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Introduction: On the Idea of Discourse Immunity, or the Public Health of Rhetorical Instruction

Immunity. (L. *immunitas*, exemption) The protection of an organism against infectious agents or toxic antigens afforded by a variety of predominately specific humoral or cellular factors.

acquired immunity. The specific protection against pathogens or toxins afforded by a known prior exposure through infection or immunization.

—Arthur M. Silverstein (immunology historian)

I continue to be deeply concerned that the [Bush] administration underestimates the importance of [drug] treatment and [drug] education. We know that education can inoculate children against drug abuse.

—Edward M. Kennedy

[T]he immune system must *recognize* self in some manner in order to react to something foreign.

—Edward S. Golub (immunologist)

I think AIDS is an interesting disease because it . . . actually causes the boundaries of the human being to be blurred between self and environment. The things that can't [usually] grow in you can grow in you. . . . People become culture mediums. I mean, you become a substance upon which many things can grow, can grow and flourish. If you look at it from the microorganism's point of view, they can now grow and flourish in you. You become this kind of incredible rich ground upon which to multiply. I know that's disturbing from the human being's point of view.

—Allan Chase (medical student)

A good argument for an intensive study of rhetoric is that citizens might thereby be put on their guard against the onslaughts of these vicious forms of persuasion.

—Edward P. J. Corbett¹

Learning to Produce and Learning to Receive Rhetoric

Why is rhetorical training important and what are the goals of rhetorical training? We might divide those goals into a binary of learning to *produce* rhetoric and learning to *receive* rhetoric; rhetoric as production and rhetoric as reception; changing the beliefs of others and rendering others' beliefs or one's own beliefs resistant to change. As Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca have written, these interwoven and complementary goals have existed together throughout the tradition of Western rhetoric.

Epidictic discourse, as well as all education, is less directed toward changing beliefs than to strengthening the adherence to what is already accepted. Propaganda changes beliefs. Nevertheless, to the extent that education increases resistance to adverse propaganda, the two activities may advantageously be regarded as forces working in opposite directions. (54)

In this work I wish to sketch the progression of the idea that rhetorical training might endow the student with a kind of *resistance* or *immunity* against bad rhetoric.

The Immunity Metaphor

"Immunity," as Emily Martin explains in *Flexible Bodies*, her genealogy of the discourse of the immune system, has become one of the "great ideas today." It is, in other words, becoming an idea to think with, a metaphor we take to other topics to understand them. More and more, we are seeing our world through the lens of the idea of the immune system. More and more, we are seeing the "ideal and fit person" (15) as the individual with a sound immune system.

Although I most often criticize the "rhetorical training as inoculation" model of education, the analogy between physiological immunity and rhetorical immunity, perhaps, can help us understand what we have done in the past and what we might try to do in the future. Many health experts and many critics of public discourse (both past and present) have regarded the

world as a dangerous place, teeming with dangerous agents, whether microbial or rhetorical in nature. A society's response to any epidemic can take several forms. It might try to clean the place up, wipe out the media (both bacteriologists and cultural critics speak of "cultural media") where these dangerous agents grow and threaten to contaminate the populace. It might try, that is, to make the world a more aseptic place, as was the case in the nineteenth-century hygiene movement or in the various attempts throughout history to deny certain persons and ideas access to the public forum. Or a society might try to separate the diseased from the healthy, stigmatizing the diseased, labeling them as immoral or responsible for their illnesses, as has been the case with leprosy, smallpox, syphilis, and, as shown by writers like Susan Sontag, AIDS. Or, finally, it might try to render the populace more resistant to infectious agents—the prophylaxis/inoculation strategy for controlling disease.

These are not exclusive categories but complementary. In any epidemic, all three strategies are deployed in various combinations. The body that succumbs to disease is portrayed as somehow frail or disordered or out of balance. Individuals are morally responsible for their illness; illness is a curse, a punishment, or at best an embarrassment (Sontag 102). Since the popularization of germ theory in the late nineteenth century, military metaphors have dominated, where campaigns against disease are cast as all-out wars, and where individuals must accept their responsibility for helping to conquer the foe. Illness is portrayed as "an enemy that invades, that lays siege to the body-fortress" (Sontag 96). Or (as in the case of homeopathy and the nineteenth-century "Nature cures") they must restore their *natural immunity*, which has been rendered imbalanced by various aberrant causes (see Fellman and Fellman 25–40). Most commonly, disease is seen as the result of individuals' and societies' deviations from the natural order. Disease could not prevail if we could only restore this natural order.

In terms of rhetoric and rhetorical training, an unhealthy public discourse has often been portrayed in similar terms. As Aristotle portrayed the situation (as I discuss below), bad public discourse results from deviating from the natural order that public rhetoric would take if only the citizenry (or at least its elite leaders) would recognize what constitutes healthful rhetoric and practice it. When unhealthy discourse dominates public discussion, the individual public discursant has two choices: to withdraw from the situation completely into safety, or to acquire a resistance to public discourse so that she might enter that dangerous world with immunity. Individuals must understand how to *receive* this unhealthy discourse properly, so that they might become less susceptible to it. Rhetorical bodies, like bodies in the physiological sense, must become like a fortress that keeps invaders out; or, just as the body must recognize disease-causing

agents before it can destroy them, so too must public discursants recognize bad rhetoric so that they can resist being swayed by it.

A Tradition of Rhetoric as Immunity

Within this division of producing vs. receiving rhetoric, the first (producing rhetoric) is perhaps represented most strongly by the Ciceronian ideal, where rhetorical training is conceived as the means for forming active citizens who would enter the public fray and contribute. The classroom was important to rhetorical training only insofar as it could prepare the active citizen. Withdrawing from the realm of public discourse was simply not an option. In Cicero's *Of Oratory*, Antonius objects to the "flower sort of diction," which is "redolent rather of the training-school and its suppling-oil than of our political hurly-burly and of the Bar" (211). Cicero's more idealistic Crassus agrees. While Crassus's perfect orator would be also a philosopher, rhetorical training must never confine itself to the school, which is artificial, unrigorous, and insular. Young students may need such insularity at first, but the rhetoric practiced in the school is not and cannot be true rhetoric. As Crassus insists,

Then at last must our Oratory be conducted out of the sheltered training-ground at home, right into action, into the dust and uproar, into the camp and the fighting-line of public debate; she [oratory] must face putting everything to the proof and test the strength of her talent, and her secluded preparation must be brought forth into the daylight of reality. (221)

The discussion between the more practical Antonius and the more idealistic Crassus does not question *whether* the goal of rhetorical training is the creation of active citizen-leaders, not even *whether* rhetorical training should include participating in the "hurly-burly" of public life. They argue about *how much* philosophy—how much of the "Greekling" ideals of reflection and "idle speculation"—should be combined with the practical, active, side of rhetorical training.

The other goal of rhetorical training—the ability to receive rhetoric properly—does not stand in simple opposition to its counterpart. For Cicero's Crassus, the perfect orator is a blend of the "real" world of action and the "ideal" world of philosophical speculation. Crassus insists that in order to lead the public toward civic health, the orator must be able to listen to the community (how it conceives itself), listening, that is, with philosophical understanding, so that it can make an informed judgment about what proper course should be advocated.

Aristotle too maintains that a well-practiced rhetoric includes the activity of receiving rhetoric in the proper manner: rhetorical training must endow the rhetor with the capacity to take a distanced (critical and accurate) perspective on public debate. It has been argued for some time that rhetorical training for him was a means of nullifying what Gorgias had called the druglike magic of rhetoric (de Romilly 52), or of neutralizing the rhetorician's "bag of tricks" (George Kennedy 28; Gage, "Why Write?" 10–11). Proper rhetorical training, in fact, represents the *antidote* for corrupt uses of language. As James L. Kastely has argued (though his discussion focuses on Plato), Aristotle's true rhetoric would help us see through "mere" rhetoric as it is improperly and "sophistically" practiced in civic life, so that we might inject into public debate a more accurate vision of the world and the actions that should be taken there. Kastely notes that Aristotle believed that there was a "natural order of truth and justice" that would be adhered to if "true" rhetoric were theorized and practiced. This true rhetoric would help restore this natural order (10–11). The function of rhetoric for Aristotle (at least as stated in the first chapter of Book I of the *Rhetoric*) is "not to persuade but *to see* the available means of persuasion in each case. . . . [I]t is a function of one and the same art *to see* the persuasive and [*to see*] the apparently persuasive, just as [it is] in dialectic [*to recognize*] a syllogism and [*to recognize*] an apparent syllogism" (35, my italics, brackets in Kennedy's translation). As Kennedy comments on this passage, "Both the orator and the dialectician need to be able to recognize" the true as well as the apparent (or specious) argument, and to tell the difference between them (35, note 30). Rhetorical invention must begin, then, with the proper recognition of right and wrong, justice and injustice; and the function of true rhetoric lies in restoring the proper and true order.

Unlike Cicero's discursants in *Of Oratory*, Aristotle did not worry much over the right blend of the real and the ideal, the right blend of getting things done in a rhetorical world on the one side and of ethical/philosophical speculation on the other. Aristotle's rhetor, immersed as she must be at times in public life, needs to distance herself from the public in order to discover and then advocate the proper actions. So for Aristotle, the way to *receive* public discourse is not to receive it at all, but to see through it, reject it, and correct it. And for this lack of attention, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the tradition it has inspired has been radically questioned. Jasper Neel argues we should reject Aristotelian rhetoric as the model for composition studies, since the rhetors he addresses are, at root, antidemocratic aristocrats who desire techniques that will allow them to enter the messy and unclean world of public discourse, and then exit without becoming permanently sullied or altered: "For [Aristotle] and his friends," writes Neel, Athens "was nothing but a cesspool of democratic style and delivery anyway, the

sort of cesspool that no self-respecting aristocrat, no enthymeme master would deign to enter. . . . Rhetoric is the prophylactic that demonstration and dialectic wear in order to protect their identities and their processes from the free play of linguistic transfer" (177, 179). True, Aristotle recognized the world of public discussion was fundamentally contingent, but that was merely the unfortunate result of bad rhetorical practice (bad *technē*): "Aristotle saw an agonistic world in which one speaker had to be right, the other wrong. His own maneuvering allows him to extract himself from that situation in order to articulate the general principles whereby rightness or wrongness are recognizable" (203). Rhetoric properly exercised, then, might render its practitioners healthfully distant from the contaminated world of popular public discourse.

In *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition*, Kastely too suggests that we question the Aristotelian tradition which assumes that justice will "naturally" dominate if we can only get our rhetorical techniques properly in place. Kastely attends to what he calls "the skeptical thread of classical rhetoric," which might "speak more meaningfully to the present" (4, 2). Today, argues Kastely, we can no longer assume with Aristotle that justice is the natural state of human affairs; Plato's philosophy, by Kastely's reading, teaches us about our rhetorical responsibility in a world where "injustice is the natural state" (9). Kastely's Plato can be seen, then, as challenging the Aristotelian tradition of inoculative rhetoric. Indeed, for Plato, true rhetoric does not safeguard discursants in any sense, but makes them radically vulnerable to ideas that might fundamentally change them. He proposes that Plato (as well as Sophocles and Euripides) are, contrary to most contemporary accounts, "friends of rhetoric." Plato provides a philosophy of discourse that better addresses the problem of persuasion in a world where no single political position and no single argumentative technique can ensure the proper conception of justice or the proper means for pursuing justice. The question of *justice*, rather than *knowledge*, assumes the foreground. Kastely sees Plato's skepticism as the foundation for a "flexible rhetorical practice" (rather than technique for winnowing the true from the false) that entangles "us in a lifelong search for justice in which we can never achieve our goal but which nonetheless engenders not a futile life but rather the fullest life that one can lead" (52). Such rhetorical "flexibility" is fraught with risk since we cannot exculpate our responsibility to justice by nodding comfortably to an order of the true and the good. Such practice places our very *selves* in jeopardy:

To practice philosophy as Socrates understands it requires the courage to reject conventional understanding. One has to accept isolation as the price of thinking for oneself. . . . One can exploit

dialectic only if one is willing to open oneself to refutation. . . . The terror that always lurks in a dialectical inquiry is caused by the almost certain prospect of finding out that *one is not who one thinks one is*. This openness requires enormous courage because in such an inquiry one risks discovering commitments that were acquired inadvertently and, even more likely, wrongs that were done unintentionally, but for which the inquirer must accept responsibility. (39, my emphasis)

In other words, when we practice “rhetorical skepticism,”² we open ourselves—consciously, deliberately, responsibly—to ideas that are not “ours” but foreign. We “risk losing our beloved persons and practices and understandings as we seek to know them and ourselves better through a dialectical refutation” (45). We risk losing who we are.

Like Neel, Kastely, and others, I question a rhetorical training whose goals emphasize the production of qualified, distanced, critical receivers of rhetoric. In particular, I question the idea that good rhetoric might serve as the “antidote” to bad rhetoric—or, as I foreground the term, the idea that sound rhetorical training might serve as an inoculation against bad rhetoric, so that we might become less susceptible to the wiles of the wicked rhetor, so that we might securely remain ourselves, uninvaded by alien and dangerous ideas and discourses. And yet I recognize also how difficult it is for teachers of rhetoric to resist the temptation to merely substitute their authoritative discourses and models of critical reflection for those held by students. As Neel warns, “The call of academic elitism through which we arrogate superior aesthetic and ratiocinative powers is practically impossible to resist” (125). Or, as Kenneth Burke put it, human beings as symbol-using, -making, and -misusing animals are inherently “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order) and rotten with perfection” (*Language* 16)—the impulse, in fact the necessity, of substituting one hierarchy, one terminology, for another appears to be our lot as symbol users. No matter what terminological or rhetorical system we adopt for taking apart and better understanding the discourses that have laid hold on us and our students, they too gain their own power over us: “There is a kind of ‘terministic compulsion’ to carry out the implication of one’s terminology” (19). Whether or not we recognize the constructedness of our beliefs and our systems of knowing and naming, they are compelling for us and compel us to take certain actions nonetheless.

And of course the pedagogical imperative to help students resist conformity and manipulation is a noble one. The knowing subject who can stand apart from the competing fray of voices in relative autonomy remains at the center of the Western intellectual tradition. As C. Jan Swearingen

observes, “The knowing subject who stands apart from nature, apart from self, and apart from previous philosophy, even when problematized, remains the protagonist in Western philosophy and aesthetics” (*Rhetoric* 221). From Isocrates and Plato to Burke to contemporary composition theory, rhetorical training has sought to endow students with the wherewithal to resist the powerful discourses of a culture that seeks everywhere to inhabit them. All this is noble and should remain a part of our pedagogical goals.

But rhetorical training errs when it lapses into mere defense, rather than dialectic, or negotiation, or Burke’s identification. To use Burke’s terms, when division is emphasized over identification, or when division and identification are not conceived as thoroughly interwoven, then rhetoric devolves into logomachy, the will to persuade the audience at all costs—rhetoric as productive manipulation. Or it devolves into the effort to erect barriers between the self and foreign discourse, an effort to safeguard oneself from any discourse that would threaten the autonomy and assuredness of the self—a rhetoric of reception that *refuses to receive*. Rhetorical training, then, becomes merely a program for safeguarding students from competing discourses that “we” (intellectuals, the academy, teachers of writing, etc.) see as dangerous. Rhetorical training becomes a method, in part, for ensuring that our students receive discourse in a way that enables them to think and feel in ways that correspond to what is really in their own best interests.

Popular Public Discourse as the Disease, and Rhetorical Training as the Immunization

Throughout this work I return again and again to the idea that rhetorical training might safeguard students against pernicious discourse that seeks to inhabit them. There is a long tradition of explicitly portraying bad rhetoric in terms of disease, infection, or other agents that can infiltrate the body and mind and even spread like a contagion. Bad rhetoric is what the citizenry must be on its guard against, and rhetorical training in this sense protects us by showing us *what* bad rhetoric looks like. We learn to recognize bad rhetoric when we see it. According to the viewpoint that sees rhetoric as a “bag of tricks” that diverts us from our pursuit of truth, if we are to respond “properly” to discourse of any sort we must have the cognitive, moral, and ethical wherewithal to distinguish the healthful from the unhealthful, or the tricks of rhetoric from the truth. For instance, a writer who calls himself/herself “R” explains how s/he was able to *resist* the admittedly very powerful rhetoric of Hitler in World War II Germany:

[Hitler’s oratory] was of the kind that speaks neither to the mind nor to the heart of his audience, but plays upon its nerves until

they are strung to such a pitch of intensity that they shriek for release in action. . . . But it can only be practised by one who has a profound and subtle understanding of the secret hopes and fears of his audience . . . ; who can be a conservative with the conservative, a revolutionary with the revolutionary, a man of peace with the pacifist and a war lord with the belligerent, and on occasion all these things at once should it be necessary. Certainly, Hitler was the greatest master of this type of oratory there has ever been, and I have stood among 10,000 people in the *Sportpalast* in Berlin and known that everyone around me was the victim of its spell. Who knows, if I had not been inoculated in childhood against the tricks or oratory, I might have succumbed myself.³

Obviously, and as Wayne Booth (who quotes this passage) points out, when we speak of such *inoculation* we are simplifying rhetoric into “mere rhetoric”: rhetoric is what we recognize as specious and reject; truth is what we embrace. In this sense, rhetorical training as inoculation is a kind of surveillance system against bad rhetoric.⁴

The “rhetorical training as inoculation” model subscribes fairly closely to what Emily Martin calls the “modernist model of immunity.” Here, there is ideally a clean division between self and nonself, and the immune system’s mission lies in recognizing and then destroying the exogenous pathogen, which is likened to an invading entity. For at least the last fifty years, modernist interpretations of disease and immunity have been “dominant.” In other words, the modernist version of immunity has been the prevailing idea for understanding not only how our bodies work but also the various topics that are informed by the immune-system metaphor. Modernist models of immunity square fairly well with modernist views of argumentation and the arguing self. Here, disease constitutes a “conflict” to be resolved or put down. Pathogenic agents are trouble-making aliens who want to disrupt the natural health of the human body. Here, the immune system is usually portrayed as the body’s military or police force or border guard that brutally enforces the frontier between self and nonself, friendly and alien entities (see also Sontag 63–67). With this modernist version of immunity, the outside must not get inside, and when it does, the outside must be exterminated.

The argumentation analog of the “recognize, then destroy” model of immunity would be *eristic* and *agonia*—“fighting for one’s life,” to use Ong’s phrase. To accept this metaphor of rhetorical training as inoculation against bad rhetoric is to accept what many in rhetoric and composition consider an impoverished sense of discussion and disputation. It hardly needs to be said the combat/border-guard model of debate is the contemporary “popular” view

of rhetoric, where the line between rhetoric and philosophy ought to be (or would be in a just world or among just persons) conceived as a clean and clear one. Assuming that one could possibly be on guard against rhetoric but still open to knowledge, assumes, as Richard Lanham puts it, that “[r]hetoric is cosmetic, and bad girls wear makeup as well as good ones, probably better” (*Electronic Word* 158).

Wayne Booth, writing in 1982, commented, “We really do seem to be surrounded by masters of ‘mere’ rhetoric, many of them professional liars using rhetoric to trap us. Every day millions of Americans are taken in by public words that no *educated person* could believe after careful thought and investigation” (*Vocation* 340, my emphasis). Surely, implies Booth, with his tongue firmly in cheek, we might expect the ordinary citizen, the member of the “mob,” to fall for such tricks, but not the educated person, who has been taught to distinguish right from wrong, who should have been taught to recognize the difference between good and bad rhetoric. With this bit of irony, Booth suggests one of the main premises of the antirhetorical stance, its antidemocratic, paternalistic bent. Indeed, as Stanley Fish points out, “there is always just beneath the surface of the antirhetorical stance a powerful and corrosive elitism” (*Doing* 473). As Joseph Harris argues, cultural studies pedagogy that portrays the competent observer as somehow invulnerable to the pernicious effects of popular culture (while others, of course, possess no such power) indicates its “deep anti-democratic impulse, a fear of the mob” (“The Other Reader” 228).

Just as the diseased body is conceived as weak or morally aberrant, the rhetorical body that succumbs to “mere” rhetoric is both responsible for its predicament and is labeled as “weak,” “cursed,” or justifiably “punished.” As Sontag notes, disease has always served certain groups well for labeling certain other groups as weak, inferior, or immoral (*passim*).

The Inoculation and Resistance Theory of Attitude Change

There are other problems with the inoculation/resistance metaphor of persuasion, which can be illustrated through the research of social psychologists and communications scholars, who have been using the “inoculation and resistance” metaphor since the early 1960s. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, with worries over Nazi and Soviet propaganda, with the widespread discussion of such works as *The Authoritarian Personality*, *The Lonely Crowd*, and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, American society as well as the academy seemed preoccupied with the question of *conformity* (Halberstam 521–36; Larson 63–64). In the field of social psychology, and later in speech communications, academics began exploring why it seemed that people could be so easily manipulated toward obedience. The verdict

on attitude change and conformity was straightforward: it was alarming how easily individuals abandoned their beliefs and sense of morality when confronted with even the flimsiest of arguments. People's attitudes were alarmingly open to manipulation. Social psychologists wanted not only to understand why people conformed but also to learn how individuals might be made less "susceptible" to conformity. These social psychologists found, basically, that John Milton was right when he said in his *Aeropagitica* that the best way to fortify an individual's immunity against persuasion was to put it to the test.

The "inoculation" analogy was constructed by social-psychologist William J. McGuire, who first discussed "resistance" and "susceptibility" to attitude change in a 1961 article, "The Effectiveness of Supportive and Refutational Defenses in Immunizing and Restoring Beliefs against Persuasion." Using a medical/biological metaphor, McGuire suggested that just as individuals can be made resistant to a disease or virus by giving them a mild or "attenuated" strain of the germ so that they would develop antibodies, they can be made more resistant to discrepant beliefs by inoculating their initial attitudes. The inoculation "treatment" consisted of exposing experimental subjects to weak counterattitudinal messages prior to exposing them to stronger, truly threatening messages. These researchers found that persons could be made resistant to persuasion by exposing them to such weakened virus-arguments, which stimulate their defenses. They will then be put on guard for *other* potentially damaging counterarguments, that is, on guard against arguments that are contrary to and threaten the individual's beliefs. As a contemporary researcher puts it, "Inoculation does more than simply preempt specific content. The threatening material triggers the motivation to bolster attitudes, thus *conferring a broad blanket of protection against all potential counterarguments*" (Burgoon et al. 488, my emphasis). The literature on "attitudinal inoculation" is vast and impressive. Literally thousands of laboratory studies and case studies have shown attitudinal inoculation does occur, in a wide range of situations and across a fairly broad spectrum of attitude types. Young persons, for instance, can be inoculated against peer pressure to smoke (Pfau, Bockern, and Kang); and as I will discuss momentarily, voters can be inoculated against the "attack-ads" of political campaigns.

The inoculation/resistance metaphor subscribes to modernist notions of belief, just as it subscribes to, as Martin calls it, modernist metaphors of physiological immunity, where the body is ideally a fortress that prevents dangerous agents from transgressing the frontier between self and nonself. The attenuated, weak counterarguments (the experimental treatment) are likened to immunogenic microbes, which show the body how to recognize dangerous beliefs when they encounter them and tell the body to put itself

“on guard” against subsequent assaults. The arguments that truly threaten the subject are likened to pathogenic microbes, which try to infect the body and compromise its harmony or integrity. Subjects supposedly hold attitudes that are “theirs” (which are created by their true selves), but counterattitudinal beliefs (beliefs that do not rightly belong in the believing body) threaten to invade this integrated and autonomous self. The difficulty, of course, lies in distinguishing the healthy body’s beliefs from the invading beliefs. Which are healthy and which are pathogenic depends on which beliefs you hold to be the true ones. Inoculation seeks to render the body or the belief-holding subject immune to attitude change, decidedly not to render it more open to the possibility of entertaining new beliefs and understanding them—or being transformed by them.

Research focusing on inoculation against attitude change has also illustrated how tricky and dangerous such strategies can be. In some cases attempts at inoculation can result in what has been called a “boomerang effect”: the effort “backfires” as the attempt to inoculate actually *magnifies* the effect of persuasion you are trying to inoculate against. One very interesting such case occurred when Kathleen Hall Jamieson at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication and her colleagues devised a program for helping the news media neutralize the power of misleading political “attack ads.” During the 1992 presidential campaign they began working on a program called “adwatch.” They showed political attack ads to a group of experimental subjects and explained to the subjects how the ads included “errors and misleading claims” (Cappella and Jamieson 342). The adwatch program was seen by the researchers as inoculative in nature: like the experimental subjects, the voting citizenry might be immunized against a broad range of misleading political-ad strategies.

Inoculation is a way of preempting an attack ad, especially if it can be anticipated. Inoculation forewarns that an attack is imminent, summarizes the lines of argument in the attack, rebuts the attack, and offers a base of evidence and reason to uphold the attacked position. . . . The newscaster [who narrates the adwatch spot] counterargues . . . , thereby reducing the persuasive impact of the ad and inoculating against subsequent exposures to the same or argumentatively similar ads. (Cappella and Jamieson 346–47)

However, the researchers obtained results that were opposite to their expectations. Jamieson and her colleagues were surprised to find that their adwatch segments could—and did—backfire, or “boomerang.” Persons “exposed” to the attack ads were *more* likely to favor the candidate who launched the attack ad than were persons with no exposure.

They found that the reason-based critiques of adwatch simply could not compete with the image-based attack ads, which made skillful use of visual information. Visual information, reasoned the researchers, appeals to emotional responses, enhances memorability, and is “processed quickly by receivers, while their minds are virtually at rest.” In general, the attack-ad rhetoric often *outtrumped* the effects of the verbal, reason-based critique (Pfau and Loudon 326–28). (One might say it is a case of pathos overpowering logos.) Therefore, in this contest between the image-based attack ad and the reason-based attack-ad critique, “the spot is likely to win” (Pfau and Loudon 328). Indeed, for some groups of viewers in particular, adwatch critiques not only failed to neutralize the attack ads but also actually *magnified* the effect of subsequent exposures to the original attack ad: “once a television ad plants an image in the mind of the receiver, subsequent airing of the spot, even in the context of an adwatch, may have the effect of reinforcing that image” (Pfau and Loudon 328). The adwatch spots had the unfortunate and unintended effect of helping the attack ads bamboozle the subject-viewers further.

In short, the inoculation-and-resistance model does not square with postmodern conceptions of knowledge or of subjectivity and the strategy is fraught with risk. This is not to suggest that *because* this model is not postmodern in character that there is something inherently wrong with it. Rather, this suggests that changes in subjectivity (or even changes in attitudes about specific beliefs) are rarely, if ever, accomplished with ease or assuredness. Human beings are more complex than the inoculation model implies. However, just as modernist theories of inoculation and resistance have informed (and oversimplified and impoverished) modernist theories of attitude change, postmodern theories of resistance might square better with contemporary ideas about what it is we expect to accomplish through rhetorical training. These emerging models might help us better envision the characteristics we wish to have our students embrace. They might help us better envision what characterizes healthy discussion and what characterizes the healthful participant in discussion.

Contemporary Composition and “Flexibility”

Contemporary composition teachers are still—and with good reason—captivated by the problem of cultural conformity, but their conceptions of how students are persuaded not to conform remain, in many cases, unhelpfully informed by modernist ideas of attitude change. As John Trimbur and others have described the goals of cultural studies and composition, it should help students resist “the imposition and reproduction of dominant forms of thought, structures of feeling, and patterns of behavior” (9). In other words,

cultural studies helps individuals resist the “subject positions” imposed upon them. To an increasing extent, they recognize further that withdrawing from the world of actual public discourse is not an option. Academic literacy cannot remain in the ivory tower but must engage meaningfully with the world outside the academy. I too find such rationales worthy ones, but I fear that some cultural-studies pedagogies do little more than “expose” our students to cultural theory and critique. Mere exposure cannot fundamentally alter students, or at least such change is all too rare and unpredictable. Believing that teaching cultural studies will lead students to acquiring a lifelong habit of resisting cultural conformity is either naïve or grandiose on our part. While we may think our students have merely conformed to the penetrations of commodity culture, we have to remember that those cultural beliefs, as far as our students are concerned, are *their* beliefs, and that our countercultural intrusions are the alien ones. To put this in terms of the inoculation/resistance metaphor, for our students, the beliefs of commodity culture are those of the healthy body, and the teacher’s countercultural beliefs are the immunogenic or pathogenic ones. And it seems likely that rather than really changing our students, we may merely be providing them with immunity to any countercultural arguments they will encounter after our class, leading, in other words, to the boomerang effect.

The question, therefore, should come down to efficacy: *Can* we, that is, in the short time we have with our students, bring about the terribly complex and difficult changes we are seeking (see Alcorn and chapter 7 of this book)? So, with Alan Kennedy I wonder if, “far from being an inoculation against success in late capitalist America, classes founded on resisting the dominant ideology might well be keys to success in it” (25). Richard Ohmann agrees that the issue of achieving real change poses “a hard question that should be asked more often. . . . [S]tudents came to college to gain social advantage, not to defect; to elaborate their individuality, not discard it.” Ohmann questions the published accounts of student change in the cultural-studies classroom, and wonders about the longevity of such change: “But what next . . . for those [“transformed”] students—for the ones who say they will never see the world the same way again? All too likely, . . . [they will turn to the pleasure] of ‘participation in the construction of a new world, free from class, gender, race exploitation’” (329). Just as Jamieson and her colleagues discovered that reason-based critiques are sometimes no match for the emotional power of visual rhetoric, we might consider that in our cultural-studies classrooms, reason-based arguments against commodity culture may be no match for the lifelong inscription of desires and identities. Do we stand a chance of substantially altering our students by merely “exposing” them to cultural theory?

It is neither practical nor even ethical to have as one's teacherly goals helping students acquire immunity or resistance to their culture or to the ideas of others. We should not and probably cannot help students become like fortresses that exclude all alien agents or ideas, which we teach them to recognize so they can never invade or transform student writers.

Perhaps Martin's description of what she calls the "postmodern model of immunity" can help. As Martin illustrates, our standards for the "ideal and fit person" change, and these changes are informed (to an increasing extent) by our imaginings of what the immune system is. The modernist interpretation of disease portrays illness as a problem of imbalance or as a "conflict" that needs to be resolved or demolished. But a postmodern model of immunity and disease is emergent, partly because science is changing, partly because the AIDS epidemic has necessitated different understandings, and partly because we are thinking about the world and ourselves differently. In the postmodern model, disease is conceived to be something like an "imbalance," but the imbalance does not result from a deviation from the *natural* workings of the body. Rather, imbalances always occur and are, in a healthy body, temporary, part of an exquisite, always-changing give-and-take between self and nonself. In the postmodern model, the immune system is an organizing and systematizing power within us that must be *flexible*. *Flexibility* suggests that the immune system is capable of adapting to and responding "intelligently" to the changes in what counts as self and nonself. The immune system must alter itself according to the present state of the system and the environment. There is always the interplay between self and nonself. Here it is recognized that outside always gets inside, and in fact that the distinction between outside and inside (self and nonself) is a dynamic one. If our immune systems are to be flexible, they must be clever enough (not just tough enough) to enter risky situations (the world is a risky place of germs and disease), where contagion can never be prevented but only responded to. Whether an antigen (an agent that provokes an immunological response) causes disease depends *not* on the antigen itself, but in many cases on our bodies' reactions to it. Therefore, a healthy immune system does not respond to every agent it regards as foreign (as in the case of hay fever or certain other allergies), but only to those that really pose a threat to the body. If we think about the immune system this way, then the metaphor of "militia" and "fortress" becomes insufficient, and we must move on to metaphors such as a computer interface, or some other metaphor that allows us to think about immunity as a dynamic system that "organizes" and "systematizes" unpredictable and always-changing conditions—something that can constantly renegotiate the relationship of self *with* nonself. Keeping foreign bodies out—keeping the body whole, untainted, and unviolated—is no longer the paramount issue.

Responding intelligently and flexibly, even to the point of self-transformation, becomes the preeminent concern.

Of course, Martin's *flexibility* resembles in some remarkable ways what many compositionists have been theorizing and practicing in recent years. Students are not taught to merely apply an accepted paradigm for reading, interpreting, and deconstructing their culture or the ideas of others. Nor are they taught merely to be "on guard" or "to see through" them. This is not to say writing teachers ought not to teach interpretive strategies, but only that these strategies should not be conceived as methods for safeguarding students from dangerous ideas. The concern becomes not erecting barriers between student writers and their culture, or between students and the ideas of others. Rather, students are taught that outside always gets inside, and that trying to make ultimate distinctions between the two is a difficult, probably impossible, task. Self, culture, and other must be examined together, in terms of one another. The interpretive and rhetorical strategies we teach, in other words, might resemble Kastely's "rhetorical skepticism," where one still strives to reject conventional understandings and one still must take responsibility for their positions, but, rather than erecting safeguards, one opens oneself up to "the almost certain prospect of finding out that one is not who one thinks one is" (39). Student writers strive to understand "who they are" and "who they might become" *through* their investigations of culture and the ideas of others; and they strive to understand their culture and the ideas of others *through* their investigations of themselves.