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ABSTRACT

Recent rhetorical research in professional writing raises the issue of the absence of discussion of "resistance" in professional and nonacademic writing research. A study of a biologist working at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico suggests that ideological "resistance" occurs even in the realm of technical writing. Further, it confirms what several theorists have argued, namely, that people reappropriate the dominant culture in producing their own alternative cultural expressions. Michel De Certeau argues that because studies in culture and institutional practices have focused on repressive apparatuses, they overlook, or rather they have made invisible, the heterogeneous practices that resist dominant cultures. Agents resist by using the products of the dominant discourse to insinuate heterogeneous positions and values into discourse. In the case of the biologist, she had to frame her observations about how missile tests could affect the environment around two restrictions: (1) the objective ethos, which requires that all data be quantifiable and presentable in the form of bulleted items; and (2) the rule against "intangibles," aesthetic or spiritual observations that are not reducible to technical terms. She resists by occasionally refusing to comply with expectations, but more often she writes the document as she is asked to do but then attaches to it another one worded so as to further her own concerns. Alternatively, she will talk directly and personally to project managers who she senses might be sympathetic to her ecological concerns. (TB)

Looking for 'Resistance' in All the Wrong Places

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The research about which I am going to talk today is prompted by a number of issues in recent rhetorical research in professional writing.

- the realization that discourse and ideology maintain and reproduce each other,
- my own understanding that in teaching institutional and professional discourse we can easily naturalize the social relations which discourse reproduces (Herndl 1993).
- the ongoing discussion about "resistance," largely influenced by radical and liberatory pedagogies of Freire, Giroux, and Shor.
- the relative absence of this same discussion about resistance in professional and nonacademic writing research.

I realize that there are problems with our definition of "resistance" : that fact is part of why I have been working on this project. Resistance is usually defined in contrast to discursive "accommodation" and "opposition." Among other problems with this definition, is the fact that it is not easy to distinguish "resistance" from "opposition" in practice. As much as I am attracted to the theoretical position that produces the notion of resistance and use it to direct my own teaching, I think we need to ask whether "resistance" is only an ill defined, theoretical construct that exists only in writing classrooms. In the interests of time, I am going to skip over a critique of the prevailing definition. But I will, however, develop a working definition of my own as I discuss the work of Michel De Certeau in a few minutes.

My concern for the problem these issues raise is heightened by my recent experience teaching a course in my department called "Writing in the Workplace." Almost all of the research reports I read in textbooks and journals tend to discuss how different discourses operate and how they are formed, how writers learn to participate in them productively. Very little of the material concerns the ideologically and socially coercive effects of institutional discourse--what my students and I came to call "the dark side of the force." If Foucault had to argue that we should think of ideology as productive rather than merely oppressive, I think we now need to recognize the opposite. We tend to consider the productive power of discourse and ignore the power of discursive styles, genres, and regulations to enforce a dominant ideological and cultural position at the expense of dissenting positions. This relative absence was reflected in my students'--and many of them were older, experienced people--pragmatic sense that self-preservation dictates that they "just do as they are told" and adapt to the demands of the institution.

My students' sense, however, does not match either the rhetorical theory--unless first year students exhibit resistance, but have it beaten out of them by the time they are employed--or the research on consumers of public, mass culture. So, my research explores the following questions:

> Is there a form of social and political action which we might call "resistance" going on sometimes when people engage in professional discourse? And if there is, what does it look like? and how might we explore it?

Some earlier research reports suggest that something like resistance might occur in professional writing, but few explore the issue explicit'y. In what I think is an exception to this trend, Anthony Pare describes the exclusionary power of institutional discourse in his analysis of

the case reports written by Canadian social workers. Pare argues that the guidelines which determine what evidence is and is not admissible in court not only produce case reports, but they also force social workers to suppress information that they feel is relevant. Pare writes that social workers sometimes resist those discourse regulations and send inadmissible evidence to court when they think it necessary for the client, even at the risk of being reprimanded or a fined by the court (118)

This seems to be an example of one sort of discursive resistance. But I think there are other, perhaps more common forms.

WHAT WE DID

To explore this question, a colleague and I spent a year doing research at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, one of the country's largest research facilities for missile development and testing. This may seem an unlikely place in which to study cultural and ideological resistance. But as Foucault has shown us, contemporary life is increasingly defined within the bureaucratic space shaped by institutional discourses and power.

White Sands seemed a rich research site for two reasons.

First, as a military base, White Sands is the epitome of the kind of powerful and coercive institution which regulates discourse and polices the actions of writers. It is the sort of place which pragmatists envision when they describe "resistance" as an academic fantasy, something that can occur in the classroom but not in the world where you have to do as you are told to keep your job.

Second: the situation seems especially suited to represent a clash of values, interests and cultural positions. We worked with members of the Range's Environmental Safety Division. In the view of our principle informant in this division, their job was to protect the natural environment by seeing that Range operations observed both the letter and the spirit of the EPA regulations. The interests of the field biologist who saw the range as a beautiful habitat for mountain goats, endangered Mexican wolves, and the all but extinct Tularossa Pupfish, were decidedly different from those of the out-of-state, independent contractors who test missile systems there or of the Pentagon staff who ultimately oversee military operations on the base. Conflict seemed inevitable to us going into the research, and we were not disappointed.

Over the course of the year, we talked with a number of base personnel until we finally decided to concentrate our interest on the chief wildlife biologist for the base's Environmental Safety office. The material I will discuss in a few minutes comes from our interviews with this biologist and our analysis of the documents she provided us.

In order to understand the biologist's actions, I want to borrow a way of thinking about the relations between agents and dominant cultural institutions from work in cultural studies, particularly from Michel De Certeau's theory of practice and then I'll offer one characteristic case from our work at White Sands.

Work in cultural studies has altered the way we think about the relations between people and dominant culture. The prevailing model of these relations had been that of the Frankfurt School, most notably Horkheimer and Adorno's notion that people "automatically" accept whatever the "culture industry" produced, using the industry's own terms and values to recognize and consume its products. In terms of writing and discourse, this is very similar to those

moments in Foucault's Archeology when a discursive formation determines the kinds of statements we can make and the objects about which we can make them. In response to th s model of a passive consumer, Stuart Hall and has argued that the production and consumption of culture are two semi-autonomous "moments" in the circuit of cultural production. In Hall's model, consumers engage in their own process of cultural production when they use what the dominant discourse produces to actively make their own products. In this way, neither process is autonomous, but neither is absolutely determined either.

The piece of theory that I found particularly useful in thinking about resistance extends Hall's position. In The Practice of Everyday Life, De Certeau takes up Hall's understanding of consumers as autonomous producers, and he explores the ways people reappropriate dominant culture in producing their own alternative cultural expressions. De Certeau argues that because studies of culture and institutional practices have focused on repressive apparatuses, they overlook, or rather they have made invisible the heterogeneous practices that resist dominant cultures. To explore these marginalized practices De Certeau describes what he calls "strategies" and "tactics," two forms of cultural action. Strategies belong to institutions and subjects who occupy a recognized place in the social order. Strategies operate through the dominant discourse supported by the power that is the precondition for the knowledge they produce and the cultural position they reinforce. Tactics by contrast are calculated actions that are "determined by the absence of power" (37) and which "play on and with the terrain imposed" by the dominant discourse. According to De Certeau, the tactic is not itself a discourse; it is too momentary. It is an action or the manner in which an opportunity is seized, what he calls a "conjunctural practice." The obvious rhetorical analogy is to *kairos*, the science of the propitious moment for

rhetorical action which must be seized or forever lost. In describing how tactics operate, De Certeau offers a functional definition of resistance when he says:

> The actual order of things is precisely what "popular" tactics turn to their own ends...Though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power or simply denied by an ideological discourse, here order is *tricked* by an art. Into the institution to be served are thus insinuated styles of social exchange, technical invention, and moral resistance.... (26)

This suggests that while resistance may come from a stable if relatively powerless cultural position, the forms it takes change constantly. Like the consumers in Hall's model, agents resist by using the products of the dominant discourse to insinuate heterogeneous positions and values into discourse. As tactics, resistance is an action "taken on the wing," making do with what the situation presents.

What then might resistance look like in the writing of the biologist we worked with at White Sands? Our research suggests that she did engage in ideological resistance and that this was organized around three powerful moments in the institutional discourse.

- The dominant engineering model that reduces complex relationships such as those that exist in the natural environment to quantifiable data, and which only recognizes as legitimate things which can be readily measured and described in brief, almost tabular form.
- The prevailing assumption that all regulations be read literally, constructing a minimalist interpretation of the law. Our informant characterized these as the difference between observing the "letter of the law" narrowly defined, rather than the "spirit of the law."
- The prevailing organizational structure that artificially separates individuals and working groups. Because EPA regulations have precise guidelines and specific legal penalties and enforcement power, the military created an "Environmental Safety Division" concerned

> only with issues that could incur specific legal penalties. "Natural Resources," by contrast, includes everything else, including the wildlife living on the land, but for which there is not clear, precise, legal regulation. Thus environmental safety biologists are institutionally separated from other wildlife biologists and the two have no regular working relationship. Our informant observes that this administrative structure creates a sense of isolation and powerlessness, a divide and conquer situation, that she said felt like "psychological warfare."

Since my time is limited, I will only talk about the first of these issues.

Reducing complex relationships to quantifiable data is part of the institution's effort to manage large amounts of information efficiently. And this reduction was enforced by a prevailing style that demanded very short documents, usually comprised of bulleted sentence fragments. But I think that this managerial pragmatism has more obviously ideological sources and more severe consequences. The biologist we worked with explained that this reductive style largely excluded careful discussion of ecological issues. As she put it:

> But when you can't get a document out of the office or beyond a certain place in the chain if it's longer than a page or written in complete sentences and they only want a bullet format--the famous army bullet format--you lose all ability to explain, to teach, to support your point of view. To me it feels very conspiratorial, because in a way it relieves these people. They can say "Oh well, somewhere down the line a decision was made." (12-16-92: 10)

A moment later she added:

> It is exactly the point that we are dealing with natural systems; it isn't your basic sort of engineering, statistical problem. There's far more. The ramifications are greater. They're more complex, they're harder to see, and they aren't easily quantifiable either. (12-16-92; 10)

In another discussion four months later, she returned to the issue briefly and said this regulation style is:

> ...not comprehensive enough, nor is it enough to make people see or read between the lines in order to understand the complexities of the issues involved. (3-22-93; 14)

Two kinds of knowledge are being excluded by this discourse. The "objective" ethos that reduces complex systems to quantifiable data and presents them as bulleted items, excludes not only explanation of ecological systems, but also what our biologist calls "intangibles. Introducing an example of the first problem, she explained that the reduction required by the discourse made it all but impossible to acknowledge the complexity of environmental problems, and that this exonerated the institution from the necessity to deal with them. She said that even when you understand the environmental problem,

> you can't prove a thing. He can't prove it. You can't prove it. The quantification of that type of removal from an immediate issue is so difficult to deal with that...it's difficult even if you understand the concept. I'm not just talking biomagnification. It means all kinds of stuff. I don't even know how to explain to people about biodiversity. . . . are there secondary, tertiary impacts somewhere down the line that we can muck up around and pretend don't exist or are too hard to deal with so we're not going to recognize them officially or whatever. I think that's even more of the separation too.

The second kind of exclusion enforced by the discourse is even more striking. I had been reading through the field notes of a young biologist on the range. The notes were unusual because they talked about the lovely scenery, the rare and unusual wildlife, the aesthetic values of the area. They could have come from Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac. When I asked her why there was no other writing like this in the materials she had given us and whether she ever used such narrative in her writing, she said that these "intangibles" were not allowed both because they might bring up unexpected and officially unnecessary data, and because they were regarded as unscientific and literally worthless. She explained that the ethos of "hard science" required that they omit all "aesthetic musings" from their language and restrict themselves to only those things which can be measured and which have a practical value, a value in dollars. The desert around White Sands is strikingly beautiful and unspoiled, and it is difficult not to be moved by its beauty and relative rarity in American landscape. But the discourse of institutional science precludes these issues. As our biologist put it:

> The problem is it's one of those intangibles. It is not respected by most of the people, agencies, other scientists that we have to deal with. We are constantly required to take the intangibles of the natural environment and try to label them with "what is the benef to us?" . . . And dealing with intangibles, the entire field of natural resources has . . . not found a good way to attach, to make intangibles, the natural field, understandable or valuable to a group of people who attach dollar sign, measure worth by dollars. (3-22-93; 3)

SO WHAT DOES SHE DO?

Faced with this highly regulated discourse, our biologist resists the institution's reductive ideology and style in a number of ways. In the most extreme cases, she resorts to the kind of

blatant action that Pare described in his analysis of Canadian social workers. She said that she is sometimes asked to be a "team player" and help the engineers conduct a project that comes perilously close to breaking the environmental regulation. In such cases she sometimes refuses to do the job, and she then faces the same kind of consequences as Pare's social workers. In fact, she has been reprimanded for insubordination. These are the kinds of cases that our students are thinking of when they say that you can't resist powerful institutional ideology on the job. And the results of this sort of action are not necessarily very productive.

More interesting examples occur when our biologist completes the project or the document in question, but reappropriates the discursive conditions to resist and modify the institutional agenda. She said that when institutional style requires a reductive quantification of complex phenomena, she writes the required document, but accompanies it with another much longer and more detailed one. She says:

> And I send it to a position of authority saying, based on all this stuff, these are my recommendations and I sign it as a Wildlife biologist and ranger staff specialist. This person now is supposed to take that and do something with it; that's his job. (12-16-92; 11)

In the case where excluding "intangibles" denies systemic relations and aesthetic, even spiritual values, she resorts to an even more indirect action, a "tactic" in De Certeau's terms. Because "intangibles" and aesthetics are prohibited, she avoids what would be seen as "subjective" or emotional language. If she uses this language, she gets ignored as a "Lizard Kisser." To circumvent this restriction, she sometimes talks privately with a project manager and, if he is sympathetic, she explains the value of the intangible considerations. More

interestingly, she takes advantage of the institutional distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" of the law. When she cannot explicitly describe qualitative issues in a project, she writes documents that hold the project managers to a generous interpretation of the law rather than their usual literal interpretation. In a literal assumption, any action that is not explicitly prohibited is acceptable, regardless of the consequences. Because the environment is institutionally defined by strict legal codes, this sort of institutional reading radically limits their responsibilities and minimizes environmental issues. In one case she described, she and a state biologist had negotiated a letter in which the base and the state agreed, after seven years of work, on a plan for a project. In the formal letter, they inserted specific language saying that the Range "will obey both the spirit and intent of this agreement." She saw this insertion as a tactical way of officially asserting something of the "holisitc" perspective, the "intent of the overall direction" of environmental concern. She feels that she is engaged in what has become a game, and that she has to outwit the dominant interpretive regime. Like De Certeau's tactics, these actions are taken on the fly. She sometimes holds back a letter ready for signature and waits for the opportune moment when she thinks her superiors will sign it.

In this case, the biologist struggles on the institution's terrain, using available materials to circumvent the dominant commitment to quantitative reduction and minimalist interpretation. She has used writing the way consumers use tactics to "insinuate" alternate and marginalized positions into the dominant discourse. Once her documents are signed and become part of the official record, she has set precedent and forced the institution to recognize if only temporarily something of her environmental agenda and with it the value of "intangibles."

I will close with one more brief excerpt. And I choose this because it suggests the kind of conscious political commitment which I think characterizes resistance and which she demonstrated so thoroughly.

> If I was a person with a different frame of mind I would be finding ways to avoid the laws and would be helping them to bend or go around them. But I became convinced that the military needed more people like myself, who would be willing to tell them that their antiquated ideas were not the way of the future, and to try to push them--with dynamite if necessary--to pick up the pace and get with the program. That that was important. And the longer I've stayed and put up with the bullshit, the more I believe that those who remain and continue to fight are maybe the better biologists in the long run." (3-22-93;15)

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