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Predicting Futures, Performing Feminisms

Chronology and Ideology in Composition Classrooms

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Rereading Karen Kopelson's "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning" (2003) after the 2016 presidential election, we found it hard to imagine the article was published over a decade ago. It feels so present: the "pervasively nonspecific 'anti-P.C. movement'" (17) Kopelson describes is a forerunner to the finely honed "anti-P.C." movements of today's political milieu. The institutional positions of "teacher-subject[s]" who do not conform to students' conservative expectations about authority figures remain especially precarious (118), even as right-wing activists and white supremacists now trawl social media and troll university instructors in ways that have left an even broader swath of faculty feeling on the edge of termination.

It was against this backdrop that we stepped into our respective classrooms in Spring 2017. While the ideologies that inform our pedagogies and the controversies students research and write about in our courses sometimes generate forms of resistance, the likelihood of such resistance felt especially dramatic and potentially derailing as 2017 began. Given the formerly marginalized ideological positions and rhetorical styles welcomed into mainstream political discourse during the 2016 election cycle, we anticipated that our commonplace strategies for negotiating student resistance might no longer suffice. In what follows, we describe our attempts to engage *kairos*, a rhetorical concept Kopelson (2003: 130) links with *mêtis*, in two courses: a first-year

writing (FYW) course focused on research and argumentation and an upper-division English course titled Feminist Rhetorics and Methods. In comparing our experiences in these two courses, we explore how forms of student resistance shift over the course of a college curriculum. Drawing on kairos and the attendant concept of *chronos*, we argue that *when* teachers perform ideological neutrality or nonneutrality is at least as significant as whether and how (see DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill 2005). Keeping with Kopelson's (2003: 118) pursuit of "politically responsive and respon*sible* pedagogical tactic[s]," we present two intertwined case studies that articulate our responses to particular political, curricular, and institutional variables. We offer not universal strategies but localized, chronologically delimited responses by two particular teachers to two particular pedagogical ecologies.

In our first case study, Eric describes his attempt to perform neutrality in an FYW course by enacting a timely shift in course content. Specifically, given the 2016 presidential campaign's protracted, obvious politicization of nearly every aspect of American life, he shifted the content of his course into the future, asking students to read, research, and write about controversies we are likely to face come 2066. He argues that such a chronological shift can allow students and teachers in composition classrooms to deliberate about pressing issues outside the frameworks of intractable political ideologies. In our second case study, Kate reflects on her attempts to perform ideological neutrality in a course explicitly focused on feminism. Contrary to a great deal of FYW-focused scholarship on student resistance, she found that students wanted her to identify her ideological allegiances because they were eager to claim feminism in the space of her classroom. We end by arguing that our different experiences at different curricular stages call for more nuanced approaches to how we negotiate and theorize student resistance and teacher performance. Rather than assuming that the forms of resistance teachers encounter in FYW apply to all college courses—even all college writing courses—we must consider kairos in tandem with curricular chronology.

The Arrow of Rhetorical Time

Rhetorician Debra Hawhee (2002: 18) describes *kairos* as "rhetoric's time." That is, the Greek term marks the "quality of time" rather than "time's quantity, which is captured by the other, more familiar Greek word for time, *chronos*." Hawhee (2009: 66) notes that one meaning of *kairos* is derived from archery: the modifier *kairios* was used to characterize spots on the human body that were especially vulnerable to arrows, and ancient archers would train to hit these spots "by aiming at 'an opening or series of openings.'"

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Thus, while there is no ready-made English equivalent to *kairos* (Hawhee 2002: 18), Hawhee (2009: 67) glosses it as an opportune "'window' of time"— not unlike the window-like apertures through which historical archers often fired—during which a rhetorical act is especially likely to hit home.

While *chronos* may be the more familiar term, *kairos* has drawn much more attention from composition scholars, often in theoretical projects centered on rhetorical invention. As Peter Simonson (2014: 310) puts it, "The concept of kairos provided one of the most fertile grounds for reformulating invention within both pre- and postmodern horizons of thought." However, the term also pops up in projects focused on pedagogical matters (Kopelson 2003: 130; Peeples, Rosinski, and Strickland 2007).

Much theoretical work on kairos expands the realm of rhetoric by expanding the realm of contingency, with which rhetoric has long been associated (Lestón 2013: 49; see also Aristotle 2007: 1359a, 1392a–b). While Socratic philosophy quested after arguments based on necessary truths, sophistic and Aristotelian rhetoric focused on persuasive and discursive possibilities that emerged within the contingencies of social existence. Kairos is all about engaging such contingencies. Thus, when a scholar like Robert Lestón (2013: 48) argues that kairos can help us reimagine "what it means to be human," drawing certain assumptions we once took to be foregone conclusions into the realm of debate and contingency, he opens new possibilities for kairos and so for rhetoric.

However, kairos would not be kairos without constraints, which often come in the form of chronos. That is, because kairos depends in part on a rhetor's ability to determine what arguments will probably be effective given certain rhetorical variables (e.g., audience disposition, venue, political climate), for kairos to be salient certain outcomes need to be probable. In a situation defined purely by flux, a rhetor would be unable to grasp kairos with any certainty (at least until someone generates a theory of quantum kairos). Pedagogically oriented scholarship that takes up kairos captures the chronological structures that constrain its vagaries. As Timothy Peeples, Paula Rosinski, and Michael Strickland (2007: 58) put it in their account of developing an undergraduate professional writing and rhetoric concentration, "There are times when chronos dictates or . . . times when one might approach program development from the sense of chronological time." Even if we wish to privilege kairos over chronos, time's arrow-like movement often prevails: the steady ticking of academic calendars and curricular sequences creates defined structures that both limit kairotic openings and make those openings possible.

Let's return to Hawhee's archery analogy, imagining students as archers and teachers as those charged with crafting fenestrated targets to help archers-in-training develop their skills. We find ourselves faced with a field of targets designed and sequenced for students by our predecessors, and we work individually and collaboratively to add to and adapt those targets, carving out new openings at which students will aim. But as we become better target makers, we may note that, for all the diversity of students' backgrounds and subtlety of our craft, students tend to aim at just two or three openings among the dozens we have provided for them.

Analogically speaking, composition teachers often respond to students' proclivities for certain targets by walling off certain topics (e.g., gun control, abortion). But in the months leading up to the Spring 2017 semester, with American political ideologies in a heightened state of flux, Eric began encountering the limits of this and other commonplace pedagogical workarounds. He came to an imperfect, but to his mind kairotic, solution: instead of putting certain openings off limits, he moved the target to the far end of the field.

Predicting Futures: Eric

En route to the future, a blast from the pedagogical past: In many classical schools of rhetoric, the culmination of students' education was something called declamation (Bloomer 2001). Declamation required students to deliver a full-fledged speech that demonstrated the depth and breadth of the rhetorical acumen they had developed during their studies. Most declamations fell into one of two categories: *controversia* or *suasoria*. A controversia was a "forensic speech on a specific legal case," whereas a suasoria was a "deliberative speech on a question of history or politics" (Mendelson 1994: 93). That is, while a suasoria might focus on a past event or decision—for instance, whether a particular historical figure should marry (Bloomer 2001: 167)—it was pursued as if it were an undetermined matter requiring further deliberation.

In some ways, declamation is a classical version of what contemporary education researchers call problem-based learning, or PBL (Amador, Miles, and Peters 2006). A present-day composition course in which students study, analyze, and make arguments based on landmark Supreme Court cases is arguably both an extended version of controversia and a form of PBL. However, both composition courses based on historical court cases and PBL assignments based on present-day issues raise certain pedagogical concerns. In the former case, the fact that the outcomes of many landmark cases now

reflect conventional wisdom instead of ongoing public controversies raises questions of transfer. For example, to what extent will engaging with *Brown v. Board of Education* lead students to recognize forms of de facto racial segregation that persist in the present? Meanwhile, pedagogical approaches based around both historical and present-day controversies that are not relatively settled can get bogged down in ideological disagreements.

The problem of ideological intractability was at the forefront of my mind as I prepared to teach FYW in Spring 2017. While a range of social and political issues felt newly urgent, to what extent would making them a significant focus of the course (a) lead students to double down on their initial ideological positions and/or (b) challenge students' ideologies without resulting in any meaningful changes in their practices (see Rickert 2007: 2)? With these concerns in mind, I decided to shift the controversies students would read, write, and argue about fifty years into the future. I positioned students as "Secretaries of the Future" (Brancaccio and Long 2016), and I wrote the following course description for the syllabus:

In this particular section of ENGL 1020, we'll be researching, reading, arguing, and writing about the future. Unlike a traditional vocational or technical education, a university education isn't only about preparing you for the job you'll find right after you graduate, but for the world we might all face ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred years down the line. It's a world where jobs we take for granted won't exist anymore and jobs we can't imagine might have taken their place. But people, political systems, businesses, and even universities themselves aren't always good at planning for the more distant future. We pay a lot of attention to short-term problems and solutions, but these can distract from and even intensify the problems that might arise in 2050 or 2100. To approach these long-term problems, we'll be using the principles of deliberative rhetoric. Deliberative rhetoric, which has been around since ancient Greece, is a framework for inventing and arguing about future possibilities. We'll use it to think and write about the future of work, food, the environment, urban planning, technology, and more.

By my reasoning, this approach would allow students to take up controversies that were likely to become increasingly pressing throughout their lifetimes but also engage these controversies at something of a remove from the political scene circa 2017.[1] Take, for instance, the issue of job automation. On the campaign trail, Donald Trump often claimed, contrary to powerful economic trends, that he would keep jobs in manufacturing and coal from going away (Krauss and Corkery 2016). In March 2017, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin argued that it would be "50 or 100 more years" before job

automation became a serious concern for American workers in such sectors (Dreyfuss 2017). It is understandable that citizens, including college students from Appalachia or the Rust Belt, might be drawn to a vision of the future in which coal mining and manufacturing remain viable professions and might thus resist suggestions that such jobs are going away in the short term. However, as Mnuchin's statement suggests, even staunch fiscal conservatives are willing to acknowledge that job losses are coming in the longer term. Fifty years out, even ideologues are willing to question the limits of their ideologies. While Kopelson (2003: 127) builds a case for "teaching from a distance" in the sense of "performing the more disinterested, academic, authoritative role," I speculated that teaching from a temporal distance, in terms of the content of the course, would open ways of navigating ongoing "racism, antifeminism, homophobia, mounting xenophobia"—the issues that still seemed to be driving reactionary politics in 2016 and thus the issues that seemed especially likely to prompt unproductive forms of student resistance.

Moreover, a focus on the future put the class in established rhetorical territory: the realm of the possible, the probable, the contingent. Instead of focusing on the relative necessities of history or the stubborn ideologies of the present, debating the future allowed students to exercise rhetorical reasoning about the world to come. Broadening the field of kairos via a chronological shift, the course engaged students in what I consider highly speculative, future-oriented suasoriae. I myself speculated that, by situating students' deliberations in futures they might actually (if only possibly) live through and have to address, the course could avoid some of the potential limitations of transfer that attend historical suasoriae.

But debating the future did not mean abandoning all rhetorical assumptions. Students formed groups that revolved around certain areas of interest, such as sustainable design or government surveillance, and throughout the semester were charged with researching, analyzing, and making arguments within those areas. Early course readings suggested certain principles that made for good and bad predictions (Vanderbilt 2015; Zhang 2015; Dubner 2016). While their principles are not airtight, these pieces provided *topoi* (in rhetorical terms, metaphorical places to "find" arguments) that students could adopt for their projects. That is, the readings provided rhetorical guidelines for better anticipating and advocating for possible futures.

Alongside these readings, students collaborated on annotated bibliographies about their groups' topics. As they did so, we turned our attention to texts that documented or made the case for burgeoning economic, climatological, and technological changes (Eveleth 2017; Hertzfeldt 2015; Lunau

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2017). For the next major writing assignment after the annotated bibliography, students analyzed extant arguments about the future of their chosen areas, using the topoi from previous course texts to consider the argumentative strategies and limitations of the pieces they were analyzing. Finally, students made their own multimodal arguments about the future of the areas they had studied. These arguments took a range of forms and approaches, from a folk song in which the narrator, a musician, described being replaced by a holographic pop star, to 3D-printed models of human organs meant to evoke the future of medical technology.

While students' arguments and other projects often relied on certain commonplaces, such as resolute degrees of optimism or pessimism about humanity's future rooted in students' convictions about "human nature," or the dual poles of "alarm" and "enthusiasm" we often fall back on in the face of new technologies (Rice 2014: 94), they by and large avoided the commonplace ideological sticking points on display during and after the 2016 election. While student resistance was not entirely absent from the course, the course's focus provided one way of approaching *chronos* in a kairotic manner—a way that emerged only because of my own embeddedness in an inescapable set of present, and now only somewhat past, circumstances.

Performing Feminisms: Kate

Like Eric, and so many of us trained in FYW, I do not purposely reveal my own ideological convictions in the classroom. Instead, I have been persuaded by Kopelson's (2003: 132) argument that "the performance of neutrality takes the widest point of view possible, considering the immediate pedagogical moment primarily as it is related to and eventuates in long-term pedagogical goals." Thus, while I carefully develop my documents, projects, and classroom community around feminist principles—rhetorical listening, an ethic of care, inviting student input and agency—I have never explicitly stated this to my FYW students. So I was surprised when, fumbling with my keys to open the classroom door one day, I heard two of my FYW students talking. One student said to the other, "You know, like, everything we do in class is feminist, right?" The student wasn't saying it in a negative way; he was just stating a fact. The other student just shook her head quizzically and asked, "Really?" I chuckled. This was the only time I had heard students name my pedagogy.

Because I have grown so comfortable with my performance of neutrality, so much so that it feels more like some sort of truth about my identity than an overt performance, I was in uncharted waters when I went to publicize one of my advanced seminars: Feminist Rhetorics and Methods.

During my publicity campaign visiting upper-level classes to tell students about the course and invite them to ask questions, I was met with ice, perhaps from those who would never take a class with *feminist* in the title and from others who were afraid to claim the term or admit they were interested. This experience informed how I began the Feminist Rhetorics and Methods class: with my tried-and-true persona from FYW, embodying feminism and using it to craft my documents and approach, but not naming it. I had planned to begin the class with a sort of soft-sell feminism, expecting students to still be afraid of the term, afraid to affiliate, considering it a somewhat dirty word. I had flashbacks to my experience advertising the class and realizing the power of the f-word to freeze a smile, to break eye contact. I had recognized the classroom impact of being, as Sara Ahmed (2017) calls it, a "feminist killjoy," and I wanted to find a way to balance out the resistance I expected. I wanted to have my feminist cake and eat it too. This ambivalence is reflected in course documents.

In particular, the document design of my syllabus demonstrates my commitment to feminist pedagogy. The syllabus excerpts shown in figures 1 and 2 emphasize reciprocity in course design and space for student input and agency. Significantly influenced by Lynda Barry's (2014) ideas about syllabus design and Elizabeth Kleinfeld's (2016) rhetorical readings of syllabi, I developed this syllabus in the form of a customizable booklet. It was constructed, rather simply, out of construction paper and landscape prints of color images and text. Also, as mentioned in table 1, the first day's assignment was for students to personalize and customize their syllabus, to participate in the tradition of women's ways of making by putting a "definition of feminism on the cover," be it "words, an image, textures, a combination, etc." The syllabus demonstrates an emphasis both on rhetorics, analyzing and articulating how discourses function, and on methods, making discourse and putting it out into the world. Further, there is an acknowledgment that everyone in the course has needs—me, individual students, the class community—and the document design provides space for each stakeholder to be heard and record those needs. Though not perfect, the syllabus effectively reflects my pedagogy and invites students to share in the work of the class.

However, the first week's readings muddy the waters. That week, I assigned three readings (see table 1). Two of the three writers were men. Of course, men have many important things to say about feminism, and I would have certainly assigned Michael Kimmel and Jamie Utt during the semester, but in the first week? I was hedging my bets, concerned that I would scare students off (especially my four male students) by diving straight into feminism;

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BY THE END OF THE COURSE, I HOPE THAT YOU...

1. are well-versed in feminist rhetorics and research methods;
2. understand how knowledge is constructed and are able to identify access points within critical conversations, particularly as they relate to feminist concerns and intersectionality;
3. connect theory and practice to present innovative solutions to problems related to identity construction;
4. gain facility with innovative research methods, including digital platforms.

FEMINISM IS FOR EVERYONE

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BY THE END OF THE COURSE, WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THIS CLASS?

1. _____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____

Figure 1. First excerpt from Kate's syllabus

WHAT I NEED FROM YOU

1. Come to class;
2. Have an open mind;
3. Be respectful of yourself, your colleagues, and me;
4. Read everything thoughtfully;
5. Play the "believing game";
6. Take chances;
7. Experiment with ideas, your writing, modes of composition;
8. Make this classroom and our discussion board a safe space;
9. (Respectfully) Challenge me.

WHAT YOU NEED FROM EACH OTHER

_____
_____
_____
_____

WHAT YOU NEED FROM ME

_____
_____
_____
_____

Figure 2. Second excerpt from Kate's syllabus

Table 1. Excerpt from Kate's course calendar

Date	Work that is Due For Class This Day	In-class Work
1/17	Bring an artifact that represents you	**Rhetorics** (What): Course Introduction; Celebration of Student Writing; Habits of Mind **Methods** (How): Syllabus Development
1/19	**Read**: Michael Kimmel, "Toward a Pedagogy of the Opressor"; Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* "Introduction"; Jamie Utt, "Why I Need Feminism as a Man" **Write**: On D2L, please respond: Kimmel, Gay, and Utt offer very different definitions (and lots of them) of feminism; what is it? **Do**: Personalize your syllabus: compose a definition of feminism on your cover – this can be words, an image, textures, a combination, etc.	**Rhetorics**: Project 1 Introduction; Feminisms derived from readings **Methods**: MT Engage; library access to Available Means

I was waiting for the right kairotic moment to ease them in. Candidly, this insecurity and attempt to appeal to the male students in the class is fodder for another article, but for our present purposes it demonstrates an inability to account for the timing and timeliness of the beginning of an upper-level class. By the time students are selecting upper-level writing courses, they are more finely attuned to identifying ideological stances and, particularly with English majors, experienced at critiquing *everything*. Thus, my inartful attempts to perform neutrality while teaching feminisms and rhetorics fell on highly skilled, highly skeptical ears. Instead of being drawn in, students seemed confused by my attempts to teach feminism merely as an object of study, as they were already well versed in languaging feminism. Further, they had selected the class; it was not required for general education, or even for their writing concentration—it was an elective. So instead of the resistance I expected to feminism, there was resistance to my hedging, to my prefaces, to my attempt to perform a distanced neutrality. Further, in a deeply red state, in a political season that saw misogyny and sexual assault continually accepted, my students seemed to want/need an instructor who unapologetically identified as feminist. After that first week, I stopped apologizing.

In reflecting on my discomfort (and subsequent embarrassment) and the tension in my course documents, I am relieved by Ahmed's (2017: 14) reminder: "Feminism: it can be a strain." Further, I would argue that classroom ideologies, when we follow them through to their logical implications, are all a strain. They ask us to be consistent, to mirror our practice with our theory. In a canonical essay, James Berlin (1988: 490) usefully reminds us, "A way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated with ideology, and a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed." Yet, returning to Ahmed's reminder, I am also chastened. Even if feminism is hard, it is worthwhile. Ahmed (2017: 14) writes:

Feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in how we cite. I think of feminism as a building project: if our texts make worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials. Feminist theory is world making. This is why we need to resist positioning feminist theory as simply or only a tool, in the sense of something that can be used in theory, only then to be put down or put away. It should not be possible to do feminist theory without being a feminist, which requires an active and ongoing commitment to live one's life in a feminist way.

My performance of neutrality was recognized as disingenuous by my students, not just because they had mostly self-identified as feminists before taking the class, and not just because advanced English majors are, to return to our guiding metaphor, more precise archers: they know which targets they want to hit, and they have good odds of hitting them. It was perhaps most problematic that I had ignored the bounds of chronos on my own feminist pedagogy, a pedagogy that "requires an active and ongoing commitment." Surely this does not mean that I need to announce my feminist ideology at the start of every class, but in advanced writing classes, identifying ideology can have the effect of allowing students *into* complex disciplinary conversations rather than turning them away. In my class, this meant that, once I acknowledged feminist ideology as an organizing principle, we were freed to suss out difference and nuance within feminism*s*.

One of our focal texts in the class was Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014). The thrust of her book is searching for a simultaneous space within feminism as ideology to be a feminist, engage in popular culture, and pull (white?) feminism, or what some might perhaps call "feminism as moral police" (Ahmed 2017: 2), down off its pedestal. Because of her penchant for antifeminist and misogynist media, and the various inconsistencies she finds

in herself that make her feel that she does not qualify as feminist, Gay labels herself a "bad" feminist. Students really liked the book, particularly because it engages so accessibly and humorously with contemporary popular culture, and partly because it intelligently refutes many of the "anti-P.C." accusations leveled against feminism (Kopelson 2003: 117). Yet the smart conclusion most of my students reached at the end of the semester was that there is no such thing as a bad feminist or a good feminist. Instead, we need to be able to critique feminisms, and especially the problematic history of white feminism in the United States. Feminism is a "project," and we're not finished with it (Ahmed 2017: 14). Whereas for Eric moving inquiry to the future allowed students to engage with ideas too loaded to address productively in the context of the present, I like to think that the revision of my ideological performance helped us move productively into the present ideological muck of feminism.

Conclusion: The Bidirectional Movements of Kairos and Chronos

In considering the right times to invite students out of crystallized, politically charged ideologies, we had to attend to when and where students were. For Eric, this meant temporal distancing. For Kate, this meant getting up close and claiming feminist ideology in a way she had not done before, both chronologically and kairotically. Chronos and kairos don't shoot in straight, parallel lines; they wind around each other. If you will allow us one last arrow-centered metaphor, they function on a sort of time continuum that dovetails with physicists' understanding of how time flows. This flow, the "arrow of time," is one of the focal mysteries of physics. As a construct, the arrow of time relies on our forward-oriented perception of how time moves. Yet there seems to be general agreement among physicists that, at the subatomic level, time is symmetrical—it moves both forward and backward. This is how the tension between kairos and chronos manifested in our classes, or at least in our hopes for how the intersection of the two constructs might function: in our efforts to avoid unproductive resistance in the form of entrenched political ideologies, we moved backward and forward in time, depending on content and context, to make successful delivery more probable. Our broader point? Effective curricular and course development takes into account how students will progress as time goes on—both what they will be ready for and when that happens in the curriculum. For our work, then, we found that it was a matter not so much of avoiding ideology but of operating within and across ideologies that do not map neatly onto the present political scene.

   In our time-conscious performances and pedagogies, we were and

continue to be motivated by Kopelson's (2003: 135) gloss of "rhetorical honesty": "The honest desire and honest effort . . . to keep students open, keep students learning, keep students open to learning, so that they may engage with rather than shut out difference."

Note

1.   While hypothetical and decidedly situational, the approach here speaks to an extensive and unsettled body of psychological research about "temporal distance" (see Kogut, Eyal, and Sharon 2017).

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