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## Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times

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## ***Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times***

Amy J. Wan

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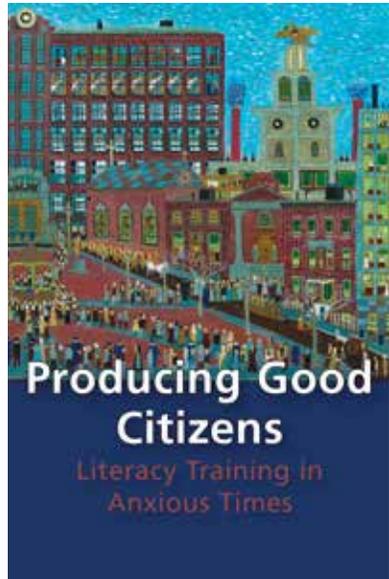
### ***Review by Daniel Bernal***

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Strong in theory, rich in history, and far-reaching in its implications, *Producing Good Citizens* will soon become a staple for scholars, activists, and pedagogues alike who are interested in the complicated intersections of literacy and citizenship. In this historicized work, Amy Wan explores three main sites of citizenship training during the 1910s and 1920s—federally-sponsored immigrant Americanization programs, union-supported worker education training, and college-mandated first-year writing courses. Wan’s book starts with a brief introduction to citizenship theory, moves into archival research of each training site, and concludes with applications of her methodology to present anxieties over citizenship, particularly in relation to the Patriot and DREAM Acts. Through her book, Wan complicates

citizenship as a discursive construct and demonstrates the limits of what literacy—and citizenship—can do for students as well as “the limitations put upon students by not only the idea of citizenship, but also its legal, political, and cultural boundaries” (178). Wan’s powerful, timely argument and her final challenge to educators and scholars alike should not be ignored. Together, Wan invites us to consider what is meant by the invocation of citizenship in the classroom, to analyze the habits of citizenship that are encouraged by our practices, and to connect our citizen-making processes to other more politically and materially situated notions of citizenship.

In her use of “citizenship,” Amy Wan builds on Danielle Allen’s *Talking to Strangers* (2004), Barbara Cruikshank’s *The Will to Empower* (1999), and Bryan Turner’s introduction to *Citizenship and Social Theory* (1993). Wan, along with these scholars, expands the concept of citizenship from mere legal status to a “kind of credential with legal and cultural purchase” (6). In this manner, Wan justifies the exploration of citizenship construction in not only legal spaces, but also in classrooms, workplaces, and community spaces. She cites Harvey Graff’s *The Literacy Myth* (1979) and Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), assessing that, while literacy might deem an individual worthy of certain resources (i.e. passing first-year composition in order



to graduate) it in no way guarantees social, economic, or political access. While this tendency to falsely conflate what Sharon Crowley describes as the “economic inequality and racial discrimination with a literacy problem” (qtd. in Wan, 7) might seem obviously erroneous, Wan is interested in its origins, pervasiveness, and rhetorical power. Ultimately, she concludes that this “literacy hope” serves to perpetuate systemic inequality.

Nevertheless, the invocation of citizenship production is also constantly leveraged to justify the usefulness of higher education, and especially the writing classroom. In this way, the ideals of citizenship support literacy instruction by proving that students are becoming the right kind of citizens who are doing the right kind of learning. Citizenship is referenced in student learning goals precisely because education is recognized as one of the traits of citizenship demonstrated by good and useful citizens. For example, Kathleen Yancey in her 2009 NCTE report calls for compositions that “foster a new kind of citizenship” (7). Yancey desires to empower students, “citizen writers” (1), to use twenty-first century writing skills to take action in a digital world. Wan also references other scholars such as Ellen Cushman (1998), Elizabeth Ervin (1997), and Michele Simmons (2007) who similarly characterize the writing classroom as a space that can “reinvigorate democratic and participatory citizenship through writing that relates to the public” (Wan 21). But Wan takes issue with these high-sounding arguments. She asserts that this undefined and “ambient awareness” (22) of citizenship plays a role in shaping the types of citizens that are produced. She writes, “The desired skills—public writing, public engagement, citizen critique, critical literacy, or technology—become inextricably, although often silently, linked to the imagined ideal of the ‘good citizen’” (22). This is dangerous because educators’ subconscious and unsifted views of what kind of people students should become may “conceal other ways of being a citizen” (Wan 22). Wan’s work attempts to get at the roots of this ambient awareness of citizenship as civic engagement and provides a brief literature review of citizenship theory, drawing particularly from T.H. Marshall’s rights oriented perspective of citizenship (1950), Judith Shklar’s *American Citizenship* (1998), and Linda Bosniak’s “Denationalizing Citizenship” (1976). Through these scholars, Wan calls into question the ambient understanding of citizenship, complicates the popular notion that citizenship is an achievable status (through literacy), and analyzes the view that it provides equal political standing and access to resources. Ultimately, she attempts to bring together the “theoretical good of citizenship with the material and political ... [by] looking at literacy *as a habit of citizenship* and considering how literacy teaching helps to construct this habit” (32). Wan’s “habits of citizenship” approach broadens the scope of her investigation, allowing her to recognize both the direct habits instilled by literacy—like civic participation or good work habits—and the indirect influence of literacy on an individual’s accessing of certain privileges of citizenship including political, social and economic access.

In chapter 2, Wan explores the individualistic, worker-citizens produced by federal Americanization programs in the early 20th century. She argues that the rhetorics of assimilation, patriotism, and citizenship promoted by such literacy training spaces

worked to assuage predominant fears about the influx and perceived corrupting influence of immigrants, who were now emigrating in larger numbers and from areas other than Western Europe. One such 1918 federal textbook reads as follows: “I come to the evening school to speak American English. It means a better opportunity and a better home for me in America. It means a better job for me. It means a better chance for my children. It means a better America. I shall do my part in making a better America” (qtd. in Wan, 56). Lessons such as this one designed to teach literacy also inevitably carried habits of citizenship, transforming immigrants into citizen-workers who were “punctual, followed the company rules, and did not agitate against the factory owner” (68); in short, workers who would contribute much to the country, assimilate culturally, and be exploited. But Wan also demonstrates another consequence of this type of instruction—a brand of individualism. She writes, “With literacy as a crucial aspect of their training for citizenship, immigrants learned a kind of individualism, making them solely accountable for whether or not they could gain full citizenship. ... Placing responsibility on individual actions and desires allowed for any poor treatment of new citizens to be concealed, making it the fault of the individual who did not fulfill citizenship’s cultural requirements” (70). Throughout the final chapters of her book, Wan demonstrates how this intricate connection between individual prosperity, literacy, and citizenship has become embedded in the American psyche. And, of particular interest to scholars in our field, Wan explores how these notions of individualism live on in current iterations of literacy hope and equality narratives, evidenced in the rhetoric surrounding the DREAM Act.

In contrast to the individually-achieving, hard-working citizens created through Americanization programs, chapter 3 explores how workers’ education programs teach literacy to cultivate a different type of citizenship. Wan cites extensively from labor newspapers and other publications put out by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and demonstrates that labor education imagined a more collaborative and intelligent type of citizen, characterized by civic responsibility to fellow workers. This vision of workers as members of a community with shared goals contrasts greatly with the highly individualized political and economic entities created by Americanization programs. Wan historicizes these goals within the framework of social anxiety—namely industrialization, mass production, and the changing roles of workers. Similarly, she explores how the unions used these programs to further their goals: “the cultivation of leadership in the ranks, the recruitment of more educated workers leading to a stronger and larger labor movement, and the acquisition of intellectual equality with those in power such as bosses and politicians” (110). In this way, while workers’ education attempted to expose assumptions about the equality of citizenship, they explicitly created the type of worker-citizens useful to the unions. Of particular interest to Wan is the union’s orientation towards civic participation for a communal good. She argues that this movement perhaps sets the precedent of literacy training for critical literacy (110), but is hesitant to apply this type of thinking to contemporary writing classrooms.

University literacy instruction in the early twentieth century, as Wan explores

in Chapter 4, arises out of similar societal anxieties and “illustrates how the concept of citizenship was used to construct a burgeoning middle class” (114). Wan’s work challenges Robert Connors’ (1997) characterization of this period in education as a “consolidation period” (Wan 119). She contends that this period, “rather than one of consolidation, actually reflects the flux and turmoil found outside the college classroom” (Wan 119). Specifically, Wan focuses on the English classroom as a citizen-making space, which she asserts “has strong roots in the period around the First World War with its anxieties about the growing number of immigrants and shifting work expectations” (123). Her analysis of NCTE publications shows a movement away from teaching literature and other cultural texts, in favor of “teaching the communicative, intellectual, and ethical skills to be a self-governed citizen” (125). Taken in conjunction with the other case studies Wan has reviewed, this chapter demonstrates the production of a different sort of citizenship—primarily coming from the middle and upper classes, but a citizen concerned with both work and civic participation—in some ways a combination of the union member and immigrant-student. Wan argues that in this training site, while literacy is primarily seen as a tool for “future productivity” (114), students would also learn the “communicative, intellectual, and ethical skills needed to be a self-governed citizen” (125). In this vein, Wan analyzes how teachers in the 1910s and 1920s constructed classrooms as little republics, set stages for debates, and connected course content to the world—thereby preparing students for civic, and not only economic, participation. The writing classroom pledged to provide students with economic, political, social, and even spiritual benefits, which, in turn, provided legitimacy for the institutions.

Wan’s final chapter fast-forwards to the present, demonstrating how equality narratives and versions of literacy hope are still prevalent today. She calls for a self-analysis of how educators define citizenship in the context of education and literacy training and argues that a nuanced understanding of citizenship can help us to negotiate the space between the traditional goals of liberal arts education and an increasingly vocational paradigm; between the collective goals of democracy and the private goals of access to high-paying jobs (155). But, while Wan starts by emphasizing the importance of education towards the creation of citizenship, she soon moves to the importance of citizenship in an individual’s access to education through a discussion of the Patriot and DREAM Acts. She roots these legislations in cultural anxieties over immigration similar to those twentieth-century anxieties explored throughout her book and posits that the “DREAM Act reinforces the long-standing appeal of education and literacy as components of defining citizenship” (165). This section of her work is timely but far-too-short and therefore begs further research. Of particular interest to community literacy studies is Wan’s suggestion that, in the vein of the immigrant-Americanization programs of chapter 2, the common narratives about the dreamers which focus on *individual* achievement against all odds, “rather than a larger, more meaningful overhaul of the way a nation defines its citizens ... might undermine hopes for a less-punitive immigration policy” (169). Simply put, Wan argues that by publicizing individual “success stories” we invisibilize the larger social,

economic, and political barriers to citizenship faced by immigrants, as well as overlay literacy and higher education as the preferred road to citizenship. This final example, along with Wan's charge to "teacher-citizens" (171), invites educators and scholars alike to weigh literacy's privileged role in citizenship-production against a more complicated, materially situated notion of citizenship in order to better understand all its consequences for our colleges, classrooms, and communities.