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Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World

Nancy Welch

Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2008. 184 pp.
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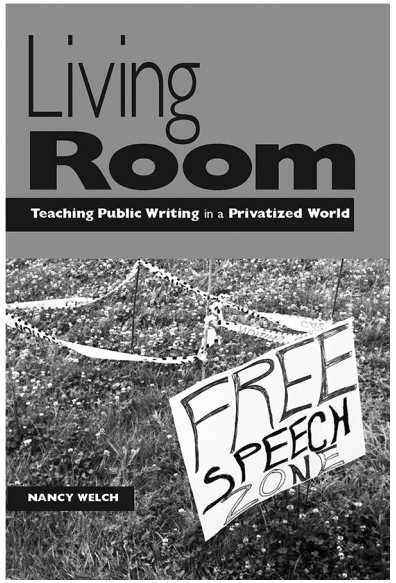

At the 2011 Federation Rhetoric Symposium (FRS), I heard Dr. Nancy Welch, professor of English at the University of Vermont, deliver a talk called "What We Teach When We Teach (Only) Moderation and Civility." Her argument intrigued me, so at the conference I purchased her 2008 book *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Welch's discussion of civic literacy through writing dovetailed perfectly with the FRS conference theme of "Writing Democracy: A Rhetoric of (T) here" and informed my own nascent pedagogical project to teach students public writing through multimodal composition. When I read Welch's book, I realized that not only does she give a rationale for teaching public writing under the constraints of neoliberal hegemony, but she also gives readers insights into how we use rhetorical history to build community literacy.

Dr. Welch aims her book at an audience primarily of scholars and teachers of composition and rhetoric; however, her text could also be pertinent for sociologists, anthropologists, sociolinguists, historians, public policymakers, political scientists, critical theorists, media scholars, social workers, public school educators, psychologists, and philosophers. In fact, the book makes the argument for civic rhetoric as vernacular art in an accessible, palatable way that would also appeal to those not in academia: for

example, community book clubs and writing workshops. Although Welch's work is carefully researched and eloquently articulated, her writing is, like bell hooks's, crafted to reach a larger constituency through its engaging narratives and its recursive unity.

The exigency for the book arose from two defining events in Welch's life of activism: a rally in Times Square protesting the "Shock and Awe" bombing campaign in Iraq in the spring of 2003 and a march two days later down Broadway to Washington Square. The Conference on College Composition and Communication was held in New York that year, and Welch recalls attending the first "emergency protest" in a sea of black umbrellas as the NYPD barricaded the throngs of protestors into a confined two-block space. The second protest filled forty blocks, as police allowed protestors to move about unmolested in the sunny, unseasonably warm weather. Welch explains that she uses the "helpless despair" of the first night coupled with the "unrelenting hope of the Saturday march" to "inform [her] approach to the chapters in this book" (3). She reveals that both of these perspectives have enabled her to think about how to teach writing in a way that "supports access, voice, and impact" while also keeping in mind the "formidable constraints" that prevent people from trying to change the status quo (4).

These two events inform the overarching goal of the text: to bring together two conversations in composition studies. The first conversation, a burgeoning interest in teaching public writing, manifests in the work of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Gilles Deleuze, and others, work that seeks to animate a discussion of how various publics engage in debate in a shrinking sphere of influence. An increasing tension between the social turn in composition studies since the 1980s and the corresponding privatization of the national social and political milieu forms one of the dominant themes in this text, and Welch employs these notions of public and private in discussing issues of the content and context of arguments that students create. The second conversation concerns the revival of readings of rhetorical history in the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Jean C. Williams, Jane Greer, Anne Ruggles Gere, Susan Jarratt, and others—histories of middle-class populations who have devised a wealth of strategies and venues in which to make arguments about issues of concern. Welch uses this idea of rhetorical recovery as seen through socioeconomic class to explore questions of form and genre of the public discourse written by students.

In describing these ongoing conversations, she raises a valid concern: previous conversations have focused primarily on middle-class forums and practices. Welch exhorts the reader to engage in scholarship and pedagogy to expand dialogues concerning marginalized publics, who practice the "working-class rhetorical arts of the soapbox, picket, sit-down, and strike" (5). Crafting the book's organization from the general to the

specific, Welch first lays the foundation of the book's rationale in a nuanced, well-researched discussion of neoliberal economic policy, and how that push toward a privatized globalization has shaped public discourse. In the next few sections of the text, Welch looks at models, lessons, and questions of twentieth-century efforts to gain "living room," a phrase used by Welch as both a literary allusion to a 1985 book of poetry by June Jordan and an extended metaphor conveying the space of public debate that neoliberal policy has shrunk to a point of near-extinction. Finally, Welch offers a case study of rhetorical action by the students of the University of Vermont, where Welch teaches composition, rhetoric, literacy studies, and women's studies.

In the first chapter, "A Public World Is Possible," Welch establishes the rationale and structure of the book and explains how composition studies has taken an opposite trajectory from that of public discourse. This failure to engage the zeitgeist of contemporary social issues stems from, in part, a failure to practice critical literacy and to activate critical literacy in others. To prove her point, Welch cites thinkers such as Harriet Malinowitz, who in 2003 noted the "stupidification" of the American public by corporate media and the lack of critical literacy to combat this trend (Welch 8). Welch insists that we need a longer timeline to understand how neoliberalism began to privatize the public sphere. This history she begins here in the first chapter by putting June Jordan's *Living Room* (1985) into its historical context and theorizing how works like Jordan's can inform pedagogy. The chapter ends on a hopeful tone, with Welch exploring how old technologies like the soapbox and street theater can still be relevant in the age of Web 2.0. Each of the first four chapters ends with an interlude that provides a case study of the chapter's theme. In Chapter one's interlude, "Your Appeal Has Been Reviewed by the Medical Director," Welch critiques sociolinguist James Paul Gee's argument that we must "teach students *the* language of power" (21, author's emphasis). Welch explains the limits of this approach by narrating the experiences she and her husband have had with managed healthcare. When one is caught by the privatization of authority and an endless feedback loop, knowing and using the language of power is no guarantee of rhetorical success.

Chapter two, "Ain't Nobody's Business?" begins with another of Welch's recollections, this time of generational differences in obtaining birth control. The landmark court decisions that opened up more access to birth control gave women additional "zones of privacy" rather than more "spheres of liberty" (29). Welch uses John Stuart Mills's terms "self-regarding" (private) and "other-regarding" (public) to explain the paradox of how privacy is eroding in an era of privatization (30). Welch notes that gated communities, the outsourcing of public services, and corporate "right to privacy" legislation have created private spaces for those in power, while

common people undergo an unprecedented level of scrutiny and intrusion upon their civil rights. The distinctions have become blurred, as Nancy Fraser has pointed out in 1997, with domestic and economic privacies being equated and naturalized (34). Welch suggests that instead of using the term "private experience," we use "privatized experience" (34). From tracing this question of public vs. private spheres, Welch demonstrates how she uses examples of what Fraser calls "'discursive contestation' over the highly political questions of where (and by whom) public and private boundaries are drawn" (44) to urge students to analyze and question the subjects upon which they can form arguments. Through engaging students critically with theoretical texts and rhetorical case studies (by Patricia Williams, Herbert Kohl, Dana Frank, and Martin Duberman, among others), and using metacognitive writing strategies, Welch helps students find agency and authority in topics that have been reserved for "the experts." Welch describes a number of strategies such as "Reseeing the Argument," a revision exercise that asks students to annotate the emerging arguments in the margins of their drafts, and an invention activity in which students make two lists: "I'm an authority on . . ." and "I'm concerned about. . . ." The purpose of these activities is to guide students to question the false dichotomy of public and private. In the Interlude "Risking Rhetoric," Welch expands the notion of public and private to ask questions of individual, private activism and collective, public solidarity.

Chapter three, "Taking Sides," explores the implications of Susan Miller's assertion that we need to send students to "activism school" (Welch 55). Coming from a tradition in which the practice of inquiry has been related to (feminized) composition rather than (masculinized) rhetoric (56), Welch wonders, "what my relationship to argument might be" (57). Pushing against the binary of rhetoric as inquiry and rhetoric as confrontation, Welch regrets the predominant opinion in feminist thought that it is "regressive for a feminist and an academic Leftist to argue at all" (58). Maintaining her doubt in positivism, Welch prefers a pedagogy in which writing exercises pry open hermetic assertions. She traces two strands of feminist rhetoric: the maternalist and the postmodern or third sophistic (59). Both maternalist and third sophistic rhetoric fail to prepare students for public writing for three reasons: First, they fail because they privilege disengagement in the struggle for social change, albeit for different reasons; second, these feminists disavow founding principles and the restrictiveness of platforms; and third, they tend to elide historical details that might challenge their own status. Because of the triumph of free-market capitalism and the supremacy of U.S. imperialism, activists take sides either for or against neoliberalism. Far from disengaging, Welch asserts that these are the struggles that "should claim the attention of rhetoricians" (69). Nevertheless, with all the polarity and the problems with these feminist rhetorics, they

can teach us vital lessons in coalition-building (maternalist) and in resisting arguments that are not well-considered (post-modern) (70). Students can be taught how to enact both passion and critical distance through learning some "strategies of rhetorical combat" (70). The Interlude for this chapter, "The Hard Line," gives a case study of resistance waged by African American auto workers in the 1970s. Welch gives an overview of the texts by these workers that she and her students analyze—documentaries, newspaper articles, speeches—to show how everyday people gained a voice in the public sphere and fought the oppression in a confrontational and rhetorically effective way, gaining concessions from employers outside of traditional organized labor channels.

In the fourth chapter "Making Space," Welch provides examples of the kinds of analysis and synthesis in which her students engage. They examine the visual rhetoric of t-shirts with slogans and post their found poems on telephone poles to protest war. This chapter records Welch's efforts to study the history and find the strategies that students need not only to craft arguments but also to think through all the constraints, including the insidious efforts to silence their voices. She also attends in this chapter to two connected silences in our current literature on public writing and public-sphere theory. The first one she has already alluded to: the ongoing move to convert public infrastructure and resources into private property. The second silence relates to a lack of dialogue about our "rich history of in-the-street working-class rhetorical action against both the interests of capital and the state forces in place to protect capitalist interests" (90). Voicing concerns about constraints or obstacles against public discourse, students think about the ways their attempts to be heard are thwarted, the hazards of arguing with loved ones, and the consequences of facing censure by those in authority (92). Making the second silence audible is also difficult. To address this, Welch examines our ambivalence about class, the difficulties in creating forums for working-class citizens, and the failure to acknowledge the needs and desires of working-class and disenfranchised people. In order to show these tensions, Welch has students read a familiar text and another text with which the first engages in conversation. The civility and order of the idealized public sphere are problematized by exercises such as this one. Using a university panel session on the Iraq War as a case study, Welch explains the problems of class and authority experienced by her students in Chapter four's Interlude entitled "This is Not a Rally."

Chapter five, "So What Gives You the Authority?" begins with the dilemma of student apathy. Where does it come from? What can we do about it? Welch attributes inaction not to apathy but rather to ethos, or lack thereof. Senior students in her women's studies seminar did not see themselves as authorities in their chosen fields of study and found the prospect of writing about public or private matters equally daunting.

Welch uses this anecdote about class discussions to launch an inquiry into rhetorical ethos. She argues that in our privatized, neoliberal society, public debate is increasingly restricted to the "experts," leaving ordinary citizens without a voice in the issues that affect them. She cites literacy theorists (such as Shirley Brice Heath), media critics (Robert McChesney), journalists (Helen Thomas), and historians (Howard Zinn) to help her unpack what it means to own and wield ethos in a constricted public sphere. This chapter ends with a call for collective concern about "the disturbing gap between actual demonstrations of mass public argumentation and what many of our students, in their classrooms and in the wider culture, learn about leaving arguments to the experts or until the next election" (144). In the book's epilogue, "Education Goes Public," Welch includes a case study of collective action among students and faculty at the University of Vermont to urge the Board of Trustees to divest from companies who did business with South Africa in the era of Apartheid. She chronicles their efforts to find and create forums for voicing dissent against university policy as well as solidarity with South African activists.

This book raises as many questions as it answers, but in provoking thought and debate about the shrinking public sphere and in giving educators a set of tools to help students engage in public writing, Welch's text serves a vital purpose. Nancy Welch has seized the kairos of our historical moment to make a call for us to encourage and facilitate community literacy. I hope we will heed her call.

Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World

Catherine Prendergast

Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2008. ix + 180 pp. $22.95.

Reviewed by Jerry Lee
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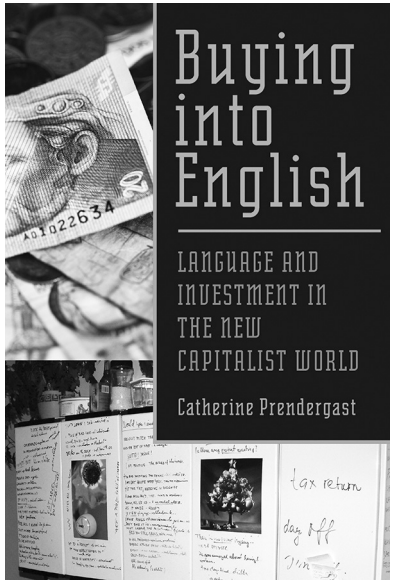

Prendergast's *Buying into English* exposes readers to some of the material realities of the English language's role in relation to globalizing capitalist market structures. Using Slovakia as her case study, Prendergast demonstrates through critical ethnography the state's efforts to learn or "buy into" English and how the promises of such efforts often remain unfulfilled. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that saw the overthrow of communism in Czechoslovakia, English was taught widely in Slovakia (still a part of the Czechoslovakian state until 1993), becoming "predominantly associated with money and influence" (5). Prendergast complicates previous efforts of Robert Phillipson (author of *Linguistic Imperialism*) and David Crystal (author of *English as a Global Language*) to equate English with economic access, arguing that the globalization of English needs to be understood also as an exercise in information asymmetry (6-10).

Chapter One discusses how English was a "lingua non grata" during communist rule in Czechoslovakia, censored or limited by Soviet doctrine: "The central control of information, the demand for loyalty, the empty rituals, and the danger of punishment all left their imprint on people's encounters with English" (26). The English language, because of its associations with capitalism, was vilified, although Prendergast provides instances in which it was in fact necessary nonetheless. But one of the main