

Composing an “Agon” and “Lettering a Public”: Democracy Between Binaries?

Jeremy G. Gordon
Gonzaga University

Abstract. In response to ongoing expansion of neoliberal ideology in democratic education, this essay details a classroom experiment that attempts to “redo,” or “recreate” democracy. Recrafting democracy, in this context, takes shape in active efforts to compose an agonistic public sphere through a specific kind of “lettering a public.” As described, intentionally inefficient student efforts to “care-fully” compose, revise, and mail democratic letters allowed a more reciprocal and felt form of democratic deliberation to unfold. The essay describes the “Dear Demos” course assignment and articulates how the experiment in doing democracy might work to contest neoliberal notions of efficient, technocratic models of self-governance.

Keywords: neoliberalism, democratic deliberation, rhetoric, composition, agonism, letters.

Of Conflict and "Conversations" in the Pacific Northwest: Binaries in Democratic Practice

The summer of 2020 in Spokane, Washington was, like that in many cities in the United States, sweltering—materially and metaphorically. Ecological and political temperatures were above average. Pandemic tensions reverberated, amplified by mask-burning ceremonies, confrontations in grocery store aisles, and adamant, vague refrains about free breathing by anti-mask “advocates.” Many of those most concerned about breathing free and easy, however, found it all too easy to dismiss calls for breath by protestors and activists responding to the murder of George Floyd, a murder that choked off the potential for taking a breath. The violent suffocation of George Floyd prompted an array of responses. In the Pacific Northwest, Portland, Oregon became a focal point, or rather, a flash point for unrest and daily (and nightly) encounters between protestors and police forces. The streets of Portland were sites of embodied democratic action for 100 consecutive nights, even though the unrest was “officially” deemed a “riot” (Levinson, 2020). A riotous display, for sure. “Naked Athena” showed up, and suburban yard tools became tactical ways to disperse tear gas (Lang, 2020; Nguyen 2020). Meanwhile, in Seattle, Washington, a “protest society” established “CHAZ,” the Capitol Hill autonomous zone, an experiment in radical democracy without police (Bush, 2020). According to “citizens” of CHAZ, the move was to establish a space for reimagining how to arrange a community in more egalitarian ways. Of course, stately rhetorical responses to riots and autonomous zones were less than generous. Most pointedly, then U.S. Attorney Justice William Barr (2020) deemed Seattle and Portland “anarchist jurisdictions,” to help justify the use of police force and the presence of U.S. military personnel in the cities. According to Barr and the U. S. Department of Justice (2020), Seattle and Portland were sites of “domestic terror.”

Such rhetoric framed sites of dissent as antidemocratic or, at least, a threat to communities or law and order. In essence, rhetorically situating dissent as anarchist riots worked to tame democratic practice, narrowing democratic engagement in ways that promoted what Robert L. Ivie called “demophobia”: the fear of democracy and democratic practices that exceed and challenge the formal, quiet, and orderly kind (Ivie, 2005, p. 34). Expressions of demophobia (such as calls to dismantle experiments in community governance and frame dissent as domestic terror) are, as Ivie noted, hinged to assumptions that figure democracy as present in ideal public spheres. Here (in ideal public spheres), universally assumed neutral and rational deliberation in the service of truth is pitted against “the realm

of the scramble," in which a plurality of forms are part of democratic struggle (Ivie, 2005, p. 28).¹ Put another way, fear of dissent, revolt, loudness, and embodied encounters in streets is situated as hostile to public ideal public spheres and the institutional power structures that maintain them. Calls for "law and order," peace and prosperity, reason and safety rhetorically promote cultural containment of democracy by liberal-democratic institutions that act as arbiters of *proper* civic engagement.

Democratic containment was on full display in Spokane, Washington, where protestors took to Spokane's streets, the ones that were blocked off to make room for walkers. According to local television, protests started peacefully, "productively," and within a reasonable time frame. However, a few protestors decided to stick around after curfew. They stood at the edge of Riverside Park, a public place in downtown Spokane. Others stayed around a few intersections, with signs and slogans. Then, tear gas and batons were brought out to disperse what was left of the crowd. All the while, White male "militia" members started patrolling sidewalks, with high-powered rifles. They vowed to protect the streets, and places of business, from "radical" anti-fascist activists. The local television stations loved it all, maybe especially the spectacle of rogue agents of law and order. There was no mention of violence, or threats of violence, even as batons and battle-ready militia members made shows of force. Things did not become violent, according to reporters, until a brick pierced the window of a Nike store. The framing of the events was striking, after that. The montage that introduced daily news reports began with a colorful collection of marchers, ultimately gathering at the park to hear speakers, yell a bit, and leave. But then, the montage took a sinister turn, from colorful protestors to agitators and rioters shaded in black and white, a stark binary between "good" citizens and "bad" rioters, democratic action and criminal acts. Close-ups on the cracked store window were followed by clouds of tear gas near the park and police being confronted in the streets. The logic provided by the narrative is, well, black and white. Democracy was fine until the brick.

Constructed binaries between democratic agents and bad actors provided the backdrop for the fall 2021 version of Encounters in Public Spheres (COMM 340), a communication studies course addressing how public spheres are rhetorically shaped, maintained, contested, and controlled. As the title of the course suggests, we were especially invested in questions of how everyday encounters in public life constitute publics and public culture. Given the regional and national context, we could not avoid questions of how encounters in public places (such as those in Seattle and Spokane) were framed and how democratic engagement was constructed in either/or binary terms. More to the point, we became invested in how "democracy" was located, articulated, defined, and dismissed and how demophobia was expressed in media coverage and political statements. The sociopolitical context for the course is important to take account of, as it set the tone for semester topics, assignments, and activities, all of which explored the appeal of ideal public spheres as *the* place where democracy happens—as well as the limits of those assumptions. More than this, we wondered about how to do democracy between the binaries. That is, we pondered how democracy and democratic practice might emerge in ways that press the limits of democratic containment while avoiding judgments of participating in what some would call political terror. What follows, then, is an account of how students in COMM 340 practiced democracy between binaries, and, in the process, attempted to compose a less idealized but still deliberative and agonistic public sphere while being situated in a time and place in which direct democracy and radical dissent were constrained.

¹ The realm of the democratic scramble is not to be confused with, or used to justify, the kinds of political activities (and terror) taking place on January 6, 2020. Violent coup attempts grounded in White supremacy, neoauthoritarian attitudes, and policies that, fundamentally, aim to undermine democracy are distinct from even radical dissent working to promote collective governance and address ongoing injustice and inequity.

Part I. Studying Antidemocratic Public Spheres

As a class, we studied encounters between people, places, and things, ultimately focusing on a televised "Community Conversation" about race and policing, a conversation managed and mediated by a local television outlet.² Relying on democratic theory, we noted that the community conversation quickly became a marker of the powerful pull of deliberative democracy and the desire that "ideal discourse" can guarantee "reasonable outcomes" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 117). Together, we analyzed how the conversation assumed that "the proper field of politics is identified as the exchange of arguments between reasonable persons guided by the principle of impartiality," which is best achieved by observing procedures that govern ways of speaking (Mouffe, 2000, p. 116), all in hopes of reaching consensus and agreement. In many ways, the community conversation, and its end, helped define how and by whom democracy is done, with the improper fields of politics populated by dissenters who did not observe the "procedures for deliberation" presumed to make rational consensus possible (Mouffe, 2000, p. 115). Most notably, the class concluded that the Spokane conversation was necessary but not sufficient for democracy, equality, and free and open public deliberation, particularly given the power differences on the stage. No matter how many times a high school student of color rhetorically revealed the failings of Spokane mayor Mayor Nadine Woodward on the issues of race and policing, the procedural-based approach made sure that elite, institutional power stayed in place and guaranteed that the public sphere remained exclusionary.

As Chantal Mouffe (2000) might say, Spokane's "community conversation" was ultimately an evasion of plurality and the plural practices required for democracy. Privileged as the democratic ideal, the conversation precluded the possibility of contestation in Spokane's public sphere, instrumentalizing democracy into a purely procedural matter. As the credits rolled, the end of the community conversation assumed an end to contestation and conflict, reasserting hegemonic notions of violence, and avoiding questions of power. In the process, privileging the conversation, as a number of students emphasized, narrowed democratic rhetoric and the kinds of rhetorical practices that might be included in democratic deliberation.

When democratic deliberation is restricted to (presumably) disembodied speech distinct from passion and power, democracy becomes an activity in managing (to use a market term) citizenship. Nancy Fraser (2005) made it quite clear that democracy and democratic deliberation cannot be disentangled from differences in power, social standing, hegemonic constructions of "good speech," and what one might presume to be a perfect public sphere. When expertise and specific styles of eloquence are required for entrance into democratic deliberation, thin definitions of democracy emerge, primarily connected to counting up votes as the symbol of aggregate agreement. Citing the community conversation as preserving democracy signals a fear of collective governance, fear that paves the way for technocratic management styles of governance. Mouffe's (2000) words echoed as the community conversation credits rolled: "Bringing any deliberation to a close always requires a *decision* which excludes other possibilities, and for which one should never seek to escape from responsibility by invoking the supposed commands of general rules or principles" (p. 128). Of course, given conversations about bricks through Nike's windows, we had to consider how demophobia is inspired and sustained by economic logics, especially the drive for negotiation and avoiding conflict in favor of efficiency.

² For more on the "Community Conversation," see https://www.khq.com/news/watch-khqs-community-conversation-with-spokane-leaders-about-race-and-policing-part-1/video_541e771a-aabf-11ea-8ec6-33e64e17088f.html

Part II. Neoliberal Nihilism. An Undoing of Democratic Education

As a class, we struggled with the fraught relationships between democracy and economy. Ultimately, we went to Wendy Brown (2015) for help. Brown (2015) described how neoliberal logics have pervaded everyday democratic life, and how neoliberal rationality remakes everything, and everyone, in the image of *homo economicus*. In contemporary neoliberal times, argued Brown (2015), the *demos* (democratic peoples) disintegrates into atomistic pieces of human capital—to be sold, bought, marketed, and exchanged. As Brown (2015) wrote, neoliberalism is more than a set of economic policies or a form of relation between state and economy. “Rather, as a normative order of reason . . . and deeply disseminated rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (p. 23). All spheres of existence—public and private, educational and religious—are framed and measured by economic metrics, even if those spheres are not directly monetized. Situated in neoliberal logics, democracy as collective self-governance morphs into periodic aggregations of votes and ratings. Any collective spirit or notion of a public good is eviscerated, in favor of purely private enterprise, rendering citizens that might participate in a common good as consumers seeking a return on investment (Taylor, 2020). Would-be citizens become atomistic capitals competing for social, political, and economic market share, leveraging competitive position and the managerial techniques that allow them to do so efficiently.

Guided by neoliberal rationality, democratic encounters in public spheres become economic transactions, with efficiency as the ultimate aim. Brown (2011) emphasized that educational spheres are no different. When maximizing personal interests is the end of education and anti-intellectual sentiment spreads, students are interpellated as “a speck of human capital, making an engaged citizen, an educated public or education for public life” moot (Brown, 2011, p. 23). Of course, as neoliberalism dominates every other sphere of existence, “there is no public life to be educated for” (Brown, 2011, p. 23). Democratic education is also undone by attachments to specialization and professionalization, both of which unravel intimate connections between democratic participation and the ever-eroding liberal arts. As Brown (2011) emphasized, the status of a liberal arts education is being undone from all sides. “Cultural values spurn it, capital is not interested in it, neoliberal rationality does not index it” (p. 22). With neoliberalism rationality dominating every sphere of existence, it is no wonder that the community conversation in Spokane became the idealized site for democratic engagement, an efficient process leading to consensus and rational agreement, a valorization of erasing tensions, and a managing of conflict between protestors and professionals. All were “accomplished” in the conversation. At least, it was assumed so.

Critics might ask if alternatives are possible. What is democracy, and a democratic education, if not a community conversation? Such questions were addressed by Astra Taylor (2020), who argued that thinking deeply about democracy is needed, but this is hampered by the very fact that most have rarely encountered democracy in everyday life, at least, democracy as an ongoing struggle for equity, belonging, and social justice. Students in COMM 340, in general, agreed with Taylor's arguments and reaffirmed that opportunities for a plurality of democratic practices in neoliberal contexts, including educational settings, are rare—even though developing capacities needed for any semblance of democracy is important:

If democracy, in an era of enormously complex global constellations and powers is still possible, it requires a people who are educated, thoughtful, and democratic in sensibility. . . . The survival of democracy depends upon a broadly and deeply educated people resisting the neoliberalization of everything, including themselves. (Brown, 2011, p. 36)

How, then, might such a sensibility emerge in an educational context? How might educators create the conditions for deeper democratic encounters? How might we invite students to develop the capacities for democratic deliberation that challenges neoliberal conversations? How might students encounter each other in more dynamically democratic ways? "Encounter" is the key term. If democracy is all about how encounters between people are constituted, then providing chances for students to encounter each other is vital, particularly if those encounters contest neoliberal rationality and procedural logics that police well-manicured public spheres. What follows, then, is a single example of how deeper democratic encounters might take place in a university context. To be certain, the example is imperfect, fraught with allegiances to deliberative rhetoric, and does not completely vanquish neoliberal logics. Neither is it absolutely unique, or new. Rather, the sample activity is an experiment inspired by others attempting to rewrite democratic engagement and recompose what Mouffe (2000) called an "agon," a place where ongoing "competitive collaboration" might emerge (p. 38).

Part III. "Crafting" an *Agon*. Recomposing the Demos in COMM 340?

Encounters in Public Spheres (EPS; COMM 340) is an upper-division communication studies course at Gonzaga University, a private Jesuit liberal arts institution in Spokane, Washington. As part of a broader communication studies curriculum, COMM 340 builds from courses focused on the rhetorical construction of meaning, power, and identity.³ In EPS, students address questions of how publics and counter-publics emerge. We ask how publics and public spheres take shape, how they become meaningful, and how they become powerful and explore the different ways in which they interact. In essence, we understand encounters in and between public spheres as where democratic engagement happens, especially as struggles over space, meaning, and power are foregrounded in a plurality of interactions. The hope is that COMM 340 helps students become attentive to how encounters in public spheres reveal how inclusion and exclusion are constructed, and how such constructions are rhetorically shaped.⁴ Given the contexts and conversations in the summer of 2020, The fall 2020 semester of EPS centered questions of how we—as a class—might actively take part in rhetorically constituting encounters in public spheres. In the process, we were most concerned with how such rhetorical efforts are part of crafting democratic rhetoric and practicing democratic engagement.⁵ Ultimately, EPS was an attempt to cultivate a democratic sensibility, one rooted in ongoing, embodied, agonistic encounters with others. The semester provided us with a chance to *do* democracy, to experiment with how different modes of rhetoric might allow us to craft publics.

Accenting the doing of democracy allowed us, with Daniel Brouwer and Robert Asen (2010), to reconceptualize rhetoric(s) in public spheres. Brouwer and Asen suggested a slight shift in how one describes the shape of public life—from public *spheres* to public *modalities*. Amplifying modalities, according to Asen and Brouwer, "foregrounds productive arts of crafting publicity," or the ways that people compose public encounters (p. 16). Accentuating "craft" helps draw attention to the capacities

³ For a more detailed look at the Gonzaga University communication studies department and curriculum, see: <https://www.gonzaga.edu/college-of-arts-sciences/departments/communication-studies/about-the-department>

⁴ From the official course description: "This class explores contemporary theoretical conversations about publics and public spheres: what they look like, how they are shaped, how they arrange political bodies, and how we navigate their boundaries and borders of inclusion and exclusion. Students analyze how different modes of communication promote solidarities around common concerns and arrange difference, as well as how we form counter-publics and spaces of resistance and transformation." See also the Gonzaga University communication studies department course listing and descriptions at <https://www.gonzaga.edu/college-of-arts-sciences/departments/communication-studies/courses>

⁵ I should note that this course was all digital, all the time. It was not an online course, just a course adapted for a digital context during pandemic times. I am happy to share the course "syllazine" (syllabus) upon request.

for “creativity, coordination, and determination” in fashioning ways of being in the world (p. 20). Craft, in the way that Asen and Brouwer detailed it, is a dynamic production and revision of knowledge, of invention, and intervention. Brouwer and Asen stressed that public crafting is grounded in everyday rhetorical arts, situating democratic performance as a manner of being in the world. It might be apt to say that doing democracy is a matter of crafting democracy—fashioning encounters, stylizing relations, and creating the forms that invite agonism. As such, democratic crafting provides one way to challenge assumptions that essentialize democracy into formal procedures, capital competition, and technocratic reign.

Agonism centers “competitive collaboration” in political dramas, situating democratic citizens as “legitimate adversaries to be *addressed* rather than enemies who must be destroyed” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 38). “Addressed” is the term that best describes the first assignment in COMM 340: “Dear Demos. Rhetorically Lettering a Public” (Appendix A). The assignment was inspired by Buntin et al.’s (2020) *Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy*, a collection of letters composed by a variety of writers addressing a multiplicity of social, political, and ecological issues, topics, and controversies in the contemporary United States. The contributors “addressed” readers in a variety of forms. Some are poetic calls to action. Others are more traditional correspondences. There are manifestos, treatises, reflections, think pieces, and fractured and fragmented word art. Letters are organized around primary themes, such as “Geographies of Exclusion,” “Extractions, Extinctions,” “Depletions,” and “Memories (Imaginings) and Other Americas.” Regardless of form or content, each letter blends political and personal concerns, holding feelings and political agency together, stressing that emotion is an important part of democratic citizenship. Taken together, the letters construct a kind of public sphere, a place “of appearance” in which individuals can disclose their (public) identities and establish relations (Passerin d’ Entrèves, 1992). The level of intimacy in *Dear America* letters calls for responses that enliven the *potential* for encounters. That is, the collection provides models for agonistic democratic deliberation and ways to, indeed, address and letter a public.⁶

Composing an Encounter and Lettering a Public: Rhetoric Between the Binaries

If riots in Portland and Seattle are case studies for democratic dissent and more direct rhetorical action, Spokane’s community conversation exemplifies commitments to democratic containment and demophobia. The dichotomies provided the grounds for our “Dear Demos” assignment, which was prompted by questions about how to rhetorically engage in a democratic fashion, without reaffirming neoliberal habits. While the assignment is far from perfect, it is an attempt to address that question.

After critically reflecting on pieces from *Dear America*, students began the process of writing their own letters to “America,” or rather, to the “Demos,” an imagined democratic populace. Their topics differed, as did their approach. Like *Dear America* letters, student compositions varied in form and tone. Some were more poetic, others more essay-like. Some featured rage, others grief, others hope. Student writing knotted the personal and the political together. They featured feelings, while attending to local, regional, state, and national issues. Most layered those different spheres together, engaging with broader U.S. issues in more intimate ways, grounding engagements within a particular context. As such, student letters also provided a space for disclosing public identities—to each other, and to other students in a different region of the United States. As letters were sent and envelopes

⁶ Letters may seem “old fashioned,” perhaps even an attempt to re-establish dominant forms of rhetoric, especially those connected to official public discourses found in letters to the editor, yet most of the letters that students composed would not “fit” within the generic conventions of newspaper publication.

opened (details below), agonistic rhetorical encounters "unfolded," encounters of revision and reciprocity.

Unfolding Encounters: Revision and Reciprocity

A crucial part of this assignment involved the actual sharing of letters with other students, beyond course peers. Collaborating with a colleague at another private institution in South Carolina made it possible for students to create and sustain rhetorical encounters, constituting an interstate space of appearance that was consistently made and remade. Students from Gonzaga and the university in South Carolina traded printed and/or hand-written letters with each other, relying on the United States Postal Service (USPS) to help construct their encounters. Each letter—whether written or received—marked an opportunity to revise encounters, and the rhetoric that shape encounters. To be sure, revision does not mean that letters (and encounters with them) became more rational, or more agreeable. Rather, the letters became a rhetorical site of pluralistic democratic deliberation. In practicing an ongoing reciprocal circulation of letters (back and forth), students kept deliberation moving, without a particular end to be reached. That is, their trading of letters resisted a procedural foreclosure of deliberation, leaving open the possibility for response—or rather, the potential for the unfolding of a public encounter.

The term “unfolding” should not go unnoticed here. Certainly, the trading of letters allows for the unfolding of an agon, in metaphorical terms—composing and reciprocating personal/public letters as a way to allow democratic relations to emerge. Additionally, rhetorical praxis itself unfolds, primarily through revision. Given the letter form, compositions invite constant revision. This includes what is written on the page. However, it might also include revisions of ideas, perspectives, and attachments. With each letter, shared meaning of public and private lives can be rewritten, recreated. Again, not all moments of unfolding were comfortable, or without conflict. The circulation of letters helped sustain conflict as the very thing that bound students together. Letters on paper, signed, sealed, and delivered, maintained sites for ongoing democratic encounters, especially given that the letters were, actually, printed (and handwritten) and mailed. Without the immediacy of digital platforms and formats, careful attention to compositions became paramount. After all, sharing letters via the USPS makes immediate replies and revisions impossible. Students had to, quite literally, sit with what they and their interlocutors had composed, knowing that a significant amount of time would pass before they could send their next letter. Waiting for the chance to read, write, revise, and respond emphasized the literal unfolding of democratic relations, emphasizing that democratic life is inefficient and embodied, perhaps without particular ends—quite the opposite of neoliberal logics of contemporary "democracy."

"Snail Mail": Inefficiency and Enveloping Embodiment

The purposeful decision to rely on “snail mail” for this assignment was informed by multiple factors. First, the USPS was at the center of attention during the 2020 election cycle. Unfounded concerns about the potential for voter fraud accompanying mail-in ballots were part of a larger effort to discredit (and dismantle) the USPS as a failed public good (Rozsa, 2020). The USPS was being threatened by neoliberal ideology and by acolytes who claimed that the USPS was too inefficient and undeserving of government funds (Rucker et al., 2020). In response, defenders of the USPS rhetorically situated the USPS as vital for electoral democracy and as a crucial site of working-class struggle and racial equity (Levitz, 2020; Prescod, 2020; Rashawn, 2020). Defenders framed the USPS as an institution integral to the democratic process, even though the Post Office features itself as a “vital conduit to the national

and global marketplace.”⁷ I do not want to be too critical here. The USPS does have a deep connection to U.S. democracy, a connection discussed in relation to this assignment (Chontiner, 2020). Taking into account the relationship between U.S. democracy and the USPS was significant for this assignment. We especially wanted to think about how relying on the USPS for deliberation was a form of public interaction supporting a public good and resisting neoliberal ideologies. Sending letters via the USPS provided us with an opportunity to resist privileging speed and efficiency in rhetorical engagements. The spatial distance and reliance on “snail mail” actively worked against neoliberal logics that threaten public places in which democratic citizens might meet. The USPS offered students a kind of interstate space, in which rhetoric had, quite literally, to travel roadways before reaching interlocutors. Our class interpreted this notion as a powerful way to reflect on how democracy is connected to specific places and regions, and how much metaphoric and physical space separate people living in the United States. More than casting ballots, or seeing people in red or blue voting blocks on a flat map, encountering each other via the USPS allowed time and space for relations to develop. “Snail mail,” as the phrase connotes, intentionally created an inefficient process of constructing a way for students from “red” and “blue” states to compose, or letter, their relationships. Though inefficient, sending and receiving letters amplified how democratic life, in one way or another, does require opening up space for public encounters not limited to marketplaces (of trading, buying and selling ideas and/or goods and services).

Building on the work of Hannah Arendt, Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves (1992) noted that democratic life requires a place where citizens are able to meet. What brings people together “is not . . . some set of common values, but the world they set up in common, the spaces they inhabit together” (p. 153). To be present in a common space, for Arendt, was very much about embodiment, about the fleshy and felt presence of public life. The 2020 digital experience, of course, prevented such presence, to a degree. The process of composing and sharing letters allowed for a small touch of embodied presence, in constituting an interstate space for democratic engagement, for some kind of encounter beyond ballots. Though the chance to materially meet in place was not possible, the materiality of sending and receiving letters approximated (and only approximated) embodied encounters. To put it another way, the physical process of (hand) writing, printing, packaging, and mailing “Dear Demos” letters provided at least a touch of embodied presence—even if not in the same room, class, or state.

The material circulation of letters was vital for animating a shared space for meeting others, even as fully embodied encounters were rendered impossible. My argument, here, rests on the idea that, in keeping with Arendt, constructing democratic publics centers the work of “human hands” (Passerin d’Entrèves, 1992, p. 148). To be sure, the phrase might be primarily metaphorical. However, for this assignment, I interpret the phrase in very material ways. The very embodied acts of writing, folding, stamping, sending, opening, unfolding, and holding—the felt elements of sharing letters—accented the work of students’ human hands in composing a public to inhabit with others. It may be a touch romantic to think of the material exchange of letters as offering a kind of felt spatial quality. Yet, taking into account the pandemic context, in which digital technologies and active avoidance of breath and touch dominated, it may be that even a small gesture toward somatic encounters invited alternative and more animating forms of engagement. I do not want to overstate the case, but if procedural models of democratic deliberation assume and valorize disembodied rhetorical engagement, working more intimately with the hands is, at the very least, an attempt to feature (at least to some degree) an embodied feel to democratic engagement that might otherwise be contained—by neoliberal logics and pandemic times.

⁷ See “Deliver the Facts,” a report posted by the USPS: <https://about.usps.com/news/delivers-facts/usps-delivers-the-facts.pdf>

Featuring a hands-on approach also suggests inefficiency. A rush to consensus and technocratic neoliberal governance, as discussed, forecloses temporal opportunities for citizens to bring a democratic community into being. If both neoliberalism and procedural democracy are shaped by assumptions of smooth efficiency in managing deliberations and decisions, then tactics that are purposely inefficient contest consensus and closure, quick consumption, and market models of relations. Embracing inefficiency, a few students used a typewriter to compose letters. Others wrote multiple drafts of letters by hand, emphasizing an attempt to make compositions more felt, less efficient, and careful. In experimenting with felt methods of composition, these students helped slow down unfolding deliberations, especially considering how students might need to adjust to reading practices of handwritten or typewritten letters. In my own processing of reading handwritten drafts, I could not help but pay closer attention to students' handwriting, and the loops, dots, angles, and scribbles that filled the pages. I was struck by how even something perceived to be so banal could ground the ways in which intimacy was entangled with the political, in ways that made the entire process inefficient. As one might expect, entangling intimacy with political affairs can get in the way of procedural moves to closure. As Judith Butler (2005) wrote, giving an account of oneself does not have the goal of a definitive narrative or end. Rather, it is a showing of oneself that "calls into questions the limits of established regimes of truth" (Butler, 2005, p. 24). Intimacy—in form and content—works to create what Butler called "scenes of address," where living relations with others, cultural norms, and ethics are made (Butler, 2005, p. 9). In the process of "lettering a public," such scenes unfolded, scenes in which students were positioned to, perhaps more carefully, compose an inefficient scene of address.

"Care-full" (In)Conclusions

Redoing democracy, according to Wendy Brown (Burgum et al., 2017), demands developing alternative principles, alternative discourses, and, ultimately, "recrafting the subject (the person; participant)" that logics of neoliberalism produce (Burgum et al., 2017, p. 230). The fall 2020 version of EPS was all about crafting and recrafting democratic discourses and subjects. Lettering a public provided students with a chance to craft and recraft relations, in hopes of composing a somewhat public space for democratic encounters. The assignment is one example of how students might explore the capacities to perform and practice what Ivie (2005) called a "democratic idiom," a democratic mode of expression that involves "a continuous project of translation, composition, criticism, and revision" (p. 36). By having students read, reflect, compose, revise, and mail, the fall 2020 "Dear Demos" project marks an attempt to foster a democratic idiom, and a responsiveness to the ways in which rhetoric shapes the kinds of encounters people have with others. If, as Ivie argued, robust democratic engagement centers a collaborative composition of meaning, power, and identity, crafting letters that are intimate and grounded in specific places, yet can travel, is a way collaborative composition can happen—and a way that composing a collective might happen. If anything, the "Dear Demos" project allowed us to develop a democratic idiom that worked between the binaries of direct physical action and ideal deliberation. That is, writing and circulating letters became a felt, emotional process that slowed down expectations of efficient conversations.

Taylor (2020) wrote that, in a neoliberal context, "democracy is something people rarely encounter in their everyday lives" (p. 5). As such, establishing ways for students to encounter democracy beyond procedural consensus and economic exchange is part of nurturing a democratic idiom, and the inefficient, pluralistic forms that resist neoliberal ideologies. Certainly, one semester of democratic crafting cannot in itself surpass hollow, thin versions of democracy. However, it might be that attempts to compose a public scene of address might animate care for democratic rhetoric. Care for democratic rhetoric—as inefficient and reciprocal, or mutual—is a marker of what Joan Tronto

(2013) described as “caring democracy,” or the practices and habits of caring with others about democracy. As Tronto put it, democratic deficits are entangled with failures of (equitable) care, which is relegated to (gendered) private spheres of labor and feeling. Enabling care for others in equitable ways, argued Tronto, allows people to care with others. Caring about democracy with others, of course, requires a recrafting of neoliberal subjects—from individual agents in a marketplace of contractual agreements to “care-full” people willing and able to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). In carefully composing letters of mutual concern that are both private and public, students took part in recrafting neoliberal arrangements, allowing more democratic encounters to emerge. Attention to “Dear Demos” letters (in all senses of the term) marks care for democracy, particularly modes of address that expand what it means to craft relations with others and engage with social, political, and ecological issues that are matters of personal *and* public concern. Reciprocity, revision, and felt relations require careful attention. They also require slowing down, being inefficient, allowing encounters to unfold.

Appendix

Appendix 1. COMM 340. Encounters in Public Spheres (Fall 2020).

Assignment I. "Dear Demos." Rhetorical Letters to "The People."



THE DESCRIPTION.

Addressing "the demos" is about "addressing" "the people." That's a lot of quotation marks. For good reason. As Astra Taylor shows us, "the people" is not a given. It relies on how democracy is constructed, according to inclusion and exclusion - and whose rhetoric (body and voice) is deemed to be part of "the people's voice." So, when we "address" the demos, we are, inevitably, addressing an "imagined" community. Or rather, in addressing the demos, we are taking part in rhetorically constructing the demos. This includes what "we" should be/become, what should be done, what is worthy of attention, and what democracy is or might be. As letters from "Dear America" and Taylor's film highlight, "democracy" is a "gathering" of people - talking about democracy and governance, dissenting, consenting, and deliberating. In short, democracy is rhetorical. That is, it is rhetorically constructed - in words, texts, images, sounds.

Our first assignment focuses on text, words, letters. And, how they might be part of democratic "deliberation" in public life. To be sure, our first assignment engages with, perhaps, a more conventional "public sphere." Composing and sharing letters, one could argue, is an example of a bourgeoisie public sphere, particularly if we take into account how "letters to the editor" have worked as a space for the deliberation and the formation of public opinion. This is to say nothing about how participating in that place requires a certain level of literacy and legitimacy - displayed through meeting the rhetorical standards (tone, style, form) established by a publication. That said, letters have always been used by political dissidents and cultural critics, who have used letters to communicate beyond prison, theorize democratic concerns, and make statements about injustices (see, for example, James Baldwin's open letter to Angela Davis). Thus, we work with letters as a form of public rhetoric to address "the demos."

In essence, in composing letters (and mailing them), we are CRAFTING encounters in the public sphere. In hopes of a response, of course.

As with letters from "Dear America," our specific topics can vary. However, they should be personal and intellectual, hopefully creative, engagements with the current state of U.S. "democracy." This, as Astra Taylor shows, involves so much more than electoral politics. Any issue is intimately related to "the people" that make up "the demos."

That said, if we want to collectively address a topic: the relationship between democracy and higher education is ALWAYS important and in need of words.

This assignment helps us paying attention to the ways that rhetoric operates to craft the demos, "the people." And, about recognizing an exigency, and responding in "letter" rhetoric.

THE PROCESS.

1. Read "Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy" [excerpts], & related texts.
2. "Analyzing Public Texts" (COMM 275). Rhetorically analyze those letters. How do they construct "America?" How do they work, rhetorically to address exigencies? What are they addressing? In what ways (stories, research, examples, language, description, metaphors, et cetera)? What styles and tones? What ideologies are they responding to? What ideologies do they rely on? Really dig into the texts.
3. Reflecting. Inspired by "Dear America," what kind of letter would you compose? Why? How?
4. Freewrite? Consider some freewriting (recommended: Peter Elbow, "Freewriting Exercises").
5. Compose Draft I of a letter to "the demos," "the people." DUE: Monday, September 28.
6. Workshop Draft I. In class, September 28. Then, edits (based on workshop and professor feedback).
7. Mail Drafts DUE: Friday, October 9 (11.59 p.m.). "Mailing" details TBA Monday, September 28.

NOTES:

REFLECTION & REFLEXIVITY & RESEARCH.

What is democracy now? What are its failures? How has it been eroded? What hope is left? What are the possibilities that remain? What do "we" need? To do? What are our roles - as comm scholar citizens? How are our personal lives, backgrounds, and commitments connected - to larger issues, to others, to democracy?

WRITING & RE-WRITING (and probably more re-writing).

Letters are a rhetorical craft (*techné*). They require time and process. These are not "letters to the editor," nor are they a class essay. Waiting until the last minute to write these is strongly discouraged.

These letters will be part of our final course project, and may require ongoing revision.



READING & WRITING GUIDE.

To help with analyzing Dear America letters as "public texts."

To help with potential compositions of Dear Demos letters.

READING GUIDE.

Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy, as well as James Baldwin's "an Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis," are key resources for this assignment. These letters provide possible models for how we should go about composing our own Dear Demos letters.

I strongly recommend **reviewing** those public texts with a deeply analytical eye. Here are a few things to pay particular attention to:

1. How the letters connect the personal and the political. "Public spheres" are both.

How do authors write about personal experiences and everyday observations?

How do they use intimate details to create emotional connections?

How do authors rely on details, observations, and experiences to help readers understand broader public exigencies?

2. How the letters attempt to create emotional appeals/connections.

How do authors' phrasing, description, metaphors, and language create a "mood" or tone?

How do authors' attempt to create emotional connections? How do they make "this" matter?

How do the different forms used by authors help shape the feeling of the letter? Traditional letter? Fragmented "notes?" Others?

3. How the letters rely on narrative and ideology to address a public.

What are the cultural values promoted by the letters?

What stories do they tell that promote certain cultural values?

What ideological norms do they draw from? Take for granted? (i.e., nuclear family; "nature," etc.)?

Who are "the people" the letters are addressing? It's impossible to address "everyone." How can you tell?

How do letters craft "democracy?" What it is, what it should be, what's impeding it, what it needs?

COMPOSITION GUIDE.

1. We should first ask ourselves what we feel strongly about. Doesn't have to be anger or rage. What do you give a damn about? What do you WANT to write a letter about?

The exigency? Are there intersecting exigencies?

There are any number of ways to connect personal experience with larger questions of public life.

2. How might you connect personal observations and experiences and background with issues of public concern?

It might be that we have to narrow our focus. I may want to write about extinction, but how do I write about extinction in a way that connects readers to a specific place, example, experience?

Remember, these letters are both personal and public.

3. How do I use rich description, vivid language, and phrasing to create tone or mood?

4. Is there a certain form I want to try? If not a "traditional letter," what? See examples.

5. What, if any, research might I include or talk about?

6. What cultural value(s) do I want my letter to promote?

7. What ideological "commonplaces" do I rely on/challenge?

8. When I close my eyes and imagine the public I am addressing, what/who comes to mind?

It is impossible to imagine "everyone." It is impossible to write a letter that addresses "everyone." Who is the imagined public? "The people?"

9. How does your letter construct democracy? What it is? What it is not? What it should be? What it needs?

10. Please, please do not wait until the last minute to compose. Give yourself time.

Give a damn.

Respect your words. Your voice.

Respect your deme members' time and attention.

Respect the readers' time and attention.

If, at any time in the process, you need help, contact me.

References

- Barr, W. (2020). *Statement on riots and domestic terrorism*. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved May 31, 2020, from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-william-p-barrs-statement-riots-and-domestic-terrorism>
- Brouwer, D. C., & Asen, R. (2010). Introduction: Public modalities, or the metaphors we theorize by. In D. C. Brouwer & R. Asen (Eds.) *Public modalities: Rhetoric, culture, media, and the shape of public life* (pp 1–32). University of Alabama Press.
- Brown, W. (2011). The end of educated democracy. *Representations*, 116, 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2011.116.1.19>
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Princeton University Press.
- Buntin, S., Dodd, E., & Sheffield, D. (2020). *Dear America: Letters of hope, habitat, defiance, and democracy*. Trinity University Press.
- Burgum, S., Raza, S., & Vasquez, J. (2017, August 6). An interview with Wendy Brown: Redoing the Demos? *Theory, Culture, & Society*. <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/interviews-wendy-brown>
- Bush, E. (2020). Welcome to the Capitol Hill autonomous zone, where Seattle protesters gather without police. *The Seattle Times*. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/welcome-to-the-capitol-hill-autonomous-zone-where-seattle-protesters-gather-without-police/>
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University Press.
- Chotiner, I. (2020, August 17). The importance of the post office to American democracy. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-importance-of-the-post-office-to-american-democracy>
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.
- Ivie, R. L. (2005). *Democracy and America's war on terror*. University of Alabama Press.
- Lang, M. J. (2020, July 26). Leaf-blower wars: How Portland protesters are fighting back against tear gas and forming 'walls' of veterans, lawyers, nurses. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/07/26/leaf-blower-wars-how-portland-protesters-are-fighting-back-against-tear-gas-forming-walls-veterans-lawyers-nurses/>
- Levinson, J. (2020, August 27). Police declare Portland protests a riot but this definition could be rooted in racism. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/27/906729976/police-declare-portland-protests-a-riot-but-this-definition-could-be-rooted-in-r>
- Levitz, E. (2020, August 14). *Americans must defend the postal service like our democracy depends on it*. The Intelligencer. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/trump-war-post-office-democracy-mail-vote-explained.html>
- Mouffe, C. (2000). For an agonistic model of democracy. In N. Sullivan (Ed.), *Political theory in transition* (pp. 113–130). Routledge.
- Nguyen, R. (2020, July 19). 'Naked Athena': The story behind the surreal photos of Portland protester. *The Oregonian*. <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2020/07/the-story-behind-the-surreal-photos-of-portland-protester-naked-athena.html>
- Passerin d'Entrèves, M. (1992). Hannah Arendt and the idea of citizenship. In C. Mouffe (Ed.), *Dimensions of radical democracy: Pluralism, citizenship, community* (pp. 145–168). Verso.
- Prescod, P. (2020, September 13). Save the USPS, defend democracy. *The Jacobin*. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/usps-postal-service-mail-voting-trump-dejoy>

- Rashawn, R. (2020, August 24). Why Trump's attack on USPS is an attack on the Constitution, democracy, and racial equality. *Brookings*.
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/08/24/why-trumps-attack-on-usps-is-an-attack-on-the-constitution-democracy-and-racial-equality/>
- Rozsa, M. (2020, August 12). How Trump's war on the USPS threatens democracy itself. *Salon*.
<https://www.salon.com/2020/08/12/the-biggest-information-network-in-the-world-how-trumps-war-on-usps-threatens-democracy-itself/>
- Rucker, P., Dawsey, J., & Parker, A. (2020, Augusts 15). Tracing Trump's Postal Service obsession—from “loser” to “scam” to “rigged election.” *Washington Post*.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-post-office-mail-vote/2020/08/15/27a2ffd4-de5f-11ea-809e-b8be57ba616e_story.html
- Taylor, A. (2020). *Democracy may not exist, but we'll miss it when it's gone*. Metropolitan Books.
- Tronto, J.C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. New York University Press.
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2020, September 21). *Department of Justice identifies New York City, Portland and Seattle as jurisdictions permitting violence and destruction of property*. The United States Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/department-justice-identifies-new-york-city-portland-and-seattle-jurisdictions-permitting>