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# Rhetorical Education and Student Activism

**Jonathan Alexander and Susan C. Jarratt**

**O**n February 8, 2010, Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, stepped onto a stage at the University of California–Irvine (UCI) to deliver a speech sponsored by the Department of Political Science and the School of Law. A few minutes into the presentation, Oren was interrupted by an audience member who stood and yelled, “Michael Oren, propagating murder is not an expression of free speech.”<sup>1</sup> The protestor, a member of the UCI Muslim Student Union (MSU), then voluntarily left the meeting and was arrested by local police. More disruptions followed, as MSU members and supporters stood and loudly declaimed a mix of prepared and spontaneously composed sentences that challenged Israel's role in the occupation of Palestine and the legality of Oren's own participation in military actions. The protestors, labeled the “Irvine 11,” were arrested, the organization was disciplined by the university, and months later, ten of the group were prosecuted by the Orange County criminal court and convicted of misdemeanor counts of conspiracy and disrupting a public meeting.<sup>2</sup> The protest generated passionate and widely varied responses, many concerned with appropriate modes of public engagement. What are we as teachers of rhetoric and writing

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to make of such an event? Which strands of scholarship since the “social turn” in composition studies—the discipline in English studies perhaps most engaged with questions of rhetorical training and public engagement—might help us make sense of a completely self-sponsored public protest, organized by design to violate codes of civility and place itself outside the conventional genres of the deliberative democratic discourse that composition and rhetoric teachers most commonly theorize, teach, and subscribe to?

### THE SOCIAL TURN: INSIDE THE CLASSROOM AND OUT

Along many lines of interpretation, the social turn demanded opening the classroom, or at least repositioning it—placing the writing class, its grounding assumptions, aims, and practices, within a larger world determined by economic and social forces. One could argue that the field has been turned toward the social from its very inception, with the creative response of Mina Shaughnessy and others to the influx of underprepared students into universities via open admissions policies of the 1960s. Even the focus on students as thinkers and problem solvers grounding the cognitive process theories of the 1970s and 1980s is arguably “social” in that it imagines a writing class peopled by students with minds rather than dominated by a single authority delivering the truth to no one in particular. But many associate the social turn with a surge in scholarship sparked by challenges to cognitive process approaches (Bizzell 1982; Berlin 1988) and then propelled by Marxist and feminist-influenced scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Power* and the *political* became keywords for scholars such as James Berlin, who in 1988 described “teaching writing as an inescapably political act” (51). Just the year before, Ira Shor’s Freirian-influenced *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* came out with its incisive critique of the ideological forces shaping working-class students. And when Richard Bullock and John Trimbur’s 1991 *The Politics of Writing Instruction* won the CCCC Outstanding Book Award, the legitimacy of the “turn” was confirmed. Catherine Hobbs Peaden’s *JAC* review of Bullock and Trimbur in fact marks 1991 as a significant year for “cultural-political” publications. With these works and many others, the question for the field shifted from, *is* the classroom a political space? to, *how should* power and the political be analyzed and negotiated within the classroom? These are profound questions with which teachers of writing, literature, and culture still grapple.

As convenient a shorthand as “social turn” has been for a complex disciplinary change, we would not want the figure to produce a history like a map with a single itinerary. The development of politically oriented approaches to rhetoric, literacy, and the teaching of writing might be better understood genealogically with terms such as *descent* and *dispersal*, referencing a field with multiple roots and sometimes intersecting branches (Foucault). Pushing up alongside the power-and-politics-

in-the-classroom work, we find another research strand, distinctive because of its sighting of rhetorical and literate action *outside* the classroom. The ethnographies of Shirley Brice Heath and Deborah Brandt, for example, explore the literacies of people at many different stages of life and in varied situations, bringing analysis of social and economic forces to bear in their interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Ethnography took hold as a methodology for the field, producing significant work in the 1990s for scholars interested in engaging communities on the margins. Books such as Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools* (1998) and Ralph Cintron's *Angel's Town* (1998) shed light on rhetorical tactics forged by people struggling with racism and poverty.

Branching off from these fruitful projects and thickening ethnographic approaches within writing studies, community literacy studies gained remarkable force in the last decade. This field moves the composition scholar outside the classroom by design, although many of its adherents bring their students and classes with them in various ways. Steven Parks and Eli Goldblatt, for example, contend that we should seriously consider "writing *beyond* the curriculum," and Elenore Long (following the work of Linda Flower and others) adopts the language of "publics" to mark a space of engagement between students/educators and communities. The subtitle of Paula Mathieu's 2005 *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* suggests the new direction taken by committed activists who are also teachers of rhetoric and writing. John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan argue in the introduction to their 2010 *The Public Work of Rhetoric* that insights gained from doing rhetoric "out there" are vital to a renewal of the field and will require changes inside the academy—"a different professional disposition, new participatory and analytic tools, and a more grounded conception of public need" (1). We might consider activism itself one such "public need."

Seth Kahn and Jong Hwa Lee, editors of the 2011 *Activism and Rhetoric*, argue for rethinking relations among activism, rhetoric, and democracy by going beyond "explaining away the insufficiency of deliberative democracy" (xxii).<sup>4</sup> Marking the twenty-first century as an era with new rhetorical challenges, Kevin Mahoney in that volume argues, "The current assault upon all forms of democratic participation [. . .] makes it necessary to engage in a very different kind of project" (152). Citing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, Mahoney observes that "the most intense and broad-based political movements/rebellions within Empire are 'all but incommunicable'" (154). Such work suggests the limits of sweetly reasonable rhetorical frameworks undergirding most classroom-based rhetorical education, including classical models (from Aristotle, Isocrates, and Quintilian), Rogerian analysis, and Stephen Toulmin's approaches to argument, among others. Indeed, as we have turned our attention to student activism, we have been struck by the variety of students' rhetorical practices and their willingness to experiment. Of course, protest is itself a rhetorical genre with its own history of disruptive practice, long associated with the closed fist rather than the open hand of deliberation.<sup>5</sup>

The MSU protest of Oren's speech was a striking example of rhetorical action by students—one that transgressed the expectation for “civility” on a college campus. The situation recalls a crisis in the history of speech communication and composition, some of whose scholars in the 1960s and 1970s feared the disciplinary implications of “entering the fray of public unrest” (Ackerman and Coogan 3; see also Corbett). Ackerman and Coogan frame this anxiety as a question of proximity: “How close do we get to political discourse when it [. . .] transcend[s] the limits of scholarly discourse and criticism?” (3). We posed this question to ourselves as we thought about selecting the Irvine 11 protest as an object of study. When student activists protest on campus, “out there” and “in here” are superimposed. We decided to move in close on this event through interviews with its participants, keeping in mind the prospect of change or renewal of our field as a potential outcome.

How did those students—self-identified with a group not easily heard, understood, or tolerated in a post-9/11 world—decide to protest in the way they did? If their paths into activism can be seen as a kind of rhetorical education, what can teachers of rhetoric and writing learn from them by tracking that path, especially when the students' choices challenge the education we offer in our courses? We began our study with the hypothesis that student participants in this event came to it with experience in the history of protest, an understanding of—or even a lived experience with—the geopolitics of the Middle East, and a strong interest in collective action. Our objective was to learn how these elements, and students' reflections on them, might have informed their rhetorical educations, particularly what they learned outside the classroom. We selected this event for analysis because it provides an opportunity for us to make some observations about rhetorical education broadly conceived and manifested in the public space of a twenty-first-century university several decades down the road from the social turn. Moreover, although our analysis of student interviews is situated theoretically and methodologically within composition studies, the interviews themselves call attention to the numerous ways that students encounter texts, concepts, debates, and writing throughout their educational experiences, including formal spaces such as high school literature classes and college courses in film, media, and political science, as well as cocurricular spaces often designed by students themselves through student and church groups. We offer our analysis as a challenge to the field of English studies broadly to think more capaciously about the many different spaces in which rhetorical education might take place.

#### GENEALOGIES OF ACTIVISM: THE INTERVIEWS

The two of us conducted hour-long interviews in February and March 2013 with five participants in what came to be called the Irvine 11 protest.<sup>6</sup> Neither of us knew any of the students, nor do we come from a similar ethnic, religious, or national

background. And yet we coexist in an academic space and share an interest in the power of words to change the world. We wanted to find out how each student activist came to the moment of this striking and consequential protest act. How did each come to understand himself as an activist? How did family and religious backgrounds come into play? How did students work together in the context of the student organization? What rhetorical principles underlay their choice of particular strategies? How did they understand the relationship between their activism and their formal education? Did any college classes in writing or speech play a role in their rhetorical education? We were amazed at the responses: the complexities of their life histories, their thoughtfulness about activism in general and the February 2010 protest in particular, and their representation of activism as an intellectual process. There was considerable consistency across the interviews, perhaps because the group was initially brought together by commonalities of experience and stance, but also because, through the experience of disciplinary sanctions and the criminal trial, the group had many opportunities to discuss and process the events together. In what follows, we interweave responses from the five interviewees, highlighting students' rhetorical choices and terminology.

Family histories of activism—often multigenerational—played a significant part in the self-understanding of three of the five students. All their families emigrated from the Middle East—Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan—and three students reported that grandparents and parents participated actively in resistance to dictatorial regimes and occupation. In two cases, family members suffered imprisonment and torture. Most of the students came of age in local communities with common immigrant experiences and shared cultural and religious backgrounds. As Osama put it, “I grew up around a lot of stories [. . .] within the Muslim community primarily, so [there were] a lot of Somalian refugees, around a lot of Bosnian, Kosovo, Chechnya, and so that was always there.” Osama’s parents were born in Egypt, where his grandfather had endured twenty years as a political prisoner and experienced torture that he never spoke about. As a surgeon who set up clinics in war-torn Muslim countries, he served as an example to his grandson of those privileged enough to get an education “giving back.” The family sustained a strong sense of respect and admiration, along with a sense of responsibility: “I thinking growing up around that, it made you realize [. . .] there’s something wrong in the world.” Osama’s family traveled often to Egypt, where “the poor are much more visible.” He contrasted this experience with his larger life in the suburbs of San Diego, where lines of class division were clearly drawn: it was assumed you didn’t go into certain areas—less affluent areas were considered “another world” by high school friends outside his community.

Media contributed to the environment of political awareness and critique in Osama’s boyhood, with Arabic Al-Jazeera often on the television, and an older brother who listened to politically charged hip-hop: “an era of like Tupac, NWA,

Chuck D, and other rap groups who would speak out against the system.” Like other respondents, Osama read and reread *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with great interest: “Malcolm X is a huge figure for Muslim youth [. . .] growing up as a Muslim in America, there weren’t very many role models that we had in terms of American Muslims.” Along with Muhammad Ali and Hakeem Olajuwon, Malcolm gave Osama a sense of identity and also the idea of connecting struggles across race, ethnicity, and national difference: “Malcolm X’s internationalism [helped to] really connect the struggles of black and brown people in the United States and impoverished people in the United States to third-world peoples across the country.” The book wasn’t assigned in school but was passed along to Osama by his sister.

Like Osama, Asaad comes from a family with strong roots in the Middle East—in his case, Libya. He described his father as an idealistic college student who was imprisoned for pro-democracy activism at the University of Tripoli, under Gaddafi. Though Asaad’s father got out of the country, friends remained in prison for decades or were executed. Asaad’s maternal grandfather, a professor of religion, was also imprisoned, tortured, and removed from his position. Asaad’s father earned a scholarship to the University of Southern California and got a PhD in civil engineering, but he continued organizing, creating a formal opposition group against Gaddafi’s regime and thus closing off the possibility of returning. Asaad remembers participating in a range of protest activities growing up: antiwar, workers’ rights, and community organizing. Touching on a theme that appears often in the interviews, Asaad reported that his family’s support for activism is faith based but also interfaith: “My family was fairly religious, so a lot of their organizing was done through the mosque, but interfaith.” Through the decades of Gaddafi’s rule, Asaad’s family (without his father) returned every two or three years to visit Libya. He speaks fluent Arabic and is comfortable in the region. In a dramatic turn of events soon after the 2011 revolution, Asaad’s father was appointed chief of staff for the new prime minister, and the family (without Asaad) has now returned. Like many other students in our twenty-first-century universities, Asaad lives a thoroughly transnational life.

Taher grew up in Southern California within a family that highly values activism and public engagement, especially with regard to the occupation of Palestine: “It’s almost a second nature to us just because we’ve done it for so long.” Both Taher’s parents are Palestinian; his father and grandfather were born in Gaza; his mother was born in Jordan because of the 1948 Israeli occupation. Relatives still live in Gaza, where Taher returns to visit periodically. The family moved around to different areas in the region, but everywhere Taher found activist possibilities. He recalls becoming more involved during high school years at his local mosque in Corona, where he could join a youth group interested in living out one of the axioms of Islam: to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, “the social justice aspect to Islam,” as he put it. All of our respondents made reference to this guiding principle, what Taher

described as “the fuel of my ambition and my passion for activism.” Acknowledging the potential threat to “Western interests” that could be read into this axiom, Taher gave examples of parallels to be found in other religious and cultural contexts and enacted through a wide range of rhetorical activities. An example of activism from his high school years was a collaboratively created “parody-type” YouTube video giving ten reasons that a mosque needed to be built in his neighborhood.

With somewhat different family histories, both Mohamed and Yousef grew up in more assimilated contexts. Yousef’s family emigrated from Afghanistan. Describing himself as a “typical self-hating Muslim,” Yousef grew up in Florida in a middle-class family without strong political beliefs: “more mixed, not so Islamic.” A high school student on 9/11, Yousef tried to keep a low profile in the face of “teasing” (“Saddam’s your uncle!”), but also started going to Friday prayer. Mohamed, too, experienced 9/11 as a troubling time—“there was a lot of fear in the Muslim community”—but a time for rethinking a Muslim identity:

In terms of politicization, 9/11 definitely was the powder keg in that regard. I was a freshman in high school and, of course, the 9/11 attacks happened and immediately the focus was put on the Muslim community in America and what exactly we believe, what exactly we stand for. And, of course, we went from being—well, at least as a youth thinking that we were virtually unknown in the United States—to being very much in the spotlight of the media and in, unfortunately, a very negative way. So, that kind of—I think that really affected me and the community in general in terms of just having to come to terms with this whole identity and who am I and what do I represent and is it my religion that was the cause of 9/11 attacks and what implications does that have on me? Did I do something wrong? Am I guilty by association?

Mohamed’s interest in activism didn’t kick in right away. He described being a “dissenting voice” in high school class discussions about the US “war on terror”: “It would be me and another Indian atheist kid in class [laughter] and [. . .] we’d get the whole ‘Well, if you don’t like it then leave’ kind of diction and all that.” What Mohamed and Yousef both found as new students at UCI was not a retreat, but an inspiring energy for politics in the face of these post-9/11 challenges. As a new first-year student, Yousef noticed the spring protest events and learned from “the wall”—a public display of photos and information—about the opposition to the occupation of Palestine. Experiences of fasting and breaking fast with other Muslim students during Ramadan, and of the protest with the MSU, confirmed his passion for political activism.

For all five students in our study, one extracurricular site played a major role in their activist education. The MSU was “an organization that encouraged living our beliefs, not just privately worshipping”: “from an activism perspective,” the group enabled its members to “implement the ideas and principles that our faith teaches us” (Mohamed). The students’ language suggests that the group bridged private



and public spheres by both cultivating a “family” spirit (“a really strong sense of brotherhood and sisterhood”—Mohamed) and fostering work on political causes. Asaad spoke about gaining skills through his involvement in the MSU: “organizing skills and leadership skills and friendship skills.” For Osama, the social bond was not the draw; he was commuting, had his own friends, and didn’t need a fraternity-like experience. In the MSU he found “people who care about the world”; “they’re willing to discuss like different ideas and just concerns about the way the world is and how can we change it to make it better.” For Taher, a student at UC–Riverside (UCR), the MSU offered an “amazing group of people”: “highly motivated individuals, very intelligent [. . .] most of them went on to become engineers, doctors, lawyers” (like our interviewees). In Taher’s comments we found the blend of personal and political: “I just felt this sense of camaraderie.” The students also emphasized the MSU’s involvement in many social justice causes, not just Muslim-related causes. For example, Asaad described a coalition of clubs on campus that organized a protest against tuition hikes in 2009: “We always use the flagpole [as a gathering place] and then once we gather large enough number of people, we start marching around campus and we go all the way around and around,” walking into lecture halls and urging faculty and students to walk out in protest.

From the students’ comments about the MSU and the February 2010 protest, we sought to extract definitions of activism: a sense of what motivates students to act and an understanding of how rhetorical awareness and principles permeate their approach to activism. Broadly, Taher proposed that “[a]ctivism is kind of this general term for public engagement.” Others nuanced this general approach by suggesting a continuum from personal belief to public engagement. Yousef, for instance, eloquently linked the group’s activism to deeply held religious conviction that necessitated, if not demanded, engagement: “There’s like a famous saying of the Prophet Mohammad. He said that when you see an evil, change it with your hand. If you can’t change it with your hand, speak out against it and if you can’t speak out against it, hate it in your heart. And hating it in your heart’s the least you can do.” Such an ethos, coupled with their family backgrounds, suggests that an orientation toward activism is normative for this group, not exceptional.

#### FROM REFUSAL TO INTERRUPTION

Understanding the influence of the MSU for these students and their motives for activism as American-Muslim students in 2010 must be placed in the context of the history of the Middle East in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—a history with which they were all familiar. The decisions of the MSU, and of these students as members of the organization and as young people with their own personal histories, cannot be understood solely within generalized *topoi* of “university protest” or

“student activism” or “disruptive behavior” in the absence of a serious engagement with the history of Palestine and Israel from 1948, when the nation of Israel was created and the people living on that territory were displaced, many to refugee camps such as those in Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank. The sixty-five-year history of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians comes into American political awareness through flash points such as the Six-Day War of 1967 and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and hopeful points such as the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the 1995 Oslo Accords, occasions when US presidents made efforts to resolve a multidimensional geopolitical conflict.<sup>7</sup> The new millennium has witnessed an intensification of hostilities with the Palestinians’ Second Intifada and Israel’s construction of the wall surrounding the West Bank, beginning in 2000, with barriers now separating Gaza from Egypt and East and West Jerusalem. The undiminished flow of illegal Israeli settlements into the occupied territories bespeaks Israel’s unresponsiveness to international pressure, even from the United States with its extraordinary level of financial and military support. US publics, including most UCI students, may be less familiar with Israel’s recent military interventions: the 2006 invasion of Lebanon and the 2009 intervention in Gaza, termed Operation Cast Lead, aimed at neutralizing military resistance to the occupation. The shocking tactics used in Cast Lead, resulting in many civilian deaths, provoked demonstrations across the United States and were a strong motivating force for the MSU students: “We had friends whose family members died in Gaza during that attack. So you can imagine what that was already like; it was kind of boiling up inside of us” (Yousef).<sup>8</sup>

Students eloquently described the MSU’s growing attention not just to the messages they wanted to deliver, but to various modes of rhetorical engagement and platforms of delivery. Yousef narrated a series of events through which the group experimented with different forms of response. In an early event, the MSU engaged in a debate with the campus College Republicans about the publication in Denmark of anti-Islamic cartoons, and found that conventional format productive. When Alan Dershowitz spoke, however, and the MSU tried to engage the lawyer in debate during Q&A about his pro-occupation stances, they found that tactic less successful. According to Yousef, “With Alan Dershowitz, when people like would ask him tough questions, he had the microphone. He would blatantly deny it. Blatantly, he just went, ‘No, I never said that; you’re lying.’” From the students’ perspective, Dershowitz simply refused to engage.

Subsequently, Daniel Pipes was invited to campus, and the MSU tried a different strategy. Head of the Middle East Forum think tank, Pipes is the founder of Campus Watch, a website encouraging students and faculty to expose radical or militant Islamic activity in academic and activist sites on campuses. He is on record as describing mosques as “breeding grounds for militants” (Stevenson). According to Yousef, “We learned our lesson. We walked out. We put like some tape over our

mouths and whatever, but we walked out to show him that, ‘Look. Nobody wants to listen to you. You’re not important.’” Seeing Pipes’s UCI appearance the next day on Fox News taught a harsh lesson: the students had missed an opportunity to reach a wide audience with their views. But later, when Anne Coulter and David Horowitz were invited to campus, the group still decided not to show up, feeling stymied by the prominence of very conservative voices on campus, the unwillingness of official units to sponsor speakers they suggested, and the ineffectiveness of rhetorical options on offer. Both global and local circumstances had intensified sufficiently that, by the time of Oren’s speech, the group was ready to try a new approach. As Yousef put it, “It was like a bag of popcorn in a microwave for like a long time. Like it just was getting to the point where Michael Oren was like when the bag popped.”

We read the MSU’s move away from attending events with conservative speakers as what John Schilb calls a “rhetorical refusal,” a pointed denial of their significance by a refusal to engage, or an attempt to call attention, through silence, to what is *not* represented (27). Such a strategy though, seemed increasingly unsatisfying, particularly given the larger political context of Palestinians in Gaza in 2009. The announcement of Oren’s impending visit seemed to galvanize the group, with some members perceiving it as “a personal attack on us” (Yousef). Given Oren’s position as ambassador, as well as his service in the Israel Defense Force in Beirut in 1982 and more recently as an officer in Gaza, the MSU felt it had to respond in some significant way.

As we learned from the interviews and emails, the group made its decision about the form of its protest through a process valued over centuries of rhetorical education: imitation. Attentive to pro-Palestinian activism across the country in the wake of Operation Cast Lead, the students took note of a protest carried out at the University of Chicago in October 2009, excerpts of which are preserved on YouTube (<http://noliesradio.org/archives/7085>; accessed 25 July 2013). Ehud Olmert, prime minister of Israel from 2006 to 2009, delivered an address at the invitation of the Harris School of Public Policy, which, like the UCI administration, sought to prevent a rowdy response. The Harris School issued a statement in advance of the talk dictating that, in order to “protect an atmosphere of free expression,” questions at the end would be written on cards and presented to the speaker. Various audience members didn’t wait for the Q&A period to respond. They stood and repeatedly interrupted Olmert’s address. Although an article by Maureen Murphy on the event claims that Olmert was “shouted down,” the YouTube video shows Olmert listening to the thirty or more interruptions, sometimes responding, but completing his talk (Murphy). Murphy notes, “These demonstrations are part of a wave of notched-up dissent towards Israeli officials implicated in war crimes and racist policy.”

The MSU members discussed in their email exchange whether to stage a “Chicago-style” event, and our interviewees’ comments on that precedent show

that they didn't casually adopt a model from elsewhere, but thought through the rhetorical ramifications in light of their activist experiences. Osama, reflecting on the publishing of the MSU emails in court documents, noted how "a lot of people read the emails and were like, 'Wow, these guys were actually really organized,' and I guess it's pretty impressive." The group considered a range of options, but, according to Yousef, the members kept in mind previous attempts to engage speakers: "Okay, this isn't the kind of protest that we'd try to grill him and like question-and-answer. We're going to fail because he's just going to deny everything we say. So, there goes that idea." Indeed, this broader context of activist experience, as well as the *kairos* of Oren's visit, prompted intense reflection on the kind of engagement that the students wanted to stage.

Interestingly, the students focused more on the modality of the exchange itself—the genre or structure of the event—and less on the message. Osama summarized the group's view, including the dissatisfaction with previous forms of public presentation on the topic:

It shouldn't be one person [who] controls the conversation. [. . .] [A] dialogue would have been having Michael Oren on the stage and someone representing an opposing view on the stage. [. . .] And I think [in such a setting], there is absolutely no need for a protest, because you have an opposing view that will have [. . .] an equal amount of time to speak and respond to Michael Oren. [But] questions don't allow you [. . .] to do that, because you're limited in the amount of time you have to speak, and then you just ask your question and then you go and sit down. There's no follow-up. [. . .] [Y]ou can't call out Michael Oren [for] not answering the question.

As Taher put it, "Q&A won't work. This is not a tea party," suggesting that both the inequity in the speaking situation and the seriousness of the topic demanded a different form of engagement. Indeed, the students described Oren as a "trained propagandist" legitimated by university sponsorship. Put most simply by one interviewee, "[H]e can speak." They were impressed that the protestors at the Chicago Olmert event "got their point across" (Taher), but they emphasized that Olmert continued to speak. He knew "how to play the game," as one student put it. Their plan for the Oren event was not to "shut it down." After previous forms of protest—debate, marches, signs, chants, silent walk-outs—the "shout and leave" model seemed to them a rhetorically reasonable next step.

### FROM AUDIENCES TO PUBLICS

Students' developing understanding of the complexity of rhetorical situations—who is allowed to speak, what is the effect of such speech, what styles of engagement are imaginable, and what are the relationships among content, modality, and delivery—came into play as they responded to our questions about the audiences or publics for

their protest and its intended outcomes. We saw more differences within the group in these responses, differences revealing the profoundly performative question at rhetoric's core: What happens when someone speaks? (Ijsseling). In the interviews, we used "audience" to refer to the participants at the event and "publics" to stand for larger communicative spheres. As a way of organizing the responses, we start with the immediate context and move outward. Mohamed articulated the local aims clearly. Focusing the protest directly at Oren, he believed, was a way to make being a representative of Israel "controversial." For the sponsors of the event—the UCI Department of Political Science and the School of Law—the protestors ask, what does it mean to have invited Oren? Is it an endorsement of his acts, even tacitly? With reference to the University of Chicago video, Taher also focused on the speaker as primary audience: "You know, it was a very provocative and very effective way of getting the message across, not to the audience members only, but to the speaker himself." For Taher and others, Oren is "the face of Israel." As a paratrooper in the Lebanon invasion and an actor in *Cast Lead*, these students "hold him responsible" for war crimes. Osama's aims were multiple, but addressing Oren was primary: "The direct goal was to send a message to Michael Oren. And it was to be rude." He elaborated a strong critique of civility: "You have to be rude sometimes, especially if you're dealing with systems of injustice. [ . . . ] [T]here's no room to be polite to injustice. [ . . . ] [Y]ou can [be] polite—if you feel that somebody can be convinced otherwise, then obviously you should take into consideration what is the best way to approach this person. But I think this is not that type of a situation." Osama's search here for an adequate rhetorical vocabulary reveals the limitations of a discourse of middle-class behavioral norms—politeness versus rudeness—often employed in a paternal way by university administrators faced with vigorous activism.<sup>9</sup>

This style of engagement also came into play where the local community was concerned:

And then additionally we were also aware that most likely this was going to be an event that would serve as a rallying point for the pro-Israeli, pro-Zionist Orange County community. This was not really something that was geared towards students as much as it was geared towards the surrounding community of Orange County. (Osama)

In Osama's view, the protestors ultimately *didn't* go to educate this audience because they believed that it was not capable of being persuaded. We can see this aim and its anticipated result playing out on the Irvine 11 YouTube video as community members shout, scold, and make obscene gestures toward the protestors. Other interviewees mentioned longer-term effects within the campus context. A group called Anteaters for Israel began in 2008 mounting I-Fest to celebrate the May 14 anniversary of the founding of the state, emphasizing culture, heritage, and lifestyle in a fair-type atmosphere. The MSU protestors hoped to interrupt the normalizing

force of this happy, touristic view of Israel, in their view, a criminal state. In these cases, we found the students operating from a theory of rhetoric outside the liberal or deliberative frame.

At the same time, the protestors intended to bridge local, national, and international publics through their acts. Taher said, "It's a very dynamic thing for us to think about. You know, we face challenges in defining what our core [public] is and how we can approach them and how we can maintain support for our organization, to maintain support for our work while engaging in public about the issues and the different, you know, ideas and rhetoric and propaganda that they've dealt with and how we can reverse that. So, it's been very challenging." He was speaking with reference not only to UCI's MSU, but also to a group called American Muslims for Palestine, with which he now works as national student liaison. For Asaad, the national public was clearly the most important. He felt that the protest was aimed at "the largest public possible—other activists worldwide, as well as nationally." He hoped that they would "even push the envelope on pro-Palestinian activism or pro-justice activism."

Given their diversity of aims, robust consideration of formats and genres, and nuances of audience and public awareness, we marveled at the rhetorical abilities of these students. Even when our interviewees offered conflicting views of their addressees, they all showed their understanding that audiences and publics *are* varied, and that effect or uptake is never in a rhetor's control. Put another way, these students seemed to challenge a simplistic framing of rhetoric as a simple, intentional stream flowing from rhetor to audience to effect. Indeed, when we asked our participants about the intended effects of their protest, they answered variously, underscoring the complexity of the protest as an event that could—and would—be interpreted in multiple ways by different publics. In the process, they problematized the ways rhetoric and writing are often taught: as though a rhetor can identify an audience, construct an argument within a context, and expect some sort of recognizable effect. These students intuited the complexities of addressing publics, as opposed to thinking in simplistic terms of audience. With such complexities in mind, we concluded our discussion with questions about links between activism and formal education.

#### REFLECTIONS ON ACTIVISM AND EDUCATION

Just as the Irvine 11 protest is only one event in a longer temporal arc of the activist life of a young Muslim, so too are undergraduate education and specific courses only two points on the map. Hoping for a positive response, we asked our participants how their formal education contributed to their activist and rhetorical educations. Unhappily for us, all the students noted, cautiously and respectfully, that they did not see much direct connection between the two. In fact, they were more likely to cite experiences from K–12 than college classes as formative in their growth as

rhetors and activists. For instance, Osama referenced a 10th-grade AP US history class in which he read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*: "I think that book [. . .] was my—one of my first academic perspectives on all these issues, because growing up, you know something was wrong." For Osama, reading Zinn helped him make connections between Native Americans and Palestinians, and provided an "academic language" for expressing the "thoughts in the back of my head," helping him form his "natural inclinations" into coherent thoughts. As Taher put it, reflecting on encounters with figures like Zinn and Malcolm X, this material "help[ed] me intellectually wrap my mind around certain concepts, understand the dynamic of US foreign policy in a way that I might not have understood before, which also added to my passion for activism on the ground."

We were hoping to hear that writing courses helped students develop their abilities to become activists. But our participants either didn't mention first-year writing or remembered a negative experience. Yousef, for instance, complained that "when I took the writing series, it was awful. It was awful. I don't know what we were writing about. Like they tried to put some politics in it by making us read—what was that book about nickel-and-dime? But like that was still like a forced assignment." Yousef was recalling the second quarter of UCI's first-year writing requirement. In the research course, students were required to read Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* and write a research paper on a topic related to the book. Yousef's reflection on the course makes a sobering comment on the uptake for one student of a curricular effort at politically informed pedagogy in first-year composition. In contrast, another student praised a general education speech class at a neighboring university, and a couple of informants commented on productive writing assignments in upper-division writing classes. Yousef described the writing in such a course focused on the work of Franz Fanon: "We could write whatever we wanted. It just had to be like a minimum pages and that experience was great because like being able to write, like studying Fanon and then, you know, talking about my own personal life and able to like not be judged on an assignment." Such comments invite further reflection on the function and reception of first-year writing against the potential for writing classes offered later in the college career. But another student seemed more positive about the usefulness of more traditional writing practices: frequent essay exams, and essays rewritten repeatedly until they were acceptable. For Osama, such assignments, though tedious, left a positive impression because he saw improvement through repeated practice.

Given the students' tenuous sense of connection between their institutional and activist educations, we were not surprised that their views of higher education in general were not positive. Our participants offered sharply critical insights on the disconnect between theory and contemporary life: "What are they teaching me in these poli sci classes besides theory? [. . .] I read like, you know, *Communist Manifesto*

and things like that and like, Machiavelli and all these things that like they open your mind and they get you questioning things and thinking, but as far as like making me want to do something, no. The classes never made me want to do anything.” Yousef voiced a classic opposition between thought and action: “I was like, ‘I can’t keep talking about this and writing papers about it.’ I’m like if there’s a problem in the world, just go fix it. It’s that simple. You don’t have to talk about it.” Yousef’s comments, echoed by others, point to a divide between theory and practice, but also to a problem with programs defined by the dissemination of information through large-enrollment courses. Such dissatisfaction leads to more probing questions: What is an academy for? What does it do? Can it be politically engaged? Can one separate out the world of ideas from the world of action?

Indeed, the disconnect between the world of ideas and the world of action appeared again and again in our interviews. Taher noted that, in general, the campus didn’t encourage involvement in activist organizations. Even courses that might be topically of interest, such as those in international studies or political science, were not always memorable and, according to Osama, often did “not [have] a huge impact.” Yousef bemoaned that he was increasingly “turned off by political science theory,” and Osama noted, powerfully, “You can get a degree without taking a class about what’s going on in the world.”

Students expressed such views at times through the “Disney motif,” as they analogized their college experiences to spending time in the theme park located only a few miles from the UCI campus. Taher, for instance, noted how the MSU and other student activist organizations were definitely not the norm: “They’re viewed as the fringe groups of students that are just, you know, ruining our Disneyland environment here on campus that we want thousands of kids to enroll in and get the financial aid [tuition] paid to our universities.” At the same time, Yousef spun the Disney motif more positively: “I think college is like definitely, it’s an amazing experience because you have so much free time. [ . . . ] [I]t’s literally like a few years out of your life that you get to live in Disneyland. Like your whole world is Disneyland.” For Yousef, college offered the opportunity not just for a fantasy break from the “real world” but for the exploration of idealism; students, he argued, “have the obligation to be idealistic. Why? Because the politicians of this country have made it an obligation and made careers out of being pessimists and making the world stink.”

Other participants reflected this view strongly. Mohamed, for instance, argued that most students’ college educations are “incomplete,” particularly as they do not think of our “responsibility as human beings.” He wished non-Muslims were more involved and spoke eloquently about using the college experience as an opportunity to “try to get outside yourself,” to “be agitated,” to “be uncomfortable.” For Taher, engaging the “opportunity to develop yourself intellectually” inevitably means “encouraging students to challenge the status quo,” particularly because “administration,



even many times the professors, they don't really promote student activism or they promote it in the way that's kind of like what you see outside right now. You know, kids selling stuff."

Given these students' view of higher education—the limited opportunities to develop skills as activists—we were not surprised to learn that they often organized self-sponsored instruction in activism. Mohamed reported that some mosques in the United States are at a "turning point," moving from the "basics" (offering spaces for prayer and informing congregants of legal rulings affecting immigrants) to addressing social ills, a move he associated particularly with the newer generation of US Muslims. As an example, he pointed to the Irvine Mosque's Friday Night Live, a group that attempts to address "hot topic" issues, such as economic inequality, capital punishment and the prison-industrial complex, racial segregation in the Muslim community, and contemporary gender roles for Muslims. More locally, the MSU offers workshops on topics of interest, such as Islamic history, as well as meetings about how to protest and connect with other like-minded organizations. Yousef, for instance, talked about his belief that it is important to reach out and address not just your own issues, but rather become part of a collective, working across groups, "not being selfish about what we care about."

Ultimately, we were struck by how these students understood specific activist projects and protest as part of a larger intellectual and moral project. Yousef talked about the Irvine 11 event as "way to vent anger," certainly, but several students also conceived of their activism as an extension of the principles of Islam, which included connecting with other groups, as well as hitting the books, becoming educated, becoming enlightened, and enlightening yourself before enlightening others. For these students, activism should be morally grounded, built on a sense of what's right and wrong, and informed by a constant engagement with the world; as Yousef put it, students should "always ask why." Asaad summed up well his reflection on participation in the Irvine 11 protest and activism more generally:

Without hesitation [this was] the single most important thing I've done during my college career and I don't regret it at all. That's part of who I want to be, that's part of how I want to be a doctor too. I want to be an activist and I want to be able to advocate for patients. I think it's strengthened my character, I think it's strengthened my skills as well.

Such a holistic view—seeing the use of particular skills in a larger context of convictions and engagement—is perhaps the most striking characteristic of how these young people conceptualize their educations. What's surprising to us, as educators, is how little of that education the students attributed to learning acquired or even encountered in the classroom.

### RHETORICAL EDUCATION: A LONGER VIEW

As we prepared this study, we talked a good deal about its limitations and about how we wanted to position ourselves within it. We didn't seek to balance perspectives by interviewing administrators or teachers involved in the Irvine 11 event. We didn't include other MSU members, notably women, who were involved but not participants. Nor did we seek to represent the opposing point of view about the Palestinian occupation and the conflicts on campus between Zionist students and the MSU in a liberal pro-and-con approach. In part, our choices had to do with constraints of space and the richness of the archive we discovered and created through these interviews. We were also moved by the same critique of rhetorics of civility brought to light by our informants: when the deck of public discourse and opinion is heavily stacked in favor of one perspective, giving equal time is not ultimately equitable. The very minimal scholarship about Muslim students, students who have emigrated from the Middle East, and students engaged in activism in resistance to the occupation of Palestine led us to attend as carefully and as fully as possible in an academic essay to the voices of these five students—exceptional as they may be.

Indeed, oriented toward activism and reflection by virtue of their (trans)national experiences and religion, and by contemporary world events, these students may seem exceptional. But many students engage in activism at some point in their college careers. As professors, we can become insulated from student experience. Despite what the field has learned since the social turn about the complexities of students' lives, we were still surprised by these students' disparaging comments about their formal education. When readings mirror identities (*Malcolm X*) and when the structure of a class allows for discussion and freedom to explore (Fanon), students remember classes positively and perhaps transfer learning and practice to other contexts.<sup>10</sup> Students here confirm what we already know about the humanities generally and discussion-based, writing-intensive courses specifically.

At the same time, we note that lower-division writing courses, upon which the field expends so much energy, are *not* well regarded by these students. The social turn seems not to have affected our interviewees as we would have wished. As with the exceptional students highlighted in the preliminary report from the Stanford writing study (Fishman et al.), extracurricular, self-sponsored educational experiences stand out. Longitudinal studies of college writing help us put the first-year class in a longer-term perspective. Individual courses are only moments in longer trajectories—they are not unimportant, but perhaps we shouldn't overestimate them by assigning them most of the burden for students' rhetorical educations. Indeed, we might learn something about temporality and the long view from our students themselves, who understood the protest of Oren's visit as only one moment in a longer activist project. Ackerman and Coogan argue, "If rhetoric occurs routinely in public

life, as *work*, it is through routines that establish, in their aggregate, something like a postmodern *paideia*" (8). These students, and our analysis of their genealogies of activism, challenge all of us to consider ourselves as co-participants in such a *paid-eia*.<sup>11</sup> Future studies of rhetorical education should encompass the curricular and the cocurricular, the formally sponsored and the self-sponsored, as mutually informing resources if research in rhetoric and writing studies is to contribute vitally to a collective struggle for cultural understanding and peaceful coexistence.

## NOTES

1. An edited YouTube video of the event is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOKN-05uCGY>. Accessed 20 July 2013.

2. "Irvine 11 Convicted." *algemeiner.com*. 23 Sept. 2011. Web. Accessed 20 July 2013.

3. Heath's long-awaited follow-up to the 1983 *Ways with Words* tracks the families of Roadville and Trackton, and their experiences with new technologies and the disastrous economic changes of recent decades. Her title, *Words at Work and Play*, marks the domains of interest in her study.

4. Wendy Hesford offers an early study of student activism in her essay "Ye Are Witnesses." She analyzes an event on the Oberlin campus—the defamation of a monument honoring Christian missionaries in China—and the rhetoric used by students, faculty, and administrators at a number of highly emotional meetings in response to the act.

5. A rich body of work from communications scholars addresses protest within social movements. See Charles Morris and Stephen Browne for a comprehensive introduction. Analyses of the carnivalesque aspects of protests from the 1998 World Trade Organization events forward offer interesting points of intersection with our analysis here. In addition to Delucca and Peebles on this event, see Bruner.

6. The study received institutional review board (IRB) approval. Because these young activists are known publicly and have ongoing commitments to public action, none requested the confidentiality. We refer to them here by their first names. They were provided a draft of the essay in advance of publication and invited to contribute comments and corrections. At the time of our interviews, all five had received undergraduate degrees from UCI or UC-Riverside (UCR) in political science or international studies. Osama was a first-year law student at Harvard. Taher was working as national student liaison for American Muslims for Palestine. Yousef was preparing to apply for medical school. Asaad was in a graduate program at UCI in molecular biology and applying for medical school. Mohamed had completed a master's degree in mechanical engineering and was working as an engineer, hoping to gain admission to law school.

7. Matthew Abraham has argued that the field of rhetoric and composition ignores the Israel-Palestine conflict and is poorly informed about Israel's violation of international law. He urges that we should "explain and address the rhetorical difficulties that attend" the conflict (116–17).

8. Another temporal sequence within which the Irvine 11 protest can be understood tracks the local history of public events at UCI related to the global scene. For about five years, the MSU has mounted a Palestine Awareness Week in the spring, constructing a wall on the Ring Road (UCI's public space) to bring to mind the walls surrounding the occupied territories and decorating it with photos, facts, and arguments, as well as hosting related demonstrations and speaking events. Of course, groups and individuals with opposing views typically confront the MSU students at the wall, and heated discussions sometimes ensue. The UCI administration discourages heated confrontation and posts campus police prominently at these sites. For the students we interviewed, a series of public events staged against this background led up to their February 2010 intervention. Their testimonies present a compelling account of increasingly frustrated moves and countermoves in response to a series of campus-sponsored appearances by nationally prominent conservative and pro-Zionist figures.

9. See Nedra Reynolds's defense of interruption in a feminist context.
10. Susan Jarratt, Katherine Mack, Alexandra Sartor, and Shevaun Watson, in "Pedagogical Memory," reveal a similar sense of disappointment with older students' failure to remember and use first-year composition.
11. Jeffrey Grabill notes the importance of "stance" in community-based research and the need to think about our own positioning as scholars vis-à-vis those we study and those with whom we co-create knowledge.

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