Shifting Agency: Agency, *Kairos*, and the Possibilities of Social Action

Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona
Iowa State University

After surveying conceptions of agency in rhetoric and professional communication, we argue that agency is not an attribute of the individual, but the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of action. The rhetorical performance that enacts agency is a form of kairos, i.e., social subjects realizing the contextualized opportunities for action. Drawing on Foucault, Bourdieu, Bordo, and Burke, we argue that agency is a diffuse and shifting social location in time and space, into and out of which rhetors move uncertainly. Constrained agency emerges at the intersection of agentive opportunities and the regulatory power of authority. These reconcepualizations of agency, authority, and regulation, complicate the framework for investigation and interpretation of how subjects function in cultural practices that reproduce knowledge, power, change, and identity.

Agency Redefined: An Opportunity in Space and Time

The question of agency in contemporary social and rhetorical theory might best be seen as a response to the failures of the philosophy of action and its humanist social actor. In cultural studies the question of agency is an attempt to theorize the possibilities of radical, counter hegemonic action, especially in the face of powerful cultural formations. Here we might think of Gayatri Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and more recently in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In this formulation, agency becomes a question of whether and how the subaltern can make her voice heard and achieve political legitimacy; that is, how she can (re)constitute her identity and (re)position herself within the public sphere. In rhetorical theory, we might rephrase this as a question of how rhetors effect social change. Or, more generally, how people enter into and effect arguments and debates, recalling that in order to participate in a debate, a speaking subject must first be recognized and able to enter the discussion. This last, rather mundane, formulation of agency moves us away from the

interventionist politics of cultural studies, a move we make consciously, if also temporarily and conditionally. This broader formulation of agency also provides a strategic perspective on the theoretical issues at play. That is, as one of us has argued elsewhere (Herndl and Bauer, 2003), while we would like to reserve our theory of agency for the activist political positions with which we align ourselves, an adequate theory of agency must account for rhetorical and cultural action across the political spectrum.

Understanding subjects as discursive selves and understanding discourse as symbolic action—an event—with material and social consequences, we are left to question not only who has the authority to speak and represent, but also, what are the conditions and opportunities that allow subjects to act to change or to reproduce social, institutional, and discursive practices. If rhetorical agency is the act of effecting change through discourse, how should we think of agency? What sort of phenomenon is rhetorical agency? Moreover, if agency is associated with change in social or discursive practices, what is its relationship to authority? As a figure constructed within institutional relations of value and power, authority often limits and controls discourse and action. Authority, like the author function in Foucault, often regulates discursive behavior and the creation of meaning; it rarifies discourse, in Foucualt's terms (1972), regulating who can speak and what topics are legitimate subjects of discourse. This institutional relationship between agency and authority leads us to introduce the notion of *constrained agency*. But we also suggest that authority and agency are not always opposing forces within complex institutions. We need a more careful understanding of the interaction between agency and those regulative forces that stabilize institutions and practices. Indeed the regulative power of rhetorical and institutional authority is often interrupted as agentive and authoritative motives or, to use Burke's term, overlap. This leads

us to ask: How do agency and authority interact when subjects are authorized to speak against the dominant practices or when their discourse maintains dominant social relations? How, finally, are agency and authority related to the concrete individual? What kind of being is a social agent? How can we think about the subjectivity of an author, of a rhetor, in light of the postmodern critique of subjectivity and identity? In order to frame these questions in terms of rhetorical theory, we take up notions of *kairos* and ethos. Kairos implies the moment in time when speaking and acting is opportune and when this opportunity has important implications for a concept of agency. Ethos implies the authority to speak and act with consequences. Ethos, in this regard, can be understood as a legitimating function for a rhetor or subject. Authority implies legitimacy that validates one's right and ability to speak and act in a given context.

In what follows we argue that agency is the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of action. The rhetorical performance that enacts agency is a form of kairos, i.e., social subjects realizing the possibilities for action presented by the conjuncture of a network of social relations. We reconsider the relationship between agency and authority, identifying authority as both a potential constraint and a potential resource to agency depending upon specific contexts. To explore the complexities of this variable relationship we examine *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse,* Ellen Messer-Davidow's recent analysis of women's studies programs that manifests a contradictory relationship between agency and authority. Next, we examine Jim Henry's *Writing Workplace Cultures* in which he demonstrates that agency and authority are often complementary. Not only do these examples help us understand postmodern agency and its relationship to authority, they allow us to see how the same social subject can occupy

different, sometimes contradictory identities and social spaces. Thus the same person is sometimes an agent of change, sometimes a figure of established authority, and sometimes an ambiguous, even contradictory, combination of both social functions. Through rethinking agency and its necessary relationship to authority, we constitute a theory that explains the way social subjects move between identities and discursive functions and how we are all articulated in passing and shifting ways to different social spaces and practices. Agency speaks, then, to the possibilities for a subject to enter into a discourse and effect change—even change that might serve to further entrench a dominant social order.

Agency: The Excavation

In framing the question of agency, theorists typically struggle with the dilemma of the postmodern subject and her ability to take purposeful political or social action. This has been an important question across the humanities over the last decade. To make progress on this vexed question, we begin by following Raymond Williams' example and suggest that we consider "agency" as a concept whose problematic emerges from our disciplinary history. There are a number of places we could begin in examining the disciplinary history of the concept of agency; any one of them could be a synecdoche for a broad theoretical position. In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith surveys the problem of the subject and explores a series of theoretical responses. He concludes that poststructural theories of the subject "tend to foreclose upon the possibility of resistance," and resistance is the scene and enactment of agency for Smith (p. xxxi). When Smith discusses the purpose of his book, he describes his theoretical project as "an attempt to discern the 'subject' and to argue that the human agent exceeds the subject as it is constituted in and by much poststructuralist theory as well as by those discourses against which poststructuralist theory claims to pose itself" (p. xxx).

More specifically and somewhat closer to home in rhetorical theory, John Clifford articulates the outline of the debate in "The Subject in Discourse," where he balances the naïve humanism of *The Little, Brown Handbook* (Clifford's synechdoche for the profession) against his own description of the poststructural subject interpellated by discourse. We take Clifford's formulation to represent the standard understanding of the problem. As Clifford describes it, *The Little, Brown Handbook* suggests that an adequate, well-designed argument will succeed in persuading its audience. Both the writer and the audience in this scenario operate in some version of Habermas's (1970) ideal speech situation as autonomous, rational actors. Against this, Clifford sets out the carceral model of subjectivity, as a nonporous, inflexible category into which subjects are interpellated by ideology and determined by discourse. Clifford's position combines Althusser's (1971) ideological interpellation and the most heavy-handed interpretation of Foucault's rules for the formation of statements and subject positions discussed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. The critique of the rational, Enlightenment rhetor and the subsequent analysis of structure and determination run through much current work in rhetoric and professional communication. Bernadette Longo's *Spurious Coin*, for example, articulates the historical case of this sort of determinism in the development of technical writing. In addition, Brenton Faber's *Community Action and Organizational Change* explores the power of structural constraints in a number of contemporary examples.

The opposition we have just sketched erases the many differences in emphasis within these general positions and hardens them for schematic clarity. Nonetheless, we think that this opposition adequately describes the two contending positions with which many of us are all too familiar. The contemporary theory of agency is a response to the theoretical stalemate

this opposition represents. Our disciplinary concept of agency has emerged from our feeling that neither of these formulations explains the rhetorical and social phenomena we experience. This situation in which a theoretical stalemate generates a new concept is not unique to rhetorical theory or to debates about the humanist individual versus the poststructural subject. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe historicize the concept of hegemony as a feature of Marxist theory. Orthodox Marxism had described the historical necessity of the Proletariat revolution, the coming into class consciousness of a unified Proletariat as the subject of history. Unfortunately, that did not happen, and Marxist theory had to explain the lapse. As Laclau and Mouffe write, "[t]he concept of hegemony did not emerge to define a new type of relation in its specific identity, but to fill a hiatus in the chain of historical necessity" (p. 7). We suggest that the theory of rhetorical agency, which is prominent in rhetorical studies, fills the hiatus created by the failure of poststructuralism that Smith (1988) details and rhetoric's wise refusal to recuperate a romantic concept of the individual. That is, the concept of agency does not describe a new phenomenon. Rather, it is necessitated by the failure of poststructural theories of the subject to explain social change or rhetorical action.

If we define agency as Anthony Giddens (1984) does, as not "the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place" (p. 9), then agency looks a lot like power, both as a theoretical notion and as a practical occurrence. To reconceptualize agency, then, as a truly social phenomenon, we turn to Foucault's suggestive remarks on power. In taking up the question of power, Foucault (1982) avoids asking what power is or why it is used. Instead, he asks us to consider the how of power. He writes, "[t]o put it bluntly, I would say that to begin with the analysis of a 'how' is to suggest that power as

such does not exist," (p. 785). When critics talk about the what and why of power, they reify

a set of social relations. When this happens, Foucault continues, "an extremely complex

configuration of realities is allowed to escape when one treads endlessly in the double

question: What is power? And Where does power come from?" (p. 785). By contrast, asking

how power emerges and circulates leads us to investigate what Foucault terms the "thematics

of power." Following Foucault, we suggest that, like power, agency, as such, does not exist.

As a general rule of thumb we suggest that scholars mystify social reality whenever they use

agency after a transitive verb. Agency cannot be seized, assumed, claimed, had, possessed, or

any of the many synonyms for these transitive verbs. As Susan Bordo (1988) has argued of

power, agency "is in fact not 'held' at all; rather people and groups are positioned

differentially within it" (p. 166). The reality of agency is a question of positioning within

what Bordo describes as the "multiple 'processes, of different origin and scattered location,'

regulating and normalizing the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of time,

place, desire, embodiment" (p. 165). Bordo's notion of the differential positioning of subjects

within relations of power leads back to Foucault's (1982) revised ontology of power. Power

is not a transcendent thing. Foucault continues, *"[p]ower exists only when it is put into action*,

even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear on

permanent structures. This also means that power is not a function of consent," (p. 788,

emphasis our own). Throughout his work, Foucault argues against the sovereign model of

power. Centralized and total, sovereign power is an attribute of an individual. If we

understand power as a set of relations, however, it no longer requires that we connect it to an

autonomous individual. So, too, with agency. It does not reside in a set of objective rhetorical

abilities of a rhetor, or even her past accomplishments. Rather, agency exists at the

intersection of a network of semiotic, material, and, yes, intentional elements and relational practices.

If we define agency as self-conscious action that effects change in the social world, then agency is contingent on a matrix of material and social conditions. It is diffuse and shifting. In contrast to the implied model of agency as an attribute or possession of individuals, agency is a social location and opportunity into and out of which rhetors, even postmodern subjects, move. Recently Radha Hedge (1998) has referred to agency as "the coming together of subjectivity and the potential for action" (288). Further, in *The Logic of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice defines agency as the conjunction of a subject's habitus and the changing social conditions for action. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is the set of durable dispositions inculcated in the subject by her past experiences, and these dispositions adjust the subject's rhetorical actions to the continually changing situation (53). From this perspective, rhetorical action is neither determined by structures nor the domain of the autonomous individual. It is the conjunction of the subject's dispositions and the temporary and contingent conditions of possibility for rhetorical action that begin to define what we term an *agent function*. This understanding of agency articulates the poststructural subject to the radical contextualization of cultural studies.

Like the author function that Foucault identified, the agent function implies agency before the agent. But what we call the agent function is relatively less stable than Foucault's author function, and it reveals the moment or opportunity when and where action is possible. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this temporal and spatial overlap when he speaks of that which allows for action and the agency function to be engaged. His notion of the interval articulates the dimension of time to place. Bourdieu illustrates this point quoting Leach (1962) who

refers to "an area where the individual is free to make choices so as to manipulate the system to his advantage," (quoted in Bourdieu, p. 26). For purposes of our own theory building we see the articulation of the materiality of time to place and practice as an important and necessary move (see also Condit, 1999, p. 176). The place from which one speaks or writes and within which one acts is a social space, but one that exists in time.

Before we can develop an adequate theory of agency, however, we must make three radical interventions. First, we must sever the metonymic identity of agent and agency, as well as the metonymic identity of author with authority. Second, we must reverse the order in which we think of these relationships; agency phenomenologically precedes the agent and authority phenomenologically precedes the author. In so doing, we differentiate the subject from the social agent as well as the subject from the author. Specifically, we contextualize agents and authors as sites of an agency function and an authority function. To borrow Karlyn Kohrs Campbells' (2003) term, the agent is a "point of articulation" rather than an origin. Third, we must reveal the necessary, if also shifting, relationship between agency and authority. Throughout these interventions we reconsider the implications of power and representation. Our efforts are undertaken to offer a more complicated framework for interpretation to those researchers of technical and professional communication in both academic and nonacademic settings who are investigating how subjects as writers function in the cultural practices which (re)produce knowledge, power, and identity. Our use of the parenthesis in the preceding sentence to mark the ambiguity with which discourse relates to knowledge and power suggests both the ubiquity of institutional regulation of rhetorical action and the opportunities, however fleeting, to escape regulation and generate change.

Metonymy Interrupted: Agency as Social Practice

Not only is agency an artifact of our disciplinary history, the concept is compromised by the history from which it emerges and to which it is a response. More specifically, the stalemate between poststructural and romantic traditions obscures the metonymic identification of agency with agent, and mires the concept of agency in a specific theoretical legacy. Despite the postmodern theory of the subject, agency continues to be thought of in terms of the individual. Theorists interested in promoting social change write of someone "having" agency, of agency being the attribute of an individual speaker or writer. So Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford (1995) write, for example, that someone can "claim authority and agency" (p. 423). Similarly, in his discussion of rhetoric and change, Brenton Faber (2001) writes that "[a]lthough these people can claim some degree of agency, they still cannot claim to be completely free of social structures" (p. 121). Faber is careful to articulate a theory of power in connection with social change, but the vestigial language of the humanist individual nonetheless haunts his discussion of agency. We think that this is a ubiquitous but fundamental error and one that misdirects our theory building. The examples we have used to describe the reification of agency and the stabilization of the agent as a substantive category come from Marxist and feminist work that we support—work that is aimed at changing social relations and making them more equitable. But we worry that, like much work in cultural studies that celebrates the way subcultures resist dominant formations, this theory of agency reifies the individual. Furthermore, Meagan Morris (1990) has argued that political and ideological resistance has become "banal" in much cultural studies, all counter-cultural forms being seen as careful resistance and struggle (p. 14). Similarly, we worry that radical subjects seize agency and become social agents all too regularly in our theoretical discourse. Theories of agency are typically laudable attempts to catalyze action and social change, but

we worry that they are more epideictic than analytic. We share the sense of purpose that

motivates theories of agency, but worry that they produce an inaccurate notion of agency that

reifies autonomous agents and obscures the network of material and textual conditions upon

which agency depends. If we are correct and these theories are really epideictic, they perform

a kind of "strategic essentialism," in Spivak's or Emma Perez's (1998, 87) terms, a necessary

move at times, but a potentially misleading one.

To uncouple the agent/agency metonymy, we begin with Delip Goankar's (1997)

critique of recent scholarship in the rhetoric of science. Indeed, it is an indictment of the field

itself. Goankar begins the critical work of dismantling the figure, which collapses agency into

the agent. Goankar argues that the humanist model of persuasion locates agency within the

individual and in his or her conscious intention. Goankar writes that "[t]he agency of rhetoric

is always reducible to the conscious and strategic thinking of the rhetor. The dialectic between

text and context, a topic of considerable interest today, is already prefigured in the rhetor's

desires and designs. Such is the model of intentional persuasion, still dominant, but under

trial" (p. 49). What Goankar calls "strategic thinking"—the notion that a specific scientist

managed to win a scientific debate through intentional use of rhetorical skill—"marginalizes

structures that govern human agency: language, the unconscious, and capital" (p. 51).   This

strategy, which is used to explain scientific argument and social change, has a powerful

tradition. For example, Hayden White (1990) characterizes Darwin's success as his ability to

combine the tropic form of metonymy with the "conservative" (p. 129) and "more

comforting" (p. 133) tropic form of synecdoche. Whether or not he consciously intended to

do so, White does not venture an opinion here on whether Darwin's rhetorical formulation is

responsible for the success of his argument. White's analysis does not explicitly attribute

strategic thinking to Darwin, but it does leave untroubled the humanist assumptions that Goankar critiques. We see Goankar's analysis as a critique of the metonymic identification of the individual agent with agency. Despite the powerful and widely accepted poststructural critique of the individual, we think that theories of agency remain haunted by a hangover from romantic voluntarism. Like hegemony in orthodox Marxism, agency is theorized as a mediating position, compromised by the way it is embedded in the metaphysics of the individual. Its postmodern pedigree notwithstanding, agency is still hampered by the vestiges of humanist models of action. This disciplinary legacy leads, we think, to two mistakes. Agency is tied to the concrete individual, whether she is figured as the *individual* or as the *subject*. Second, agency is theorized as a thing, something agents *have*, *possess*, or *gain*.

A Reversal: Agency before the Agent/Authority before the Author

Once we cease thinking of the agent as the origin or locus of agency, we can make a second, more radical move. If we read the agent-agency metonymy backwards and consider the move from agency to agent, we can argue that it is the social phenomenon of agency that brings the agent into being. We argue that social agents only exist when subjects occupy a set of relations and their agentive possibilities in a certain way. As Sullivan and Porter (1993) have argued, a theory of agency need not evacuate the category of the subject or see the subject as a coherent, unified being. Rather an adequate theory of agency "proceeds on the basis of multiple and shifting subjectivities that enable opportunities for change, at least at local levels" (p. 42). Thus "the human agent," as Smith (1988) argued, "exceeds the subject" (p. xxx).

The postmodern subject becomes an agent when she occupies the agentive intersection of the semiotic and the material through a rhetorical performance. Agency here does not

reside in the individual, and this conception does not deny the power of language, (con)textuality, the unconscious, and capital. Agency is a social/semiotic intersection that offers only a potential for action, an opportunity. Subjects occupy that location skillfully; a rhetor's abilities and accomplishments make a difference in how her performance is accepted. While the performance itself is not adequate to constitute agency, no matter how often it is repeated, it is part of the complex relations that make agency possible. In making this argument that the enactment of agency brings the agent into being as agent, we are moving from Foucault's insight that discourse creates the objects about which it presumes to speak, to Judith Butler's (1990) argument that the performative constitutes the subjectivity of the performer. Foucault's now commonplace insight in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is that powerful discourses constitutes the objects about which they speak as they create knowledge. Further, Butler has argued that the performance of gender constitutes the gendered subject itself through the performance. Whereas Butler denies the existence of anything prior to the performance ("a doer behind the deed" (142)), however, we argue that postmodern subjects—split, contingent, driven by desires and multiply interpellated--exist before or outside their agentive or authoritative performances, outside the shifting social location of agency and authority. This subject-in-motion resembles Lawrence Grossberg's (1992) "nomad." Grossberg writes that "the affective individual always moves along different vectors . . . like the nomad, it carries its historical maps (and its places) with it, its course is determined by social, cultural, and historical knowledges but its particular mobilities *are never entirely directed or guaranteed*," (p. 126, emphasis our own). Like Grossberg's affective individual who is articulated into distinct ideological identities, the subject temporarily occupies different agentive and authoritative spaces. But the subject's ability to seize the potential for

action is never guaranteed or permanent. The subject becomes an agent when she is articulated into the agent function. Foucault argued that the author function arose in literary discourse as both a principle of thrift which limited the range of meaning attributable to a text and as a response to historic changes in the materiality of the text, specifically, the rise of copyright laws. Like Foucault's author function, the agent function arises from the intersection of material, (con)textual, and ideological conditions and practices.

Burke's Dramatist Pentad:
Symbiosis and Equilibrium in Agent and Author Functions

Foucault's work on power has spurred countless commentaries, and we have made much of it here, but we want to turn to Kenneth Burke's work on the pentad as a useful way for thinking about agency in rhetorical terms. In the current context, Burke's fundamental point in *A Grammar of Motives* is that rhetorical events result from a complex relation of elements, no one of which is primary. We think that Burke's metaphor of motive addresses the central issue that a postmodern theory of agency must explain: what is the motive force behind rhetorical events? What relationships constitute the necessary conditions and drive behind successful rhetorical acts? When we talk about agency as if it were an attribute of an individual or something a rhetor can *have*, we privilege one of the five moments on Burke's pentad. We impose one ratio on social reality. If the other four points of the pentad are valid analytic tools, as we think they are, then Burke's theory suggests that agency—in our terms rather than his—is the conjunction of the five elements of the pentad. Agency is the conjunction of all the ratios in a rhetorical context. As Burke says, some rhetorical events depend more on one ratio than on others. But we believe that all the ratios are relevant to all rhetorical events even if they are not the dominant element.

Authority and the Author Function Revisited:

Articulating Space to Time, Context, and Practice

Like agency, authority is a social location, (re)produced by a set of relational practices. The authority to speak—a speaker's authority in discourses and debates—is a social identity that is occupied by a concrete individual but emerges from a set of social practices. In this sense, authority is tied to classical notions of ethos. Authority is (re)produced by the authority function, and it legitimizes a subject to speak and act for or against change. The authority function lies outside the subject and is therefore not about an individual author/rhetor but instead about the capacity and opportunity to rarify discourse and action. We believe, as does Grossberg (1992), that "authority is not constituted from the identity of the actor but from the already invested worthiness of the site," (p. 381). That is to say, postmodern subjects are complicatedly situated within structures that, at least in part, define the context in which they participate in the author function and /or the agent function. Authority, like agency, exceeds the subject. It comes before and outside the subject. More specifically, as Grossberg (1992) notes, "authority is not located in the leaders in the community, but in the place that has been constructed, through cultural and intellectual labor, as authoritative" (p. 383). Social practice, context, and space constitute a place in which agency is enacted. But this place is temporal as well. A "place in time," to use Steven Mailloux's (2003) phrase, where the material and the temporal, combine to constitute the possibility of agency and authority.

Because the authority function reflects the cultural and relational practices that constitute value and power, authority tends to stabilize and maintain the structures within which it is constructed. Social structures tend to be stingy with the social places that took so much work to constitute and in which social groups have so much invested, so much

productive past. As it constitutes materiality of authority, the recognizable social place of authority, the authority function is part of what Giddens describes as the recursive and regulative relationship between structure and practice (see Giddens, 1984). Like the author function Foucault described, authority often acts as a principle of thrift, constraining discourse and action and maintaining social practices. In more regulated and institutionalized contexts—the academy and some workplaces we will examine—authority is a prime motive for rhetorical action. In these institutionalized settings, authoritative practices often reveal a power to stabilize, limit, and control meaning and action. Because it authorizes a rhetor to speak, act, and represent, the authority function often represents and reproduces dominant rhetorical and social relations. As it limits the proliferation of meaning and action, authority can constrain agency.

While the authority function often constrains agency, it also rarifies subjectivity within discursive fields. Foucault (1972) argues that as authoritative practices legitimize some speakers, they also exclude other speakers from a given discourse. He notes how authority serves to " impos[e] a certain number of rules upon those individuals who employ it, thus denying access to everyone else. This amounts to a rarefaction among speaking subjects: none may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so" (pp. 224-225). This process of rarefaction explains how non-dominant subjects are all too often excluded from the public sphere because they are not authorized to speak and represent. In other words, authoritative practices can so condition the opportunity for agentive action that it becomes extremely difficult for some subjects—typically those from non-dominant groups—to successfully occupy and engage the agentive space.

Agency and Authority: A Relationship of Contradiction

In *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse,* Ellen Messer-Davidow (2002) chronicles the emergence of feminist thought and action in the academy over the last four decades. While feminism has successfully established itself within the academy, as evidenced by the proliferation of women's studies programs, Messer-Davidow argues that ultimately feminisms and the *new* knowledges they (re)created have been domesticated by and commodified within the academy and therefore have lost some of their initial radical momentum and agentive potential. We contend that this is not inherent in feminism itself, but that authority as a function within the academy is implicated in the domestication and commodification Messer-Davidow describes.

In her review of the interventionist tactics and relational practices engaged in by 1960s feminists committed to proliferating women's studies in the academy, Messer-Davidow identifies the agentive opportunities that made the discipline of women's studies possible in the academy. The agent function is materialized in Messer-Davidow's work as those practices that agitated for the inclusion of women's studies in the academy. Specifically, she recounts the history of the Coalition of Campus Women (CCW) as informed by the politics and practices of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and its leader, Saul Alinsky. Using tactics learned from the IAF, the CCW undertook a campaign of direct action, agitating for a women's studies program to include library funding and, among other things, access to administration and administrative records, (p. 7). Messer-Davidow notes that to "challenge the academy's knowledge discourse—feminists had to navigate the preliminaries: they had to gain admission to a discipline and win the credentials that authorized them to operate in it" (p. 48).

Messer-Davidow investigates the structures and practices that transformed and disciplined academic feminism. She demonstrates how once women's studies emerged as a legitimate field of study—a discipline—within the academy, it engaged in authority functions that constrained its own agency as a site of alternative knowledges and practices. That is to say, once women 's studies was accepted as a discipline, it was transformed "by the [very] structure it had set out to transform" (p. 13), namely, the academy. Women's studies programs have to participate in the power dynamics of the academy and they do so at the cost of a loss of agency. As Foucault (1972) has pointed out, a discipline exercises a limiting function: "Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules" (p. 224). Any academic discipline survives through a struggle between competing demands for innovation and consolidation. Disciplines produce new knowledge, but within and against disciplinary expectations, styles, and policing practices: hiring, annual reviews, tenure decisions, editorial policies, and curricular structures.

Throughout her work, Messer-Davidow explores the processes and practices that led to the domestication of feminism within the academy, noting that many feminists believe that such domestication is inevitable. She (2002) cites the directors of two university presses who consider that "feminist scholarship, once revolutionary, [has] become repetitious" (p. 205). The repetition of agentive practices institutionalize and legitimize women's studies program, but they also contain their radical potential. The agentive possibilities of radical feminism are also limited by women's studies' relations to other disciplines and programs within universities. In order to maintain its authority within the university, a women's studies program or department must perform the duties and functions commensurate with its

institutional status. As programs offer degrees and cross list courses, they are compelled to engage the prevailing expectations and standards for courses, for degrees, for departmental management. Faculty who must face college and university level tenure boards, are expected to produce recognized styles of scholarship and compete with faculty from other, less politically engaged departments for tenure and research dollars. Thus, the authority function operates both within the discipline and in the general academic field. As Bourdieu might put it, the symbolic capital women's studies needs to survive in the academy is recognized in a field controlled by the broader academic community and in which radical community and political activism has relatively little value.

Messer-Davidow's work demonstrates two important things for our analysis of agency and its relation to authority. Women's studies programs constituted a radical intervention in the academy when they began to appear. The backlash against women's studies and the attacks by right wing critics (e.g., Bloom, 1987; D'Sousa 1991; Sommers, 1994) attest to the reality of their intervention and revolutionary work. But the necessity to consolidate their symbolic capital within the university and to conform to varying degrees to academic expectations, constrains their agentive possibilities. Thus, we introduce the notion of *constrained agency* that emerges as a result of the relationship between agentive opportunities and the regulatory power of authority. In this case, authority operates as one point in a revised version of Burke's pentad, producing an agency-authority ratio that defines the motive for radical feminism within the university. Both agency and authority are generated by material practices established in institutional contexts. Where Foucault had defined the author function as a principle of thrift, which limits the dangerous proliferation of meaning, the authority function within disciplines and universities similarly limits destabilizing and

potentially dangerous practices, thus constraining the possibilities for rhetorical action.

Articulating Agency and Authority: Overlap, Ambiguity, and Slip-Sliding Away

The example of women's studies in the academy suggests an opposition between agency and authority, a relation that only (re)produces constraint. As powerful as this constraint can be, however, we want to reconsider the diverse potentials in the relationship between agency and authority. Like agency, authority is realized in contextualized relational practices that define the subject's capacity and the opportunity to function as an authority and/or an agent. We are particularly interested, however, in the slippage between the agent function (as agency) and the author function (as authority). We want to complicate the tidy opposition Messer-Davidow's work suggests. In complicating the agency-authority ratio, we find it useful to reconsider the movement between these two functions in much the same way that de Certeau (1984) conceptualizes and distinguishes tactics from strategies. De Certeau establishes his now popular distinction between tactics and strategy as the modes of social action associated with resistant and dominant cultural interests respectively. In de Certeau's theory dominant ideological positions control the social terrain and engage in long-range, stable strategic action, while resistant positions engage in tactical hit and run action. While we find de Certeau's distinction falsely dichotomous, we look beyond this dichotomy to the space of overlap between tactics and strategies and between agency and authority. It is this space of overlap that is ripe for reconsideration as a productive and generative space of action and representation revealing both agentive and authoritative relational practices.

De Certeau's understanding of action in everyday life suggests a final element to our theory of agency that is a useful addition to our theory here. De Certeau writes that tactics "takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them. . . . [Indeed tactics] must accept the

chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves

[and] . . . make use of the cracks that *particular conjunctions* open in the surveillance of the

proprietary powers," (p. 37; italics added). We find the distinction useful in two ways. First,

as a discursive distinction, it allows us to talk about the multiply situated subject who engages

in both tactics and strategies. More importantly, we are interested in the overlaps between the

two and consider them spaces in which agency and authority potentially overlap. We call this

motion the slippage between the two and think it allows us to discuss the ways in which

subjects are multiply situated and differently able and authorized to speak, act, and intervene.

While we understand the distinctions de Certeau makes between tactics and strategies to be

primarily discursive, we appreciate the ways in which this distinction allows us to reconsider

the implications of time and timing in relational practices that reveal constrained agency and

authority. This mobility across space and time is an important part of authoritative acts,

agentive opportunities, and relational practices.

The "particular conjunctions" (37) de Certeau (1983) identifies are temporal. They are

moments of possibility. We do not like de Certeau's sense of an endless guerrilla warfare or

his categorical distinction between strategy and tactics, but he is correct when he says that

tactics "seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at a given moment" (37). If

we think of social space as changing through time in this way, then a postmodern theory of

agency returns us to the classical rhetorical notion of kairos. In John Poulakos' (1983)

interpretation of Plato's dialogue, *Protagoras*, kairos gets recognized as the "power of the

opportune moment" (p. 40). In Carter's (1988) reading of Plato's *Gorgias*, kairos is "a way

of seizing the opportunity of the moment in improvisational speaking," (p. 104). Both

conceptions of kairos shift away from the individual and toward the opportunity itself—

toward the social conjunction or what we call a moment in social space and time. We would push this theoretical formulation of kairos further and read agency as the momentary conjunction of multiple material, semiotic, and intentional conditions of possibility. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) captures the situation nicely. He argues that agency can only be seen when we examine non-epistemological relations of power that are independent of individual actors or groups. Thus "there can be no universal theory of agency; agency can only be described in its contextual enactments. Agency is never transcendent; it always exists in the differential and competing relations among the historical forces at play . . . " (p. 123).

Rhetors, even conceived as postmodern subjects, move into and out of agentive spaces as the result of the kairotic collocation of multiple relations and conditions. Agency, to return briefly to Foucault's (1982) language, is an "extremely complex configuration of realities" (pp. 785-86). As we have moved through de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics and confronted these complex realities, our rhetorical sense of kairos further reveals for us the necessity of articulating the materiality of time to discursive, political, social, and cultural practices (see Condit, 1997). For a moment then, we collapse the distinction between tactic and strategy in time and space, acknowledging the multiplicity of ways in which subjects write in the world. In rendering the spaces of overlap visible we are unearthing the generative, creative, and productive, if also potentially contradictory, space in which multiply situated subjects move. Our theory complicates the practices engaged in by subjects in a given context so that the space of contradiction described in Messer-Davidow's example can be seen as a site of potential productivity and can provide insight into the complexities of subjectivity in organizational or institutional settings.

Agency and Authority: A Relationship of Complementarity

Jim Henry's (2000) analysis of workplace culture and practices offers insight into a more ambiguous relationship between agency and authority. Henry is particularly interested in notions of authorship that circulate in the workplace. He explores the way the author function plays out in collaborative writing practices and often marginalizes the work of professional writers. In the current context, however, his research demonstrates the complementary relationship between the agent function and the authority function. Within his study we can identify subjects' movement between agency and authority in ways that blur the boundary between the two. Movement between constrained agency and authority makes visible the shifting and, at times, contradictory positions in which subjects are situated over time and across space. Henry uses articulation theory to identify the relational practices and potential of agency and authority. Specifically, he states that "communication always articulates all subjects implicated in the process to power and knowledge, albeit in varying ways depending upon institutional location, [and] local practices" (p. 143). Henry refers to the development of acuity and expertise (ethos) as a function of authority. The knowledge of institutional or organizational practices offers subjects the opportunity for authoritative and/or agentive practices and relationships. That is to say, both agency and authority can be constrained by discursive structures but not completely. Opportunities then are represented by the moments when the agent function or author function (re)produce the practices for the subject to speak with authority and act with a potential for change.

Using a number of analytic frameworks, Henry describes the ways the multiply situated discursive self participates in both (re)authorizing practices and agentive intervention. His work identifies the complicated and sometimes nuanced ways in which subjects participate in these (re)authorizing practices with agentive potential. Specifically, in his discussion

regarding writers situated in private business and corporations he eschews the notion of passive agents. Instead, Henry reconsiders the implications of those writers who can claim authority as those "who learn the norms governing representation up and down the organization . . . [who] may be more politically astute in manifesting their ideological positions on organizational products and claiming their share of authority in organizational life" (p. 56). In Henry's discussion of the dynamics between structures and subjects, he describes writers' subjectivities during the acquisition of necessary skills for organizational authorship. In this discussion he recognizes how "editing can be construed as cultural renewal and/or reproduction, a practice with more far-reaching implications than generally acknowledged" (p. 74). Henry uses this example of editor as agent and author as a demonstration of how subjects can participate in authorizing practices with agentive potential.

Henry also investigates technical writing practices and contexts. He discusses technical document processes, reconsidering the prospects for innovation potentially realized in practices of revision. His discussion acknowledges that technical document processes, as reflected in "hierarchical and cross-divisional processes that represent culture to its members and to outsiders, may be repetitive and fairly standardized in routing across organizational structures, yet as processes bound up in organizational dynamics influenced by players in various positions, they offer occasions for reshaping parts of these collective procedures" (p. 80). Henry offers a number of observations that reveal how as writers in the workplace move or slip between practices that reveal the author function and those that reveal the agent function. He writes that writers' subjectivity is powerfully shaped by collaborative writing practices. He notes that "[u]nder such conditions, they may shape their subjectivities through articulating roles in the organization to roles in document processes; similarly, writers may

shape organizational procedures somewhat by bringing skills in organizational analysis to daily activities such as document processing" (p. 81).

Henry describes subjects as discursive selves who live within subjectivities that shift as a function of the collaborative practices. In his discussion of cultural stabilization and change, Henry identifies authors as "agents of stabilization of culture" and also agents of change depending upon the "coincidence between the proposed changes and the organization's goals and underlying discourses" (p. 86). The "coincidence" here reiterates our sense of agency as a temporal-spatial conjuncture of elements. In the context of Henry's research, it articulates authority as a crucial element in agentive action.

Finally, Henry calls for a shift in composition and professional writing pedagogy and writing practices to reflect the material circumstances and complexities of the multiply situated subject. "Intervening in cultural production and reproduction entails equipping professional writers for such positioning intellectually in classrooms and collaboratively with them later in the ongoing processes and products in which each 'I' becomes implicated" (p. 166). Specifically, he relates a story of one professional writer who was responsible for clipping daily news articles for the organization with which she was affiliated. This writer was positioned such that she was able to participate in both the author and the agent function as we have discussed them (p. 175). This writer engaged in the authoritative practice of deciding which news articles to clip. In practice, she was authorized to recognize which clippings could be deemed relevant to the organization for which she worked. Henry (2000) recognizes the "great potential" of her intervention in the reproduction of organizational practices and culture (175). The agent function was engaged each time the authority function was enacted to intervene in organizational practices and representations from her professional

space.

The examples we have selected from Henry's study reveal the space of overlap between the author and agent function we have identified.   Several of the researchers involved in Henry's study discuss the ways in which split subjectivity inform the author and agent function so that writers can be positioned to act on behalf of an organization and on their own behalf or on behalf of their collaborative writing partners. Henry notes how authors are those responsible for the text and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to (p.20). His work uncovers how those cultural norms and values can be altered over time, space, and practice, as well.

Taking a Counter-Cultural Turn

At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that the question of agency emerged in rhetoric and professional communication when the postmodern critique denied us recourse to the enlightenment individual of liberal ideology, yet failed to replace that individual with a potent social actor. That is a coherent and, we think, persuasive theoretical narrative. But agency also became a central concern in the field of rhetoric when the range of contexts and speaking or writing subjects we considered changed. Research on writing in professional and nonacademic settings confronted us with a wider range of contexts, purposes, and writers than had populated earlier studies of classroom composition. The emergence of cultural studies in rhetoric vastly expanded this tendency. Cultural studies focused attention on ideology and the ways people struggle against domination and attempt to change social practices. This aspect of cultural studies leads us to consider not only how to produce efficacious professional communication, but also to explore the way institutions regulate and normalize discourse and identity. It made the experience of non-dominant subjects in discourse and society a central

issue for analysis. We suggest that as rhetoric turned its attention more and more on the rhetoric and cultural practices of non-dominant and subaltern subjects, many of the assumptions about identity and action that had been invisible in traditional analyses erupted into view. The study of the good man speaking well obscures the issues of identity, power, and the material conditions that support efficacious speech. Writing as a cultural practice performed in a heterogeneous and conflicted space populated by difference and distinction vastly complicates notions of rhetorical action. Agency is the name we give to this rearticulation of cultural rhetoric. We think that the theory we have proposed here helps dismantle the obfuscating tendency within our disciplinary history so that we can move beyond merely acknowledging multiple and shifting subjectivities to understanding the distinct ways in which we get things done in the world.

We have demonstrated the ways in which we can identify the agent function at work in the intersection of a network of semiotic, material, intentional elements and relational practices. But because our theory begins with the understanding of the postmodern subject as multiply situated and shifting, we think it important to consider how subjects are differently enabled or constrained to act and speak in a given context. The complex and situational relationship between agency and authority suggests not only that social subjects are articulated to contingent agentive spaces, but also that those spaces are often ambiguous and contradictory. The overlap between agency and authority we have tried to outline is just such an ambiguous space. This ambiguity is widespread and it can be productive. To invoke Burke (1969) again, "it is in the area of ambiguity that transformations take place; in fact without such areas transformations would be impossible," (p. xix; see also Sandoval, 2000). Ambiguity offers a potentially creative and generative space for postmodern subjects

articulated into social spaces constituted through both the agency and authority functions. We believe that understanding agency and authority as social functions into which subjects are multiply articulated brings the theoretical understanding of subjectivity that emerges from cultural studies closer to the textured and textual understanding of specific rhetorical practices. It helps explain how subjects get things done in ways that collapse any easy opposition between agency and authority, and it preserves the ambiguity that offers openings, however brief, to social subjects.

Finally, our theory moves beyond a notion of agency or authority that can be unproblematically invoked to explain the success or failure of a rhetorical performance. Like Burke, we suggest that the motive behind rhetorical events is a shifting relationship between constraints and resources. We think this framework can help rhetorical critics better understand the dynamics behind rhetorical events within the postmodern world. In some practical sense, too, it might help rhetors better gauge the opportunities for efficacious action and better position themselves in the relational practices that configure the conditions for action in the world. The kind of overlap and slippage between agency and authority we have suggested might help rhetors both understand the way regulative forces shape the terrain of social space and how this interplay opens possibilities in the grid of regulation. But beyond that, we anticipate that the application of this framework may well reveal yet other relationships between agency and authority.

We hope that the ambiguity that marks the overlap between agentive and authoritative spaces might also help us consider other more radical writing practices in other, less regulated cultural sites. As one of us works with zines, self published, and counter culture magazines, we notice a similar interplay between agency and authority. Zines are illegitimate and

nonstandard productions—irreverent, parodic, utopean, and imaginative. In some sense they are performances of difference that try to make a difference, that is, change subjectivity and representational practices and replace exclusionary and oppressive discursive practices. Such radical rhetorical performances constitute a *third space* that offers insight into the double or multiple-voiced discourses that characterize third space subjectivities (see Anzuldua, 1987; Gates, 1989; DuBois 1986; Bakhtin, 1981). Zines and third-space subjectivity are far afield from the standard sites of analysis and research in professional communication, at least in English studies. But they enact the dynamics of discourse and social change on a continuum with more regulated institutional discourse. Radical rhetorical events like zines offer what Brownwyn Davies (1993) considers "disruptions [that can see] the possibility of breaking down old oppressive structures and of locating and experiencing [them] differently, of moving outside the fixed structures" (p. 39). If we think through the possible relations of agency and authority in all these sites, we might better understand institutional discourse as a genuinely cultural practice. Institutional discourse and zines are both constituted by the complex political and rhetorical relations of agency and authority we have begun to trace. If we can see similarities in the rhetorical dynamics of these kinds of sites, we might begin to think of the third space of imagination and ambiguity as a resource for subjects working within everyday institutional discourses.

References

Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays.* (B. Brewster, Trans.) London: New Left Books.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands,* la frontera: *The new mestiza.* San Fransisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Bakhtin, M. (1998). Discourse in the novel. In J. Rivkin, & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 32-44). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bordo, S. (1998). Material girl. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 1099-1115). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice.* (R. Nice, Trans.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990*). The logic of practice.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power.* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Camebridge: Harvard University Press.

Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York: Routledge.

Campbell, K.K. (2003, September). *Rhetorical agency.* Paper presented at the conference of the Association of Rhetoric Societies, Evanston, IL.

Carter, M. (1988). *Stasis* and *kairos*: Principles of social construction in classical rhetoric. *Rhetoric Review, 7*(1), 97-103.

Clifford, J. (1991). The subject in discourse. In P. Harkin & J. Schlib (Eds.), *Contending with words* (pp. 38-51). New York: MLA.

Condit, C. (1997). In praise of eloquent diversity: Gender and rhetoric as public persuasion. *Women's Studies in Communication, 20*, 91-116.

Condit, C., (1999). The character of "history" in rhetoric and cultural studies: Recoding genetics. In T. Rosteck (Ed.), *At the intersection: cultural studies and rhetorical studies* (pp. 168-185). New York: The Guilford Press.

Davies, B. (1993). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

D'Souza, D. (1991). *Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus.* New York: Free Press.

DuBois, W.E.B., (1998). *The souls of black folk.* In J. Rivkin, & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 868-872). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Ede, L., Gelnn, C., & Lunsford, A. (1995). Border crossings: Intersections of rhetoric and feminism. *Rhetorica, 13,* (pp. 401-441).

Faber, B. (2002). *Community action and organizational change: Image, narrative, identity.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1982). The Subject and Power. *Critical Inquiry, 8*, 777-795.

Gates, H.L. (1998). The blackness of blackness: A critique on the sign and the signifying

   monkey. In J. Rivkin, & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 903-

   922). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goankar, D. (1997). The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science. In A. Gross &

   W. Keith. (Eds.), *Rhetorical hermeneutics: Invention and interpretation in the age of*

   science (pp. 25-88). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place: Popular conservatism and post modern*

   culture. New York: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1970). Toward a theory of communicative competence. In H. Dreitzel, *Recent*

   Sociology No. 2. (pp. 114-48). New York: Macmillan.

Hegde, R.S. (1998). A view from elsewhere: Locating difference and the politics of

   representation from a transnational feminist perspective. *Communication Theory, 8,*

   271-297.

Henry, J. (2000). *Writing workplace cultures: An archaeology of professional writing.*

   Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Herndl, C., & Bauer, D. (2003). Speaking matters: Liberation theology, rhetorical

   performance, and social action. College, Composition and Communication, 54, 558-

   85.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical*

   democratic politics. London: Verso.

Leach, E. R. (1962). On certain unconsidered aspects of double descent systems. *Man (62)*

130-34.

Longo, B. (2000). *Spurious Coin: A history of science, management, and technical writing.*

   Albany: State University of New York Press.

Mailloux, S. (2003). *The role of rhetoric in the academy and beyond.* Paper presented at the

   conference of the Association of Rhetoric Societies, Evanston, Illinois.

Messer-Davidow, E. (2002). *Disciplining feminism: From social activism to academic*

   discourse. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morris, M. (1990). Banality in cultural studies. In P. Mellencamp (Ed.), *Logics of television:*

   Essays in cultural criticism (pp. 14-43). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Pérez, E., (1998). Irigaray's female symbolic in the making of chicana sitios y lenguas

   (sites and discourses). In C. Trujillo, (Ed.), *Living chicana theory*, (pp. 87-101).

   Berkeley: Third Woman Press.

Pérez, E. (1999). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing chicanas into history.* Bloomington:

   Indiana University Press.

Poulakos, J. (1983). Toward a sophistic definition of rhetoric. *Philosophy and Rhetoric 16,*

   35-48.

Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the oppressed: Theory out of bounds.* Minneapolis:

   University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, P. (1988). *Discerning the subject.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sommers, C. H., (1994). *Who stole feminism?: How women have betrayed women.* New

   York: Simon & Schuster.

Spivak, G. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism*

and the interpretation of culture (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Spivak, G. (1990). *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues.* Sarah

Harasym (Ed). New York: Routledge.

Spivak, G. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing*

present. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sullivan, P.A., & Porter, J.E. (1993). Remapping curricular geography: Professional writing

in/and English. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 7*, 389-422.

White, H. (1990). *Tropics of discourse: Essays in cultural criticism.* Baltimore, Maryland:

Johns Hopkins University Press.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature.* New York: Oxford University Press.