

Present Tense

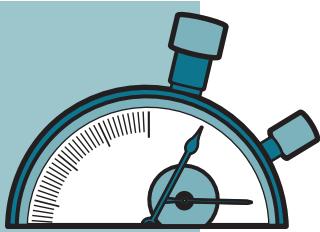
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Turning Composition toward Sovereignty

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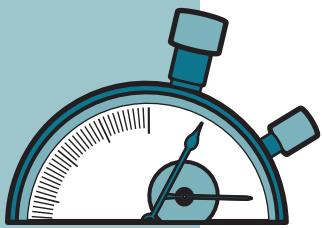
Jonathan Elmer begins his recent book *On Lingering and Being Late: Race and Sovereignty in the New World* with this observation:

Sovereignty seems to be everywhere these days, and no one is very happy about it. Political theorists, cultural observers, historians, scholars of international relations, lawyers, anthropologists, literary critics—all approach the dilemmas of sovereign power with a mixture of urgency and frustration. (1)

Yet we scholars of rhetoric and composition can't put ourselves on this list. We don't seem to be writing much at all about sovereignty—a term that I shall define here, somewhat simplistically, as the exercise of authority by a nation-state or another sort of regime, not only with respect to its own people but also in relation to similar polities.

As editor of *College English*, I'm often asked what topics show up repeatedly in the submissions we get. Rather less often, though, am I asked what topics our potential contributors rarely address. When I consider the subjects that *CE* submissions hardly ever probe, I think first of the near-zero

number of submissions we received when we announced a special issue on Lincoln and English studies. I've brooded about why this call evoked so little interest. Here's one hypothesis of mine: Lincoln was a political figure—out to maintain the sovereignty of his government—and the field of rhetcomp isn't currently prone to publish analyses of discourse like his. I realize this claim may strike you as wild, ungrounded, plain wrong. But I've come to entertain it, partly because *CE* has received so few submissions on twenty-first century political discourse, let alone the more specific subject of sovereignty and its rhetorics. Indeed, we received hardly anything about the rhetoric of the last Presidential race and of the two-year-long campaigns leading up to it. We got exactly one submission on Barack Obama. We received just a handful dealing quite directly with the war in Iraq, one of them Brian Cooney's analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* that we published in 2007. True, most of the articles in our May 2008 issue on feminist transnational rhetorics examined controversial U. S. government institutions, including Rebecca Dingo's piece on the rhetoric of the World Bank. But I wonder if we would have received a set of articles like this if the guest



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editors, Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell, hadn't strenuously encouraged submissions to this special topic issue. Meanwhile, I habitually find myself waiting for—rather than reading—manuscripts on political events in which we're presently engulfed, including events where governmental authority is very much at work.

I'm not accusing our field of political ignorance or apathy. In venues other than our scholarly journals, we certainly discuss affairs of state. I have merely to skim messages on the H-Rhetor list or the WPA list to know that plenty of rhetcomp specialists ponder—and wrangle over—current political developments. Also, there's a lot of rhetcomp scholarship on civic activism, though often the scope is local or regional causes and movements. Moreover, the burgeoning scholarship on world Englishes touches on the machinations of states and global firms. In addition, I'm well aware of the problem of timing faced by scholars who seek to write an up-to-date essay while knowing that, if published, it may not appear for several months.

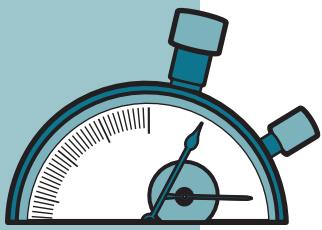
But I think our field would be taking the easy way out if it explained its relative dearth of scholarship on governments' power struggles simply by enthusing about our other work and by noting the challenges of remaining au courant in print. Let me raise the possibility that some conceptual or

theoretical impediment—that is, some mental block—has prevented us from generating more scholarship on sovereignty. Ironically, one way that I've come to sense what this block may be is by reading over and over again a certain kind of passage that appears in many submissions we get and in many other published essays that I see elsewhere. It's what I've come to call "the drive-by Foucault moment" in rhetcomp texts.

To give an example of what I mean, I turn to an article in a recent issue of *JAC* by Nicholas Thomas.¹ Passages like the one I'm about to quote² appear—albeit briefly—in quite a few manuscripts and published essays I've read:

Power worked most efficiently when people did not notice it. [...] Power is [...] productive: it creates "docile bodies," people willing to act within standardized social norms. Foucault claimed that the foremost developers of power were knowledge and the practices of obtaining knowledge. As the human sciences pursued truth through psychology, medicine, and penality, they created knowledge that established norms for behavior and health. People discipline themselves or others around them to fit these norms. (154)

Basically, many members of our field join Thomas in attributing the following theory to Foucault: in modernity, power

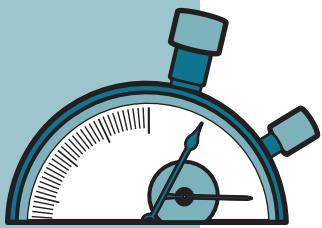


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is no longer the blatant and physical assertion of authority by a state administration, but rather a more tacit and widespread ensemble of forces, the most sinister of which take the form of psychological indoctrination—often in the name of compassionate liberal reform. Though Thomas doesn't use the word, he's expressing a common scholarly belief—held by rhetcomp specialists, among others—that Foucault helpfully broke the traditional association of power with sovereignty, particularly state sovereignty.

But Thomas then makes another move common in our field. He raises the issue of whether Foucault's model of power allows for resistance: "One might object that Foucault's power is inescapable and, therefore, useless in fomenting improvements in our lives as education seeks to do. [...]" (154). Thomas's own response to this quite-often-voiced charge is this: "We, the subjects, may not be able to get outside power, but the incompleteness of power's domination often gives us ways of involving ourselves in powerful transformations" (154-55). Some in our field take Thomas's pro-Foucault stance when they confront this issue, while others argue that Foucault's theory of power is indeed paralytic. But whatever their feelings on this question, lots of rhetcomp scholars soon stop quoting Foucault in their essay because what they're interested in isn't really power, but agency.

Agency is our field's current mantra. Many of us are earnestly, even frenziedly trying to develop a theory of it, in the belief that otherwise we will lose it because, after all, postmodernist thought has relentlessly declared our lives constrained. To be sure, agency is a key element of rhetorical action and theory; naturally, any field like ours would value it. But in my view, our current fear of postmodern theory's supposed determinism has led us to harp too much on agency. We're so obsessed with conceptualizing it that we have come to hold a dubious assumption: namely, that in order to intervene in the world, we must have a full-blown philosophy of how our behavior can count. This premise ignores, among other things, how ordinary people have been able to function without our elaborate treatises on agency nestled in their brains. At the moment, though, what I'd like to stress is this: rhetcomp scholars reference Foucault's theory of power basically as a way to arrive at their actual interest, which is agency. We ought to ask ourselves, then, whether we take Foucault's notion of power too much for granted. I am arguing that we should examine it more critically—not in a continued effort to determine whether this notion grants us agency, but in a new effort to explore how power might still connect to sovereignty. Explorations of sovereign power would provide us with more of an impetus to write about government-



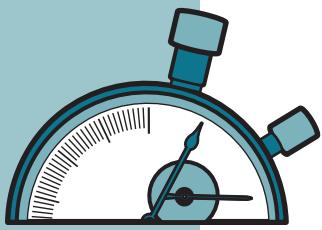
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sponsored political rhetoric than all our conniptions about agency.³ For many Foucault scholars, the moment in his work that most vividly indicates his shift away from power-as-sovereignty is the opening of *Discipline and Punish*. The book begins with a spectacularly gruesome exercise of a monarchy's authority: the prolonged public death by torture of the French regicide Damiens in 1757. I won't rehash the grim, lurid details with which Foucault depicts how Damiens was slowly destroyed. Suffice to say that for Foucault, this horrible execution signifies the end of an era. Just a few decades after this event, he reports, there was a well-established "microphysics" of power, which sought to remodel the convict's soul and, more generally, fashion all human psyches through disciplines and technologies. Power was less visible, less directly emanating from the state, more insidious in its constitution of our supposedly inward, private, and unique selves.

Foucault didn't claim that sovereign power has ceased to exist or matter. Nor did he argue that physical torture had vanished. But he did write as if we should focus now on the more subtle, diffuse, and psychological ways in which modern power functioned. Foucault wasn't "wrong" to recommend this line of inquiry; the machinations he refers to do occur. But I propose that our field turn its attention at least

somewhat back to sovereign power, because it also thrives at present. In our own country's recent past, one of the most conspicuous signs of this power was the Bush Administration's reliance on torture as a major tool in its "war on terror." Related to this was what Jane Mayer has called the government's "outsourcing" of torture to prisons in foreign countries, as well as the establishment of an American internment camp in Guantanamo. In fact, Giorgio Agamben has argued that the spatial figure of "the camp" is now a central emblem of sovereign power's continued existence. The Bush Administration's willingness to establish at Guantanamo what Agamben would call "a state of exception"—a political no-man's-land, as it were—is for Agamben and other theorists of sovereignty the very mark of a sovereign government's power. And even though President Obama has sought to close Guantanamo, public opinion has been so influenced by Bush's policy on this matter—its portrayal of the camp's inmates as a radical Other lacking judicial rights—that strong protest has arisen over his decision.

We must think about sovereign power if we're to think about—and confront—the rhetoric that was recently used by the Federal Government to justify and promulgate torture as a policy measure. And these verbal maneuvers abound, in all sorts of documents we



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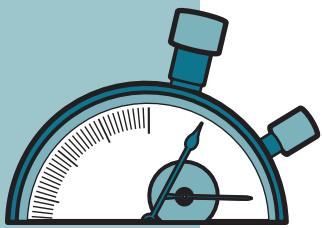
might study. The Bush regime's pursuit of torture was driven in part by the assumption that it will make prisoners yield up the truth. As rhetoricians, we might want to invoke Aristotle's skepticism about this premise in his *Rhetoric*, where he observes "that there is nothing credible in tortures" (116). For a modern-day example of such doubt, we can turn to Fred Thompson's speech at the Republican convention on behalf of John McCain. Describing at great length and in great detail McCain's torture at the hands of the North Vietnamese ([see 12:39-13:20](#)), Thompson drew laughs and cheers from the crowd when he noted that instead of giving the actual names of soldiers he had served with, McCain gave his captors the names of Green Bay Packers linemen. The irony here is that many members of Thompson's audience probably sanctioned the Bush Administration's use of torture in their belief that it does compel prisoners to tell the truth. Similar faith in the epistemic value of torture seems to operate, too, in conservatives' present impatience with the Obama Administration's willingness to read bombing suspects their Miranda rights.

Often such impatience reveals as well a wish to deny the accused person citizenship, even if he or she really is a native or naturalized citizen of the U.S. In fact, at the moment I write, circulating through Congress is a proposal to strip citizenship from

Americans thought to associate with terrorists. Meanwhile, Arizona has just passed a law allowing its police to demand identity papers from people they merely suspect are illegal immigrants. Given our field's interest in the public lives of written texts, this blatant use of documents warrants our attention.

I am not suggesting that sovereign power is inherently evil. Like many Americans, I think the Arizona measure usurps the authority of the Federal Government, which I hope will assert its rights. Nor do I share the Tea Party's apparent desire to obliterate all of Washington, DC. Moreover, the Gulf Coast oil disaster is a reminder that government is often needed to combat corporate recklessness and greed. But if our field is genuinely concerned with civic discourse—the term that George Kennedy puts into his subtitle for Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—our scholarship on sovereign discourse should increase.

Earlier versions of this essay were presented as the 2008 James Berlin Memorial Lecture at Purdue University and as a paper at the 2009 Modern Language Association Convention. I thank audiences at both these events for their questions and comments.



Endnotes

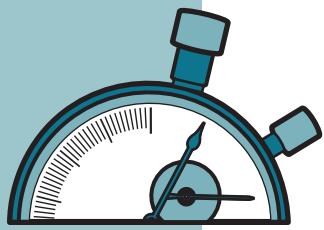
1. I should note that even though Thomas's article appears in a journal mostly read by rhetcomp people in English departments, he himself is a lecturer in Communication Arts and Science.
2. I don't quote Thomas to mock him. I think that he's pretty accurate about Foucault, and especially about *Discipline and Punish*, the Foucault book that Thomas seems chiefly to be thinking of. At any rate, I cite this passage mainly to give you a sense of how rhetcomp scholars have referred to Foucault. Admittedly, one difference between their typical treatment of him and Thomas's approach is that Thomas's entire article is devoted to Foucault. Many rhetcomp specialists offer this sort of passage just briefly and then move on to their real concern, which I'll get to shortly.
3. Talk of sovereignty and talk of agency needn't be incompatible. The two go together in, for example, the most prominent exception to the trend I'm lamenting: Scott Lyons's February 2000 CCC article "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" There, Lyons argues that Native Americans finally deserve rhetorical sovereignty, which he defines as "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their

own communicative needs and desires [...], to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-50). Certainly Lyons works with a vision of agency even as he chronicles the policies that the Federal Government has deployed against Native Americans. His is an argument for wresting sovereignty from the larger nation and for reattaching it to a historically victimized group within. But as Lyons acknowledges, we need to theorize the concept of sovereignty and trace its history before we can even begin to picture how the oppressed might appropriate it.

4. Agamben has pointed out, by the way, that Foucault was markedly uninterested in what Agamben calls "the exemplary places of modern biopolitics: the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century" (4).

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