I, “Bringing Back the Body,” begins with Dana Cloud’s “Feminist Body Rhetoric in the #Unrulymob, Texas, 2013,” a powerful analysis of feminist embodied protest in opposition to a draconian anti-abortion law that Texas legislators attempted to pass in 2013. In these protests, activists reclaimed the labels #unrulymob or #feministarmy on Twitter after Texas Republicans attempted to denigrate them. Republicans claimed that activists would throw feces and tampons at legislators in protest; in response to these false accusations, activists remixed the famous “Come and Take It” flag from the 1835 Texas Revolution. The original flag, a classic symbol of defiance in Texas, depicts the “Come and Take It” slogan below the image of a star and cannon. The remixed version replaces the cannon with tampons and uteruses in defiant response to Republican fears. Cloud analyzes these demonstrations as evidence that traditional notions of the female body dictate that women must assume a private, caretaking role and never allow their bodies to intrude upon politics. Cloud argues, “The social denial of the body is the fantasy of a state and economic system in denial of the ethics and politics of care. The monstrosity of bleeding, fecund, yet uncontrollable women in the decorous setting of the Texas legislature fundamentally challenges that fantasy” (40). Protesting women packed their bodies into the Texas legislature,



cheering, clapping, and chanting so it was impossible for legislators to speak and pass the anti-abortion law. Wendy Davis, a Texas legislator, stood for hours to filibuster the bill, refusing to sit and making her protesting body visible to everyone in the courtroom. The bill eventually did not pass due to Davis and the protestors' "unruly" bodies disrupting the legislative process. Cloud's powerful example of what it means to assert bodily autonomy sets the stage for other examples of unruly bodies throughout the rest of the collection.

In chapter two, Joyce Rain Anderson discusses embodied rhetoric through indigenous protest demonstrations in "Walking with Relatives: Indigenous Bodies of Protest." Anderson argues that indigenous protest is deeply rooted to place; as she states, "Disconnecting the body from the land is directly connected to the way maps of the 'new world' were constructed showing vacant spaces" (47). Indigenous protest is also wrapped in tradition. For example, Anderson uses the example of flash mob round dances during the Idle No More movement as evidence that bodies are instrumental in demonstrating indigenous dissent. Other indigenous protesters such as Chief Teresa Spence have protested reservation conditions by drinking only fish broth, which Anderson argues is "embodying cultural tradition" since fish broth has historically sustained starving indigenous communities. Protesting indigenous bodies, she states, are what help indigenous tribes reclaim and maintain their land.

Jonathan Sterne moves to student protests in chapter three, "A Groove We Can Move To: The Sound & Sense of Quebec's *Manifs Casseroles*, Spring 2013." Sterne writes about the student strikes which took place in Quebec in response to the government's proposal to dramatically increase university tuition. *Manifs sasseroles*, shorthand for street protests, took place every night during this period as students took to Montreal's streets banging pots and pans making their anger heard. In the process, the students blocked street traffic and were labeled a disruptive force. Sterne argues that the controversy surrounding the student strike is largely due to how the Canadian government perceived the assemblage of bodies in a public space. Further, Sterne states, "[t]he organization of movement is thus closely tied to political and social organization" (66). In other words, bodies which interrupt business as usual also upend the expected social order.

In chapter four, "Steven Salaita's Rhetorical Refusal: Taking to Twitter as a Form of Political Resistance & Protest," Matthew Abraham focuses on the Palestinian body politic in reference to Steven Salaita, who was fired from his tenured appointment at the University of Illinois due to his controversial Tweets about Israel. Salaita's tweets were controversial, Abraham argues, because Palestinian bodies "are continually excised and erased from public consciousness" (73). Salaita, however, did not allow his erasure from public—he instead condemned the actions of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) during Israel's Operation Protective Edge, which resulted in the deaths of many Palestinians in Gaza. By refusing Zionist rhetorical logic, Salaita "embraced the production of an unruly rhetoric" (82).

Jacqueline Rhodes ends part I with "Slutwalk is Not Enough: Notes Towards a Critical Feminist Rhetoric." Rhodes uses Slutwalk as an example of how critical feminist rhetoric sometimes fails to be inclusive to all bodies, particularly the bodies of

people of color who are consistently overlooked or talked over. From its inception, Rhodes argues, Slutwalk emerged as a movement which clearly privileged white, western women who could openly identify as “slut” without concern that their bodies would be hypersexualized further, as is often the case for women of color and poor women. Rhodes further comments on the white privilege of labeling feminism in “waves,” which fails to consider that these waves generally only consider the progression of *white* women’s rights. Thus, while a movement like Slutwalk encourages women to use their bodies to protest rape culture, it is still a deeply flawed example of how some bodies are left out of the conversation.

As a whole, part I encourages readers to bring the body back into the conversation. Protest is not merely a mental exercise or a “mind-centered” activity; the body is a powerful tool and a body-focused analysis further puts emphasis on bodies that are often ignored and/or marginalized in protest movements. This section may hold particular significance for community organizers since each contributor suggests an intersectional approach, which may lead to productive inclusivity in grassroots organizing.

Part II, “Civility Wars,” opens with Nancy Welch’s “Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric in a New Gilded Age.” Welch describes a protest which took place at a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) safety debriefing at the Indian Point nuclear plant shortly after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. During the debriefing, protesters interrupted a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation and forced officials to address their questions immediately. Although the meeting was regarded as productive, antinuclear activist Ray Shadis criticized the “incivility” of the protest and changed the narrative into a demonstration of an unruly mob. Welch uses the Indian Point incident as an example of how the concept of “civility” is used to manipulate people into silence and submissiveness; further, she states, this is not anything new or unique to the current neoliberal climate. The 1912 Bread and Rose strike, for example, used specific rhetorical tactics to undermine the efforts of strikers. As a final note, Welch comments on how class politics are also manipulated to prevent decisive action.

In chapter seven, “Circulating Voices of Dissent: Rewriting the Life of James Eads How and *Hobo News*,” Diana George and Paula Mathieu revive the memory of a wealthy man who eschewed his privileged life in opposition to capitalistic gain and spent his life circulating dissidence through a street paper he created. Even How’s existence, George and Mathieu argue, functions “as a form of embodied rhetoric” and “challenged others to take note” (132). By sacrificing his fortune in order to help and live among the poor and the homeless, How defied societal expectations of the late 19th and early 20th century which dictated that his advantages and privilege should be uncritically accepted (a fact which still remains true today). Furthermore, George and Mathieu state, How gave individuals experiencing homelessness the opportunity to educate themselves through “Hobo Colleges” in major cities and to circulate their voices through *Hobo News*. The paper, which was distributed by other hoboes as they rode the trains through the United States, demonstrates what George and Mathieu

call a “dissident counterpublic.” Although How has been historically characterized as an “eccentric,” he embraced an *unruly* rhetoric that defined his legacy.

As someone who also researches street papers and embodied rhetoric, George and Mathieu’s chapter encouraged me to consider how the bodies of street paper distributors must be recognized as integral to street paper circulation. In their view, the body is both essential and problematic to consider for street papers like *Hobo News* since distributors have a physical presence on the street but are also identified as homeless simply by the way they look—which often results in false perceptions of what homelessness *actually* looks or feels like. While this is certainly a valid critique, however, it seemed odd and contradictory that George and Mathieu focused on How’s embodied rhetoric while also noting that people “fetishize individual impoverished bodies” in street paper circulation (141).

Chapter eight, “We Are Not All in This Together: A Case for Advocacy, Factionalism, and Making the Political Personal” by Kevin Mahoney revisits appeals for “civility” or “civil discourse” which emerged during the Obama administration. In particular, Mahoney calls upon *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*, a report which argues that colleges must invest in educating their students about democratic engagement and civil debate. At the same time, however, politicians like Governor Scott Walker from Wisconsin slashed the budgets for public institutions like universities. The response resulted in what became the Wisconsin Uprising, and the debate for civility raged on. Mahoney argues that although some invoked James Madison’s plea for action that serves the larger public, Thomas Paine’s insistence that factions within society are necessary and unavoidable illuminate the fact that power struggles are inevitable; hence, civility may not always be attainable or desirable.

Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich focus on student protest in chapter nine, “The Tone It Takes: An Eighteen-Day Sit-In at Syracuse University.” As participants and organizers of the sit-in, Rodríguez and Kuebrich chronicle their experiences and the backlash they received from university administrators and campus publications. Transparency, Heterogeneity, Equality (THE) General Body’s sit-in stemmed from multiple grievances against the university for failing to provide accommodations for disabled students or adequate mental health services and address racism towards students of color. Despite the overwhelming evidence to support activist action, Rodríguez and Kuebrich recognize that “unruliness” is ascribed differently to protesters depending on their identity and the university ideals of “civility” clash with productive activism.

In the final chapter of part II, John Trimbur revisits Steven Salaita’s story in “The Steven Salaita Case: Public Rhetoric and the Political Imagination in U.S. College Composition and Its Professional Associations.” Trimbur builds from Abraham’s argument in chapter four and specifically focuses on the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and their failure to appropriately recognize Salaita’s case in light of his recent firing from the University of Illinois. Trimbur describes this failure as “a dereliction of professional duty” (187), which prompted him and several other composition schol-

ars to compose a letter to Joyce Locke Carter, the 2016 CCCC chair, explaining their refusal to renew their membership or participate in proposal reviews. However, their refusal to participate was only halfheartedly acknowledged and CCCC never took an official position on Salaita's case. The issue, Trimbur argues, is that even organizations like CCCC have difficulty "connect[ing] with the now flourishing scholarship on public rhetoric to the troubles and political possibilities of unruly poetics in public life" (196). In other words, sometimes even large academic organizations like CCCC or NCTE have trouble marrying theory with praxis in everyday life—despite the fact many scholars within the field of rhetoric and composition write about the type of public rhetoric and dissent that Salaita expressed in his tweets. However, Salaita was not given the same license to *practice* dissent.

Part II complicates notions of "civility" in public deliberation and reveals undercurrents of thought within appeals to civil protest. In separate ways, each author reveals that civility is really just a term for manipulation and a hegemonic force. Being "civil" doesn't necessarily mean "being polite"; rather, it can be used as code for silencing. When people challenge power, civility is used to shut challenges down rather than entertain the possibility of change. However, it appears that a few authors would have fit more neatly within part II since they, too, focus on unruly bodies. While each chapter creates a meaningful argument to further contemplate tangled definitions of civility, there is little discussion about what we are supposed to do with the definitions they provide.

Deborah Mutnick starts part III, "Limits and Horizons," with "Answering the World's Anticipation: The Relevance of *Native Son* to Twenty-First-Century Protest Movements." Mutnick argues that Richard Wright's primary character, Bigger Thomas, may be compared to the struggles that black Americans currently face and illuminate current social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). White power structures, Mutnick argues, are what destroyed Thomas's character and parallel the lives of individuals like Tamir Rice and Eric Garner. *Native Son* demonstrates what she calls Wright's "x-ray vision," which cuts through white power structures and exposes ways in which "the rhetoric of liberal democracy"—which can otherwise be described as Edward P.J. Corbett's concept of the "the rhetoric of the open hand" and garners "popular ideological support" (219)—can also make it possible for white hegemony to assume complete control over Black lives. Understanding the significance of *Native Son*, Mutnick further states, can also help rhetoricians understand how this x-ray vision is also present in "Twitter revolutions" which expose racist policing and promote anti-capitalist movements.

In Chapter 12, "*Dignitas* and 'Shit Shovels': Corporate Bodies and Unruly Language," Jason Peters argues that language shapes the way we view the body. As he states, "language itself is unruly, always uttered within and against ideological structures that attempt to regiment it yet always eluding those regimentations, less a performance of some fixed identity and more a trafficking and mobilization of identities" (229). In support of this argument, Peters draws upon the example of the French American activist Elphège Daignault, who protested the Catholic Church's treatment

of French speakers. In these protests, Peters suggests, language shaped the Catholic Church as a corporate body and Daignault represented an unruly body.

Londie T. Martin and Adela C. Licona's chapter, "Remix as Unruly Play and Participatory Method for Im/possible Queer World-Making" argues that play provides a method to examine queer world-making. In particular, Martin and Licona focus on the video projects of two Arizona youths, which serve as examples of different knowledges. They claim, "The radical, unruly, and utopic edge of this play rests on its messiness, uncertainty, vulnerability, and even on its contradictions" (246). Queer world-making is especially vital in southern Arizona, where oppressive laws create a hostile environment for resistance of any kind—particularly for those from marginalized groups. By remixing their own stories, youth can "approach their dis/embodied and disordering—even disorienting—reconfigurations and rememberings...[and] challenge dominant cultural and colonizing logics" (256).

In "On Democracy's Return Home: The Occupation of Liberty/Zuccotti Park," John Ackerman and Meghan Dunn discuss the #Occupy movement with support from Dunn's participatory fieldwork. Ackerman and Dunn describe #Occupy in terms of the *chora*, as "it calls forth an imagined extension of public life, as a civic ideal that legitimates the material construction of that idea. . .choric invention extends the presumed boundaries and territorial possibilities of public space" (267–268). The Occupy movement, while splintered, provides a starting point for "ethical civic action" and may have been the start for future reform, a place for unruly bodies.

Part III concludes with "Then Comes Fall: Activism, the Arab Spring, and the Necessity of Unruly Borders" by Steve Parks with Dala Ghandour, Emna Ben Yedder Tamarziste, Mohammed Masbah, and Bassam Alahmad. Parks describes his work with Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) activists and educators on a collection called *Revolution by Love: Emerging Arab Youth Voices* (RBL) and elaborates on his involvement with Syrian activists in Syrians for Truth and Justice (STL); his coauthors also worked with him on these projects. Parks argues that *RBL* should be read "as an attempt to create a rhetorical space in which to understand the work of democratic political reform in the MENA region within the context of a US global hegemony" (284). Furthermore, Parks discusses *RBL* and *STL* as proof that "bodies have returned to the public sphere" and "bodies are surrounded by and enact rhetoric" (294).

Nancy Welch's afterword, "Science, Politics, and the Messy Arts of Rhetoric," implores readers and rhetoricians to further consider the unruliness of rhetorics and bodies, particularly in the present moment. She poses three critical questions: 1) "What kind of rhetorical ethics are required in situations where the counsel to 'listen respectfully and try to learn from a speaker with whom I disagree' (George and West) has become untenable?"; 2) "What consideration should be paid not only to means but also to goals?"; and 3) "How can we teach rhetorical discernment?" (302–305). Rhetorical discernment, Welch explains, means teaching our students how to make a judgment call when both the right and the left use the same protest tactics. These questions can by no means be answered by the chapters in this collection, but they provide the starting point to further unravel the dense and tangled layers of unruliness and civility in protest and persuasion, as the title suggests.

A couple aspects of this book seem odd, however; although many chapters cover a diverse array of topics spanning social movements and activist work, more contemporary social movements such as #MeToo are notably absent. Many chapters, in fact, do not extend their analyses past 2014, which omits many significant moments of “unruly” and “uncivil” rhetoric—not the least of which include the protests following the 2016 election. It is possible that essays concerning these topics did not make it into the collection or occurred as the book was going to print. Furthermore, the theme of “persuasion” as suggested in the title *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics* is curiously neglected throughout the collection. In a sense, it seems that “persuasion” is taken for granted as essential in rhetorical analysis, although this could have used more explicit grounding throughout the book. “Protest” and “publics” are prominent themes in most of the chapters, but it appears as if “protest” and “persuasion” are meant to be seen as interchangeable since persuasion is implied in chapters about *successful* protests. Despite these shortcomings, *Unruly Rhetorics* provides a solid ground for rhetoricians to build upon and valuable insights for community organizers, scholars, teachers, and activists.