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THIRD SPACE / FOURTH GENRE

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins with a question: how can we understand composition teachers as third space workers, and what creative potential might live in their particular third space labor? The question emerges from Fred Moten's and Stefano Harney's identification of "composition teachers" as inhabitants of the undercommons, an at once marginal and generative "non-space" outside of the traditional structures of the University, fugitive from the dominant cultures of that university. This essay argues that composition teachers, third space laborers because they work on and around the tense and contradictory fracture between "critical" thinking and professional assimilation (and, impelled to work in both, can be fully identified with neither), also inhabit the creative energies of that space via their work on a form that can both acknowledge and evade these organizing mandates. This creative space is the form the essay, at once the ubiquitous, compulsory pedagogical form for writing instructors, and also, in its historical fullness, the inspiration for some of the most radical arts collectives of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the essay itself can open up a "site of enunciation" that isn't just analogous to Homi K. Bhabha's third space but is in fact a version of that space. On the other hand, the writing center and the composition classroom, spaces of writing instruction, can or should also—at their best—capture moments of essay-writing as moments of fugitive collaboration and potential: third space thinking and collectivizing.

Keywords: third space, undercommons, essay film, arts collective, Third Cinema, fugitivity, Black Audio Film Collective, Chris Marker, composition teacher, collectivity, collaboration

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In their catalog of those "refugees, fugitives, renegades, and castaways" tending the last flames of revolutionary potential in modern university, the "maroon communities" at once ignored by and actively slipping the dominant culture, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney include "composition teachers." These subterranean enclaves of workers "fugitive" from the hermetic systems of Enlightenment biopower and hyper-professionalized regulatory structures that characterize the modern neoliberal university are made up of

mentorless-graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers. (2013, p. 27)

And "composition teachers." This raises a few questions. Why composition teachers? In Moten and Harney's list, the modifier "composition" sits curiously next to other more grimly familiar and extensive indices of oppression and marginalization. Composition teachers are everywhere in the United States, and the institutional leadership of the field has been called more than once to answer for being a "White-dominated professional space," shoring up, rather than disrupting, the harmful norms of the profession (National Census of Writing, 2018; CWPA "Statement," 2021). Why do Moten and Harney include college and university writing instructors? What "uncanny," "cooperative," disruptive

potential lives in those of us who run writing programs, teach mandatory first-year seminars, keep the writing center open (p. 42)?

We might answer this in terms of precarity, academic hierarchy, and the liminal “third spaces” of the academy. Celia Whitchurch’s concept of third space labor “has its roots in the field of cultural studies and major societal dimensions such as race, gender, and class,” and traces a direct line between voices, positions, and spaces that slip the entrenched binaries that organize modern culture, politics, geography, and identity and the likewise entrenched binaries that organize institutional and working life—in this case, higher education (2013, p. 21). These “in-between” spaces trouble the dualisms of “insider and outsider voices,” of “high and low culture,” and represent—for Whitchurch, as for the political and social theorists from whom she takes the term “third space”—potential “site[s] of struggle” (2013, p. 21). They can also be “invisible,” falling as they do into the murky space between more “conventional” loci of power (faculty and administration, for example, in the university) (pp. 21, 4).

Moten and Harney’s list describes a similar line between institutional, cultural, political, racial, gendered, sexual, and personal identities, each occupying a state of academic precarity and marginalization because they do not fit easily within the sanitized organizational logic (explicit and implicit) of their institutions. Rather, they suggest uneasy tensions, forms of internal dissonance. The institutional, historical, social, and even political profile of composition teachers situates them legibly in a list constructed according to these terms, and also raises important questions about the dissonance internal to composition teaching at a university. Moten and Harney do not list “Writing Program Administrators” or full tenured professors in the field of Writing Studies or Rhetoric and Composition. They list “composition teachers.”

What’s more, Moten and Harney are not only interested in subjection and marginalization, but also “fugitivity” and the creative, generative, and even revolutionary potential in these academic workers. One thing every space and being on that list have in common, they suggest, is that they can easily be discredited, silenced, *managed* by being labeled “unprofessional”: to strip academic workers of their professional bona fides, the authors remind us, is to strip them of their institutional power. To put this in Whitchurch’s terms, “this sense of exclusion, together with perceptions of fragmentation and de-professionalization” by third space workers emerges in part from the power struggles that attend conventional institutional logics, the currency of which is professional status (p. 4). As recognizable institutional actors vie for power and status, they exclude illegible participants, or limit cases.

They also, however, create. The other side of fugitivity, as Moten and Harney suggest, is that this space—“nonspace,” as they call it, but we might also call it a third space—is the site of “passion,” of “the uncanny,” of the “secret once called solidarity.” Work gets done in the undercommons, the third spaces, that can’t get done in the conventional spaces of the university.¹ Moten and Harney work to claim this nonspace as a zone where the “unprofessional” does care work, liberation work. Third space workers in these terms operate outside of technocratic administrators and the “critical intellectuals” that make up the professoriate; they operate in the undercommons. For Moten and Harney, something about the “composition teacher” affiliates them with that nonspace. I’d like to consider here what that “something” might be, to consider how we find a doorway into this nonspace in our own work supporting student writers both in and out of the classroom. Why, I’d like to ask, might we find “composition teachers” on this list for reasons beyond “their history of marginalization in the academy?” (Schoen and Ostergaard 2021, 53). In what follows, I consider this question in relation not to a physical or institutional space, but instead to the space of an object (and a form) so intellectually and pedagogically embedded in the work of composition teaching that it might be taken (and taken for granted) as a *sine qua non*: that is, I consider the relationship between the composition teacher, the undercommons, and the essay.

A point of clarification as I turn to the idea of the fugitive composition teacher, the comp teacher as third space worker, and the essay form: while, like Moten and Harney, I’m not primarily focused on the tenured Writing Studies professor or the Writing Program Administrator [WPA], they’re part of the group I’m considering. Instruction in student writing is old, but tenure arrived late to this field and job security for WPAs is uneven and embattled (Ritter 2013; Bousquet, 2002; Schoen and Ostergaard, 2021). And as others have observed, there is no single definition of a “writing instructor” (Schell 2013; Thaiss 2012). I take “composition teacher” to mean all of those who teach, support, or oversee curriculum for writing as a primary area of instruction at the university and college level (two-year or four-year): tenured and at-will WPAs, first-year writing instructors, graduate students and adjuncts teaching rhetoric and composition courses, writing center staff, etc. Although the writing *center* is perhaps the most visible third space, my ambit here includes the writing center and extends well beyond it to college writing as a practice, one that is often taken as and reduced to the practice of writing *essays*.

Indeed, in higher education, as elsewhere, the potential and rhetorical sprawl of “writing” often gets shorthanded as “writing essays.” The label is used so widely and so casually as to be almost meaningless. This, for example, is an essay—but so is the five-paragraph submission to the SAT board, and so also are John Locke’s book-length *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1691) and Claudia Rankine’s lyrical *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020), the think-pieces on Oscars’-night fashion in the *New York Post*, the contributions to the “Policy Forum” in the journal *Science*, and the paragraphs my ten-year old wrote about his own arm. Almost meaningless but, as we’ll see, also instructive. If composition teachers teach essays, and composition teachers are third space workers, perhaps we should look at *essays* as third space objects. Essays are interesting because, like all of those bodies and positions on Moten and Harney’s list, they are also internally contradictory: subject to institutional logic and also slipping its grasp.

On the one hand, these essays—the remit and ostensible expertise of composition teachers—are said to encourage critical thinking (see e.g. Bean & Melzer 2021). Critical thinking is, as the authors of *They Say/I Say* aver,² the “deeper” goal of the academic writing they would demystify. “Though the immediate goal of this book,” they write, “is to help you become a better writer,

at a deeper level it invites you to become a certain type of person: a critical, intellectual thinker who, instead of sitting passively on the sidelines, can participate in the debates and conversations of your world in an active and empowered way. (Graff & Birkenstein 2014, p. 13)

Making the rhetorical moves they outline in their book will, they say, help both writers and readers be “independent, critical thinkers” (2014, p. 80). A “generic,” cross-disciplinary model for critical thinking, writes Stephen Brookfield, “focus[es] on uncovering the assumptions that frame how we think and act, and checking these for their accuracy and validity, often by seeing them from multiple perspectives” (2011, p. 21). “Reading, writing, and thinking critically,” he offers, “can hardly be separated, and in writing critically one is forced to think clearly about where one stands” (Brookfield 2011, p. 153). This multi-perspectival nimbleness, he suggests, helps students make “*independent* intellectual judgments” (2011, p. 256, my emphasis). The U.S. Foundation for Critical Thinking is more explicit: critical thinking is about “freedom of thought,” or, as the Foundation’s president, Linda Elder, has it, “liberating the mind” (Elder 2019, *passim*). In teaching students to write critical essays and thus to *think* critically, the writers here imply, good composition teachers are teaching students to be free.

On the other hand, academic essays represent an efficient pathway to the professional-managerial class. A 2022 U.S. News and World Report article comparing “high school essays” to those essays students will learn to write in college makes no bones about this:

“People who don’t write well work for those who do,” Harry Denny, an English professor and director of the writing lab at Purdue University in Indiana, wrote in an email. “And more broadly, effective communication contributes to better leadership, healthier workplaces, and more inviting communities.” (Nimesheim, 2022)

As if power worked that way. In fact, the definition of “writing well” or “effective communication” has long been determined and regulated by those already in positions of power and used as gatekeep or cudgel against those they would exclude or dominate. Nonetheless, Denny reproduces here one of the narratives on which composition teaching in the academy depends: that composition courses will help students get jobs.³ William Zissner’s *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* opens with a chapter entitled, “The Transaction,” and refers to the academic essays students are learning to write as “products” (2006); *Forbes* magazine assured readers in 2018 that “mastering writing” would help them “future-proof” their careers. As Anne Berggren traces in “Do Thesis Statements Short Circuit Originality in Student Writing?,” the five-paragraph essay offers a scale model of this product which has long served to provide this professional training, or at least to provide the training that will lead to the effective writing Denny adduces. Easy to teach and available to regular assessment, she suggests, the thesis-driven five paragraph essay provided a useful tool for a rapidly expanding corps of post-secondary writing instructors in the middle of the twentieth century (Berggren 2009, pp. 58-9). The central gatekeeper for entrance to the professional training grounds of higher education, the Scholastic Aptitude Test Board, favored this kind of essay (roughly five paragraphs, transparent onto its own aims) for the recently abandoned SAT Essay exam.⁴ As Derek Owens writes in his introduction to Paul Heilker’s reformist *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy of an Active Form*, “the research paper, the exam question, the master’s thesis, the dissertation, the professional article, the scholarly book,” which he sees as stalking horses for careful five-paragraph thinking, “these are almost never expected to be catalysts for real change. They are primarily icons, badges signifying our entry into some level of the academic hierarchy” (Owens 1996 p. xvi).

The essay as liberator of the mind; the essay as professional entry-ticket: the contradictions on display here go some distance in explaining why composition teachers appear on Moten and Harney's list. They fracture the composition teacher, making her non-self-identical; they present the composition teacher as internally riven by the same tensions that define the university itself. In Nicole Wallack's analysis, we can trace this fracture all the way backward from college to early literacy education in elementary school: the "essay-as-test" model "foregrounds 'basic skills acquisition'" and gets taught to children as young as seven or eight; "the essay as the province of public intellectuals" is critical, socially engaged, has style (Wallack 2017, p. 11). Wallack's work offers a persuasive case for seeing through this opposition so that we can, as composition teachers, introduce the essay to our students in all of its richness. Kevin Rulo suggests we might find another "room" in the essay, or a way that the essay "mak[es] room" for "temporarily autonomous zones, spaces of alternative existence and resistance that open however temporarily on a world which seems to have monopolized all possible manner of expression and acting" (Rulo 2022, p. 200). I will return to these rooms.

For Moten and Harney, the opposition between the professional-managerial and the critical thinker is a false opposition. The critical academic *is* the most fully achieved version of the professional in its "university-consciousness," its management-consciousness. They write,

The critical academic questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. [...] To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual? The undercommons might by contrast be understood as wary of critique, weary of it, and at the same time dedicated to the collectivity of its future, the collectivity that may come to be its future. (2013, p. 38)

This nonspace, or third space, outside of the false choice between the critical academic and the professional worker looks to building, imagining, and envisioning, to evading the corrosive implications of this non-opposition in favor of some other possible, some other passion. To return, then, to the composition teacher in the undercommons: composition teachers teach essays; essays—at once technocratic and critical, independent and instrumental—embody the false antinomies of higher education. The opposition between "critical thinking" and the thoroughly institutionalized professional class is a false opposition. It sustains a contradiction. But, we learn or hope, there is a third space, a nonspace, an undercommons: what is that third space in the essay? Can we see the essay as something that refuses both sides of that no-win game, that finds—to borrow from Rulo (and Virginia Woolf)—a room of its own? How do we do that; how do we see the essays that we teach not only as the degraded reflection of that false and enabling opposition but also as bearing the seeds of refusing and exceeding that false choice?

The German artist and film essayist Hito Steyerl warns us not to be facile or credulous when we look to the "heretical," "associative," "protean," qualities of the essay for an escape hatch from the antinomies of modern life; if these were, in 1958 when Adorno wrote "The Essay as Form," the qualities that could help us slip the airless conceptual binaries of the industrial age, they are no longer. "When I recently looked at a book I had written," she writes,

I had a strange impression. Every essay in it behaved like an autonomous, self-sufficient and well-adapted subject, which could be networked and coupled with almost anything else. Or to phrase it more decisively: all those essays collected in that book seemed like perfect neoliberal subjectivities. You could drop them in almost any context and they would start fending for themselves, making connections, communicating from scratch. (Steyerl 2011, p. 277)

That does not, however, mean that the essay "has really lost any ability to play a critical role"; on the contrary, "its critical impact has just shifted to a different level" (p. 278). That level, as she describes it, recalls Moten and Harney's "collectivity," a liminal space of contact, collaboration, and solidarity. She suggests that the "form of the essay [can] also enable connections between people and objects, which go beyond the flexible and efficient conjunctions typical of post-Fordist capitalism"; the essay and, for her, the essay film can form "visual bonds," "different links of people, images, and sounds...different constellations of technology, spectators, and various audiovisual materials, disruptive movements of thought and affect which possibly undermine the status of images and sounds as mere commodity" (278). In so doing, she suggests this kind of accretive, synergic essay making might "defy the measures of the market and its way of counting and extracting value" (278). This is not the essay of the individual as well-trained free-thinker or aspiring worker; this is the essay in common.

Steyerl turned to the essay film so as ultimately to return to the essay in general as newly engaged and really critical. Similarly, I want to move out to the work of some filmmakers and film collectives as a way back to the writing center

and the composition teacher. We can, in other words, understand the collaboration and collectivity of filmmaking as an unexpectedly trenchant model for writing instruction and writing practice. The essay form has, indeed, been essential for some of the experimental film collectives of the late twentieth century: the Sankofa Film Collective and the Black Audio Film Collective in Britain; the Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles, or SLON, in France [Society for Launching New Works]; the Tercer Cine, or Third Cinema, movement in Latin America (the name of this last is directly related to Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "third space"). Each of these collectives associates the essay with their liberatory and essentially collaborative resistance projects. Can the essay-practices of these collectives serve as a prelude to a return to the writing center, the composition teacher, and the humble essay? Can they help us to realize some of the authentically critical energies that Moten and Harney invoked when they saw the composition teacher working in the space of the undercommons?

The "essay, and particularly the essay film," writes Malini Guha, is "a site of interdisciplinary praxis," a form of writing and of cinema that models the "transformative potentialities of interdisciplinary work forged as encounters that are shaped by relations of affinity, reciprocity, and duration" (2020, p. 4). The British filmmakers, sociologists, historians, and cultural theorists who made up Black Audio Film Collective (1982-1998), to take just one of the many essayistic film collectives that formed between the 1960s and the 1990s, organized itself in part around the work of Stuart Hall, whose notions of "theory as practice" inspired the representational activism of the BAFC. Their collaborative work was also inspired by one of their founding artist's (the British Ghanaian filmmaker John Akomfrah) own relationship with Stuart Hall, which the latter identified as a "practice of friendship" (Guha p. 52).

The search for new "regimes of representation" led the BAFC beyond contemporary cinematic and television practices (the cinema vérité that edged out any of the more "constructed stuff" (Akomfrah 2014)). Akomfrah and the other members of the BAFC worked collectively on what Akomfrah describes as the "outlaw project" of the essay film (2014, interview), the interdisciplinary, multivocal, intertextual form of which allowed for the collaborative exploration of a "new formal language suitable to the contemporary political moment" (Guha p. 51). The essay film offered a space for this Collective's work, "a pariah space," as they understood it, not unlike the "nonspace" of Moten and Harney's undercommons: a space of praxis, of activism, of pushing back against hegemonic "regimes of representation," or, as Kobena Mercer puts it, of "entering into a struggle with the means of representation itself" (1994, p. 58). At the center of this work was their commitment to the essay form. As Akomfrah puts it, part of the protean, collaborative work of the BAFC "has to do with the form of the essay film itself. It goes back to the very understanding of the word essay, which is not to write, but to make sense of things" (2014).

In other words, work done in the "pariah space" of the essay film creates contacts, collaborations, and fusions, a "multiplication of critical dialogues" or a "critical voice that promotes consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories" that constitute, in the case of the BAFC and the Sankofa Film Collective's work, the very conditions of black existence (Mercer 1994, p. 63). "Collaborative writing," recalls Mercer of both the BAFC and Sankofa, "was not only a strategic means of interruption, of 'breaking the silence,' as we used to say, but [it also] underlined the *communifying* or community-building, process of coming out of the margins into the public speech by way of the transition from 'I' to 'we.'" (Alter 2018, pp. 255-6). Film might be thought to be "metonymical at its core," writes Nora Alter, but Akomfrah's and the BAFC's essay films extend that metonymic reach across disciplines, textual source material, archives, sounds, space, and individuals: the connections formed in this pariah space reconstitute themselves into new possibilities for understanding, for praxis, for "making sense" (Alter 2016, p. 5). Sankofa Film Collective member Isaac Julien characterizes his own practice—both with Sankofa and in his more recent work—in intensively (and extensively) collaborative terms: between film traditions, between "archival references," and between myths, cultures, and languages. His model for this work, he tells us, was the "film-essay genre" established by, in particular, Chris Marker (Julien 2016, pp. 336-7). The essay films of both Sankofa and the BAFC are also "linked to Third Cinema, in which aesthetics and racial politics are closely interwoven," and in which, as we'll see, the essay plays a key formal role (Alter 2018, p. 256). "Sense-making" is, in the eyes of these artists, necessarily collaborative work, best done in the experimental space of the essay. In this third space, or *room*, we can begin to see even the role of the composition teacher (or anyone working in writing program/center spaces) differently: as, to use Mercer's phrase, working in a "communifying space."

Marker's own films represent a watershed moment in the history of the essay film. As Timothy Corrigan writes, "Chris Marker's films define and exemplify the essay film. [...] His work becomes a rich demonstration of how this cinematic practice inherits and remakes the earlier essayistic traditions of the literary and the photo-essay, as well as anticipating new traditions" (2011, p. 36). *Sans Soleil* [*Sunless*] (1982), like much of Marker's work even as early as his 1958 *Letters from Siberia*, is characterized by its "horizontal montages," in which objects, voices, places, people, and sounds

are brought into contact and cooperation on the screen and refer to each other not hierarchically, or chronologically, but “laterally” (Bazin 1958, p. 103). This associative, dialogic style “provoke[s] an activity of public thought, and the public nature of that subjective experience highlights and even exaggerates the participations of [the] audience, readers, and viewers in a dialogue of ideas” (Corrigan 2011, p. 55). As it does in written form, the film essay tests ideas, *thinks* in public, and enacts a thoroughly dialogic and communal testing of the borders and stability of subjectivity. As Corrigan writes, “in essay films, the subversion of a coherent subjectivity within the public experience of the everyday may not always be an easily decipherable and clear politics, but is, perhaps always, a politics whose core is ideological instability (2011, p. 33).

We can see here something of the “fugitivity” and “solidarity” that Moten and Harney understand as a defining part of the undercommons. In these essay films, selves and sensibilities are distributed horizontally across a field of representation, allowing the intelligence to emerge from a collective process. Like the BAFC, Marker’s Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles, or SLON collective, saw the political, anti-hegemonic potential of this commons—an aesthetic commons, but also a labor commons. Including such members as Agnes Varda, Alain Resnais, and Jean-Luc Godard, the SLON collective began making explicitly political essay films in 1967-68 in response to colonialism, working class exploitation, and the Vietnam War. The collective, Marker writes, was “strictly non-hierarchical,” and formed because none of the filmmakers and artists “felt able to solve the problems individually” (Cooper 2019). The SLON production company funded such groups as the Medvedkine Group, a worker’s filmmaking collective that filmed their own footage and their own interviews and submitted that work to the Marker et al. production company for their equally collaborative editing and revising process. At the core of their practice was the aesthetic template of the essay.

Because the essay, in Theodor Adorno’s terms, “coordinates” rather than subordinates, the room it creates allows for the lateral, democratic, diasporic and polyvocal sprawl necessary to political intervention and critique as these filmmakers understood it (Adorno 1958). SLON films such as *Be Seeing You*, about the striking workers at the Rhodiaceta textile factory, and *Far from Vietnam*, a protest of the Vietnam War explicit enough to be banned for a time in the U.S., represented collectives not only in the filmmaking itself (between multiple filmmakers, directors, and cinematographers) but also in the voices, images, sounds, archives, interviews, photographs, and people represented and included. As composition teachers, we might take this work as a model not only for the heteroglossic, communitarian space of the essay, but also for the broadly collaborative planning, creating, revising and editing process: a diverse group of “authors” working together with a diverse collective of filmmakers and editors toward a shared—but not monolithic—goal.

Perhaps the clearest link between the essay, the essay film, the “pariah spaces” in which these artists worked and collaborated, and the third space of the university undercommons we see in Moten and Harney is the Third Cinema movement. Broadly defined, Third Cinema (from its Argentinian coinage as *Tercer Cine*), or Third World Cinema, emerged simultaneously and collaboratively as “political filmmaking in Africa, Asia, and Latin America from the 1960s to the mid-1970s” (Landy 2011, p. 255). The movement includes “Brazil’s Cinema Novo, the postrevolutionary Cuban cinema, [or ‘Imperfect Cinema,’] Argentina’s ‘Third Cinema,’ and sub-Saharan black African cinema,” the latter including the Guinea-Bissauan filmmaker Sana Na N’Hada, with whom Chris Marker collaborated on *Sans Soleil*.

“Third Cinema,” so named by the Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their essay/manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema,” is the liberationist, decolonial cinematic movement created in response to the political, social, and economic realities of life in Latin America (and in solidarity with other oppressed peoples across the globe) under neocolonialism, late capitalism, and the rapacity of globalization. Solanas’ and Getino’s 1969 manifesto was first published in *Tricontinental*, the “Theoretical Organ” of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). “Third” refers to filmmaking outside of the “first” cinema of capitalist Hollywood and the “second” cinema of European auteurs. It also reclaims the “third” of the hierarchical Third World nomenclature that arose in the U.S. and Europe during the early Cold War.

The interstitial, experimental, and thoroughly political style of Third Cinema filmmaking also aligns it with Homi K. Bhabha’s “third space” theory, where that “third space” is also a space of communicative solidarity: “What struck me with some force,” Bhabha writes of his recognition of this emergent third space,

was the emergence of a dialogical site—a moment of enunciation, identification, negotiation—that was suddenly divested of its mastery or sovereignty in the midst of a markedly asymmetrical and unequal engagement of forces. In an intercultural site of enunciation, at the intersection of different

languages jousting for authority, a translational space of negotiation opens up through the process of dialogue. (Bhabha 2009)

As I note above, this suddenly-horizontal field of dialogue and communication is also at the heart of the Third Cinema project, in particular the aspects of the project inspired by Marker and the SLON group equipping striking factory workers in 1967-68 France with movie cameras and allowing them to film themselves.⁵ “The goal,” write Solanas and Getino, “was to have the worker film *his way of looking at the world, just as if he were writing it*” (1970, p.6 emphasis in original). More importantly, perhaps, is their emphasis on this not being just *one* individual (as in the “privatized” critical individual of Moten and Harney), but the collective: the replacement of “individuals with that of masses, that of the author with that of the operative group” (1970, p. 10). The goal was to summon the “participant comrade” to the “*free space* where that man expressed his concerns and ideas, became politicized, and started to free himself.” And that space, for Solanas and Getino, was the space of the “film essay”: “fit for a *new kind of human being, for what each one of us has the possibility of becoming*” (p. 10 emphasis in original). In other words, if—as Moten and Harney also have it—the critical *individual* risks becoming indistinguishable from the institutional individual (or the “System,” for Solanas and Getino), the collectivity embodies resistance. “Significant to their invocation of the film essay,” writes Nora Alter,

is the move away from filmmaking based on individual subjectivity, which Solanas and Getino connect to bourgeois ideology, in favor of one centered on structures, people, and groups. They mobilized the essay film as a type of filmmaking that reflects the attribute of the essay as the form of “political critique par excellence” (Adorno) that does not have to be based on an individual subject position for identification. (p. 260)

Put differently, their work allows for a “radically democratizing interrogation of *community*” by the community itself (Mimura 2009, p. 61). To return, then, to Bhabha and third space, we can see that these spaces commit to a collective “sense-making” that is dialogic, horizontal, and polyvocal. They harbor what Moten and Harney call “the secret once called solidarity,” which the latter imagine is still kept in the undercommons (2013, p. 42).

But what, practically, does any of this mean for those of us working as composition teachers? It means, first of all, that we have a potential alternative answer, or at least a more complicated answer, to the question with which I began: why do Moten and Harney include *composition teachers* on their list of those beings and workers who exist in but are fugitive from the “dominant culture” of the university? Working on and around the fracture between “critical” thinking and professional assimilation—a false opposition, but nonetheless one from which tensions and contradictory impulses emerge—composition teachers also work in and on a space that can both acknowledge and evade these organizing mandates. The experimental film collectives show us that the essay is not only a Trojan horse for professional-managerial training; it can also be a collective space. More than that, it can be a space for collective sense-making, a “pariah space” where ideas, values, voices, and aesthetic forms can be brought into contact in order to tell things differently, to resist. On the one hand, the essay can open up a “site of enunciation” that isn’t just the analogue of Bhabha’s third space but is in fact a version of that space. On the other hand, the writing center and the composition classroom, the spaces of writing instruction, can or should also—at their best—capture moments of essay-writing as moments of fugitive collaboration and potential.

As we know from contemporary research in rhetoric and composition, writing studies, WPA scholarship, and writing center studies, it is tricky to locate a radical politics in academic support work or academic support “centers.” The grading, assessing, budgeting, staffing aspects of our work, to say nothing of the institutional expectations for outcomes, language support, benchmark-meeting, as well as more nebulous and often gendered and raced terms like “clarity,” “simplicity,” “plain English,” “originality,” and “concision” we must navigate in our everyday work would seem to limit our so-called radicalism even as we aspire to such practice (see e.g. Condon & Faison, 2022; Inoue & Poe, Eds., 2012; Cole & Hassel, Eds. 2021; Geller et al., 2007; Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Greenfield & Rowan, Eds; Greenfield 2019; Strickland & Gunner, Eds., 2009; Young & Martinez, Eds. 2011). Many of the authors I cite here identify exactly the contradictions that we sustain as composition teachers and they offer both trenchant analyses of these contradictions and necessary interventions.

But the possibility of the center as a collective “third space” offers us a different way to think about the possibilities Moten and Harney would seem to see in the composition teacher by virtue of including us in their list of “refugees, fugitives, renegades, and castaways,” dwellers in the university undercommons. We have made it a commonplace, a mere truism that “everyone writes essays,” and our support centers help them do this. But if we think of the essay as a *space*, or a room, the truism begins to look slightly different. As Moten and Harney put it, “[t]he critical academic

questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. But in the undercommons it is ‘no questions asked.’ It is unconditional – the door swings open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction” (p. 38). In other words, “everyone” can come in. We might, as I’ve suggested here, thus also imagine it in these terms: everyone is invited to write (or speak, or gesture,⁶ or photograph, or film, perhaps even to sing) essayistically, to cross the threshold into the essay’s rooms. The very root of the word, “to try,” suggests we all can, however tentatively or informally, and in whatever medium or language, *essay*; we can all make the attempt. In this sense the space is already a commons; no questions asked. It is too simple, Steyerl warns us, to think of essays as always-already radical in Adorno’s terms—because they are spaces of “luck and play,” because they value the nonidentical, because they push at and slip the suffocating borders of the intellectual, social, and political status quo. They’re radical instead (or also, or differently) as these twentieth century liberationist filmmakers, these politically and aesthetically insurgent collectives suggest to us, because they’re *collective* spaces in which—if we let it—“they say/I say” has the potential to be “we say,” *even if “we” don’t say the same thing*, because we have a room in which we can speak. In the horizontally organized aesthetic topography of the essay film, even contradictory voices, images, archives, and histories find their way to each other and engage, or at least meet, offering us new ways of making sense. That transformation will always be the site of struggle and resistance and as composition teachers we work in the midst of that struggle and resistance.

Can the promise of collectivity, of solidarity, that Moten and Harney want to find in the undercommons be delinked from marginalization, from the peripheralization that has real consequences for access to the security, pay, professional recognition, and the other essentials and perquisites that accrue to life on the “surface” of the university (p. 41)? This is a real concern for Moten and Harney, and one we need to sidestep here. The question for the moment is *not* how can we identify and regularize the third spaces?—a step which amounts, in the minds of these authors, to “conquest” and “conscription” (41). The question here is what life is already in them, and how do they allow us to imagine an other life? “Third spaces,” write Lynn McAlpine and Nick Hopwood,

involve interactions between people who would not normally have worked together, where those interactions are focused on a shared (often novel) object (concept, problem, idea) [...] Those new constellations of people and the common motive they share, offer degrees of freedom to explore new possibilities outside the constraints of established modes working which shape interactions in the various contexts from which people come. (2009, p. 159)

Yes, composition teachers may occupy something like these physical spaces: the classrooms, the writing centers, adjunct office clusters, or WPA organizations to which they belong. But as much recent work in writing studies has pointed out, we keep telling the same stories about these spaces, and as we do so we reproduce again and again the same conditions from which we find ourselves paradoxically fugitive (Faison & Condon, 2022; Grutsch McKinney, 2013).

The essay, however, as the artists and workers I discuss here have discovered, offers us a different kind of space—a third space, a nonspace, a pariah space—which, because we all have to write them, we all have a *de facto* invitation to enter. It can also, I think, help us to see—or to create—essayistic physical spaces, actual gathering sites that embody the communal, dialogic and even negatively dialectical (a space without resolution, a space of productive tension) aspects of the essay. When I asked some of my own colleagues who do other kinds of third space work—a center for inclusive excellence in teaching; a quantitative skills support center; a living space and institute for global studies, international relations, and multilingual college students—they picked up the liberatory quality of the term “essayistic” almost instantly as a way to make legible the work they’re doing in these “liminal, off-the-radar” as one of my colleagues put it, spaces.⁷ “Third space,” one of these colleagues writes,

in its best iteration, is liberatory. It’s light on its feet. It can be bold, be brave, be thrilling and exciting, and can also fall flat on its face. But it’s the freedom to fail, within reason, that gives “third space” it’s effective charm. (Brown 2023, personal correspondence)

These exploratory spaces are both visionary and high-risk *because* they are fugitive: at once free from the hierarchies and contradictions that organize first and second space labor in a university, and also unprotected by those structures. Perhaps this, as with the film-essay collectives I discuss above, makes them so essentially communal: the protections form in the connective tissues rather than in the vertical alignments. My colleague continues: “by building relationships across the campus, I would argue, third space workers are in fact primary drivers of building community. I would go so far as to say that third-space workers (or first or second space workers who think and act like third space workers), form and shape the core identity of an institution” (Brown 2023).

But this is where *not* having a highly visible physical space might energize the community building and forestall the disciplining to which some interdisciplinary work succumbs: belonging nowhere, third-space workers can be anywhere. Certainly this is part of the idea at work in Akomfrah's "pariah spaces": these spaces wink on like little lights in the existing spaces of the university, signal lights for some other possible space. A "there/not there" kineticism is also the energy we see at work in the collaborative space of the essay itself: essentially structureless, the form emerges from contacts between ideas, expressions, associations, references (we might note, for example, that Third Cinema, BAFC, Sankofa, SLON, and other related essay films, produced by collectives, are characterized maybe above all else by interstitial *movement*: trains, seas, labor processes, waves at the shoreline, walking figures, parades and picket-line marching, agitating bodies, diasporic flows). Perhaps this transitory pariah space is also related to the "queer utopian horizon" José Esteban Muñoz suggests we can "glimpse" here and there but never quite reach. Muñoz tells us his book is as much about utopian physical spaces (pre-Stonewall gay bars in Ohio; Andy Warhol's Factory) as about an evanescent "mode of feeling and being that [is] not quite there, but nonetheless an opening" (Muñoz 2009, p. 9).⁸ The essay offers a "strange bridge between the world of images and that of concepts" writes the essayist and diplomat Mariano Picón-Salas, "emerg[ing]" in epochs of crisis" (1954, p. 75). Another of my colleagues echoes this language of the third-space as a bridge that appears in moments it is most needed: "we work between," she writes, we "bridge the gap between students and the classroom" (Olivos 2023, personal correspondence). These colleagues are not composition teachers, but they nonetheless understand the tensions they embody as of a piece with those that split the identity of the composition teacher: critical outsider; professional functionary.

We learn this from the essays we work on as writing teachers: that our third spaces can be as conceptual as they are physical, and no less collaborative for being inhabited intellectually rather than physically. As the essay film and the collectives that produce some of the twentieth-century's most powerful essay films so readily dramatize, in the unpredictable collaborative energy that animates the essay—voices, ideas, images, concepts converging and diverging, "melting and condensing" (as Georg Lukács says of the essay form)—we can be fugitive from those impossible contradictions because we keep moving, keep finding each other, creating and re-creating what Steyerl calls a "self-organized common" (2011 p. 280). Yes, these third spaces court the same instrumentalization that Thomas Elsaesser worries we find in the "post-Fordist" production methods of the essay film: the "open floor-plan," DIY, work-from-home-or-not sprawl that threatens to make every space a third space, which is to say, to shift all burdens "from the organization to the individual, imposing on him or her an impossible demand of self-motivation as self-discipline, and appearing to reward self-exploitation by calling it entrepreneurial initiative, or even creativity" (2015, p. 251). But even Elsaesser's relentless skepticism gives way under the recognition that the ebb-tide fugitivity of these filmmakers will pull ever away from this assimilation. And this tidal force works, I would argue, by pulling back to the solidarity of the undercommons, the lateral protections of our organizing bonds.

So yes, we teach essays and inhabit their contradictory space. But what happens in that space is up to all of us, and more particularly to *us*, the composition teachers. How we teach writing and other modes of composing at the intersection of the disciplines, how we open the spaces of writing to students and colleagues, what we teach when we teach people not only to write but also to write to, for, and with one another: these are modes of collectivity that gesture towards a future while also owning a tradition of education and engagement, a collective inheritance that goes deeper than the facile reflex of critical thinking. Let's teach essays like radical filmmakers, which is to say, let's teach them like they matter! The essay, sometimes called the "fourth genre" to indicate its own peripheral status on the edge of the other major literary forms—novel, lyric, drama—can be more than the impossible organ of the internally contradictory "critical academic." The essay offers a collective space, a room in which to gather, a room in which to make sense. The fourth genre is or, should be, a third space.

NOTES

¹ By design, Moten and Harney offer no quick and easy definition of the "undercommons"; the undercommons is characterized by a dissonance, a "wildness," and a radiant, kinetic potentiality that would defy any careful denotation. In the introduction to the volume, Jack Halberstam compares the "undercommons" to the end of the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*: Max realizes that he cannot make the outcast and rejected wild things happy where they are (one possible space), nor can he restore them to the ordered world he left (a second space). But he recognizes in their community and in their dance a third option, "a path to an alternative to his world," the world from which they have been exiled. Halberstam then multiplies examples: the undercommons recognize the music that

exceeds the conductor, the study that exceeds the classroom, blackness and fugitivity, the community fugitive from institutional, colonial, and even disciplinary walls, the labor on which the “Enlightenment-type critique” of the university furtively depends. “Moten and Harney,” writes Halberstam, “want to gesture to another place, a wild place that is not simply the left over space that limns real and regulated zones of polite society; rather, it is a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness.” “To enter this space,” Moten and Harney tell us, “is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons.” The book’s subtitle is perhaps the most revealing and compressed definition; the undercommons: fugitive planning and black study.

² This is one of the most widely taught books on academic essays. By 2021 this book was in its 5th edition, but even by its 3rd printing in 2014 the authors can claim that the book is taught in “over half” of the colleges and universities in the U.S. and has sold “millions” of copies (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014 p. xiii).

³ Denny’s modifier “well” might in this assertion be capacious and plural, but any unqualified use of the “well” invokes a normative and exclusionary part of the history (and present) of composition education. “Writing well” in U.S. higher education, as Vershawn Ashanti Young reminds us, has historically been deployed to subordinate “accented” or “non-standard” varieties of English, identifying them as “deficient” (Young 2013, p. 142). Cf. Young, on the assumptions that subtend at least one historically normative use of “well”: “When we operate as if it is a fact that standard English is what all professionals and academics use, we ignore the real fact that not all successful professionals and academics write in standard English...Further, we ignore that standard English has been and continues to be a contested concept” (2013, p. 144).

⁴ See <https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-get-a-perfect-sat-essay-score>

⁵ For more on the relationship between the SLON collective, the Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collectives, the Third Cinema movement, and other experimental film collectives explicitly linking the political and the aesthetic between 1950 and 1990, see e.g. Nora Alter, “New Migrations: Third Cinema and the Essay Film” in *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* (2018), Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (1982) and Michael T. Martin, ed. *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality* (1995).

⁶ This notion of gesture is, in fact, crucial to Lukács’s understanding of the essay’s potential; see Lukács 2010, *passim*.

⁷ Thank you to my Pomona College colleagues Travis Brown, PhD., Director of the Institute for Inclusive Excellence and Director of the Quantitative Skills Center and Tamara Olivos, MS TESOL, Assistant Director of the Oldenborg Center for Modern Languages and International Relations, for taking the time to talk with me and answer some of my third-space questions. I owe much to our third space collaborations, to their willingness to share with me their brilliance and their time. I dedicate this piece to all of my third space colleagues and friends at Pomona College.

⁸ Much has been written, and there is much more to be said, about the “queer essay,” and the essay as/in relation to queer futurity and the relationship between these questions and fugitivity. See e.g. G.M. Gordon (2022). “The Essay as Trans Body” in M. Aquilina et al. (Eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*. Edinburgh University Press; D. Lazar (2013), “Queering the Essay,” *Essay Review*. <http://theessayreview.org/queering-the-essay/>; A. Aquilina (2021). “Margins and Marginality: Jean Genet and the Queer Essay.” In M. Aquilina (Ed.). *The Essay at the Limits*, Bloomsbury; G. Lavery (2022). “Unqueering the Essay.” In K. Wittman & E. Kindley (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay*. Cambridge University Press.

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