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Review Essay

Writing Inside and Outside the Margins

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In February 2012, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appeared on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. In the midst of a discussion about the department’s work, Duncan responded very quickly to a statement by Stewart that “new standards” for K–12 schools had been set by the Department of Education. “No,” Duncan interjected. “These are [states’] standards. We don’t have national standards. . . . [But] for the first time in our country a child in Massachusetts, which is very high achieving, and a child in Mississippi, which is lower achieving, is [sic] going to be measured by the same yardstick” (Duncan).

Duncan was referring to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted by forty-three states. These standards will likely define what “good writing” looks like for the next generation of K–12 students. To be “college and career ready,” the standards say, students will practice three modes: argumentative writing, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative writing. The “Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards” (National Governors) does acknowledge that “skilled writers many times use a blend of these three texts to accomplish their purposes” (24). But there are those, and just those, three modes, sometimes blended, to encompass writing.

The five books reviewed here call attention to the issues growing out of defining “good writing” in such narrow ways—or perhaps I should say additional attention, since others in our field (e.g., Hesse) have already begun to carefully examine them. Each of these texts asks and sometimes answers important questions about ideas surrounding conceptions of good writing—and good writers—in school.

The figure of the DJ, the digital griot, is at the center of Adam J. Banks’s elegant Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age. Like DJing, he contends, writing is always embedded in cultures, contexts, practices, networks. In this multilayered book, Banks addresses two questions: how can inquiry into African American rhetorical traditions “help to develop models of meaningful, engaged technology access and use,” and how can these models “contribute to culturally relevant, responsible instruction for all students, especially African American students” (15)? In five chapters, the “mix tape” for African American rhetoric 2.0, Banks presents compelling evidence supporting his contention that “the answers need to weave print, oral, and digital traditions” that “offer models of discursive and rhetorical excellence” (15).

In the book’s first chapter, Banks details the knowledge and practices that the griot brings to this work—historian and historiographer, improviser with
a knowledge of tradition, audience, and rhetorical strategy, visionary, and motivator. Banks considers how the classroom can become a griotic space where black students can “see themselves reflected more genuinely . . . and theory can benefit all students looking for greater appreciation of the multiple connected and diverging influences on writing in a society that is (very slowly) becoming more genuinely inclusive and multicultural” (14).

Next, he situates questions about rhetoric and representation in a genuine local context. An initially reluctant participant in a grant designed to bridge the gap between Syracuse University and the city of Syracuse, Banks describes his experiences teaching his first course in a restaurant in the heart of Syracuse’s black community and the many subsequent courses after that first one. But while the courses brought together community members and scholars, and while its members produced some terrific writing (based on the excerpts that Banks includes in the book), Banks examines the challenges of bringing together and remixing voices, traditions, and practices across cultures and contexts. Banks ends the chapter describing a sample class he wishes he had taught and will teach, one that “encourages people to see themselves as griots” (83). In light of Duncan’s interview, which strangely makes Massachusetts and Mississippi into the same “local” (or a local that shares the same interests), this chapter raises compelling questions about the relationships between the academy and these contexts as well.

Questions about “the local” extend through the book’s next two chapters, which point to questions and models situated within African American culture that Banks contends contain elements critical for remixing a framework for African American rhetoric 2.0. The third chapter focuses on the generation gap among African Americans as it is reflected in the “back in the day” narrative. On its surface, Banks says, this narrative seems to encapsulate debates that cycle through discussions by an older generation about a younger one. But he also sees it as a “form that represents powerful collective memory at work” and has the potential to contribute to a way of understanding uses of the past and present as they point toward a richer future. “Back in the day,” Banks says, is about “affirming black humanity” by recognizing unique and significant elements—events, values, activities—in black cultures and using that tradition “as the basis for a collective agenda for the future” (100). The narrative itself is a remix, and remixing the narrative involves asking the questions that are answered in it. What events, values, activities are critical for the future, not the past, of black culture? How can these events, values, and activities link the
past and that future so that future is distinctly black?

This leads to Banks’s exploration of the theoretical underpinning of his griotic vision. Here, he outlines what seems the most important part of his analysis: synthesizing perspectives in order to develop a new vision and an alternative future that is grounded in the complex realities of the present and the potential of the future. Admirable here is the discussion both of mixing itself, which draws on composition theorists, black theologists, and DJs, and the possibilities that are outlined.

Even as he raises these questions, though, Banks is also grounded in the pragmatic necessities of considering contexts and taking action within a framework that takes into consideration questions of African American rhetorical agency and power. Banks contends that African American rhetoric 2.0 is about the struggle by teachers and students, a struggle that leads to transformation and change and not just replication; the DJ/griot is the figure who can make this happen.

Among the many strengths of Banks’s book are the powerful, accessible, and grounded pathways that are created for rhetorical agency through his discussion of African American rhetoric 2.0 and the tradition of the griot. Banks also includes examples of these efforts in action, as each chapter includes a “shoutout”—an example of a real project enacting the principles outlined there. Ultimately, Banks’s analysis suggests that these pathways are sometimes challenging and not always cleanly bounded. Certainly, they are not reflected in the tidy three-mode vision for writing in the CCSS. But Banks also outlines a powerful vision of the possible—one that comes with an inherent messiness that is critical for the process of exploring movement, negotiation among potentially conflicting visions, and change.

Like Digital Griots, Margaret Price’s Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life raises paradigm-challenging questions about fundamental tenets of schooling by focusing on students, faculty, and others with mental disabilities (a term on which, Price says, she ultimately settles, but not entirely comfortably). In a sprawling six chapters, the book covers a range of subjects: definitions of mental disability, how conceptions of space and time intersect with the work of mentally disabled students and faculty; the idea of “collegiality” as it pertains to faculty roles; media representations of mentally disabled individuals in coverage of the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University; mental disability in autobiography and memoir; and independent scholars and mental disability. But as troubling (in a good
way) as Price’s questions are, I also found two elements of the book frustrating, though I wondered if this was by design. First is the sometimes absence for possibility, negotiation, and way-making more present in Banks’s work. Second (and related) are the thoughtful (but sometimes not-quite-fulfilling) responses that Price sometimes presents to the important questions raised here.

In the opening chapter, Price carefully outlines institutional factors that contribute to the development of labels like “mentally disabled.” She explains that she is working from a perspective drawn from disability studies, which “generally understands the institution that produces human oppression (as well as privilege)” (5). In this sense, the system is more oppressive than it is in Banks’s analysis; the possibility for possibility seems less available. Then again, in the age of the Common Core State Standards (where Massachusetts and Mississippi become the same local), this lack of availability may well reflect a more accurate interpretation of that system. In Price’s analysis, that system also deprivileges those with mental disabilities. But in fact, she says, it should be the system’s job “to measure up to [those with mental disabilities]” (9), rather than for those with disabilities to participate in a structure that privileges able-ism and “contributes to the construction of a rigid, elitist, hierarchical, and inhumane academic system” (8).

Price’s analysis of this system and its effects is strongest when she is carefully deconstructing the values that are privileged and embedded within it, asking questions about the ways that these reflect dominant cultural values that raise sometimes significant challenges for students and faculty with mental disabilities. In the first chapter, for instance, she interrogates the idea of “rhetoricity.” Since rhetoricity is the backbone of participation, what happens when people “lack rhetoricity,” as some mentally disabled people do (26)? Price almost seems to call for a language that exists apart from context (save, perhaps, for the context of its creator), a “rhetoric whose very authenticity destroys its fluency—perhaps even its ability to be voiced at all” (39).

But “what happens,” Price asks, “to the rhetor who cannot be listened to” (44)? Indeed. What are our options as language instructors? How can this important and vexing point become part of a discussion that increasingly focuses on “standards” (or even “outcomes”) and the products attesting to same? To some extent, Price seems to want to call for an obliteration of context such that mentally disabled communicators are considered rhetors, but what replaces those problematic contexts is never quite clear.

The next chapter continues to raise paradigm-challenging questions, ask-
ing how to accommodate students whose participation falls outside of normative expectations. These extend to everything from turn-taking in discussions to notions of time, to the focus of questions. She raises critical issues (and questions): How can we rethink ideas about participation, time, collaboration, interaction, what it means to be a member of a class or a department—in ways that do not merely “accommodate” difference but truly reconstruct contexts and structures? How can we ensure that our ideas of “participation” are truly diverse—rather than ones based on normative expectations that merely accommodate difference from a single standard? Here, too, Price raises questions that interrogate some of the most fundamental assumptions of our work. “Participation” is a key feature in many academic classes, but Price asks us to consider what is required to be seen as a “participant” and how instructors might perceive those who do not seem to conform to those expectations.

This probing examination continues in the third chapter, which focuses on ideas of collegiality and productivity largely in conjunction with faculty positions. It also raises compelling and troubling questions about the ways in which structures in the academy reflect normative assumptions about mental abilities and disabilities and perpetuate those structures. Price opens with an insightful and important analysis as she notes that “not only are all job candidates not equal in kairotic space, but kairotic spaces such as interviews may single out and punish with particular force traits associated with mental disabilities” (105). The pressures associated with academic life, especially the tenure clock, she says, might make academic life even more stressful for members of the professoriate with mental disabilities. “What is the nature of the thing?” (107), she asks in relation to faculty positions. Is it possible to change the mix of a faculty position to accommodate mental disability (that might be extended for all faculty members, in fact): “[C]an a faculty position consist of a different mix of activities” (outside/in addition to teaching/research/service) (107)? But Price also goes beyond to question the very nature of what it means to be—that if an instructor has to miss class on an unpredictable basis because of mental disability? What if “he cannot be physically present, but periodically holds classes online? Can we still say that his teaching is good? Good enough . . . ” (108)?

As compelling as these questions in these two chapters are, the solutions offered to them seem not quite their equals. Even Price seems somewhat frustrated by her own responses. While she says that she wants to answer “no” in response to questions about whether “people with severe depression, or schizophrenia, or agoraphobia cannot be professors,” for instance, she says she knows
that “this imagined world will require enormous, paradigm-shifting changes to some of academe’s most dearly held tenets” (112). Other answers seem less than the sum of their questions. In the classroom, she says, we might look to principles of universal design. “I am more a reformist than a revolutionary,” says Price in the conclusion to the book’s second chapter, and that stance is clear here (87). But it’s also important to recognize that while her answers may not be “revolutionary,” the questions that the first three chapters of this book raise are critical in a time when conceptions of what “good writing” (and the teaching of same) are being increasingly structured and normed in artifacts like the CCSS. Price’s conceptualizations of educational structures also leads me to think about the ways in which writing professionals found themselves shut out of the discussions about the CCSS. While I certainly don’t want to equate this with the issues that the mentally disabled experience, it did lead me to consider occasions where Price’s narrower view of possibility applies.

Following the three chapters on mental disability and practices associated with specific activities connected to teaching and learning, the following two are textual analyses of representations of mental disability and mental “illness” in written work. In the first, Price focuses on representation of “madness” in reports about the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University. In both instances, Price says, the academy was presented as a bastion of rational behavior and activity, a “sanctuary of reason” (145), while the representation of the shooters constructed a sharp line between “madness” and “sanity” and separated their deviant behaviors from those around them. The following chapter examines how pronoun references in three autobiographical texts by writers with mental disabilities challenge conventions of autobiography and reposition relationships between ablest and mentally disabled perceptions of the stories of writers.

The book’s penultimate chapter, coauthored with the subjects at its core, examines the work of independent scholars “whose views are not readily accessible through conventional academic scholarship” (201) because they do not teach, because their work is circulated through independent sources or social media, or because they are outside of the conventional academic norm in some other way. Here, Price and her collaborators illustrate the limitations that conventional structures in academe present, such as the idea that peer review tends to perpetuate existing norms of both scholarship and intellectual approach that can mean those who do not participate in those norms are excluded. As with the rest of the book, I’m left with the same sense of challenge
and frustration. In a climate where discussions of what counts as good writing (and learning) is increasingly grounded in performative standards that (most generously) can be said to reflect input from limited stakeholders, Price’s book raises important questions. At the same time, I feel challenged to imagine what the alternatives to some of the issues that she raises even are. Given Price’s unique position as an author, an expert compositionist, and a self-identified mentally disabled person, I wished—perhaps (probably) unfairly—for even bolder answers. Nonetheless, Price’s book does raise bold questions that are critical to consider.

While Price and Banks are concerned (in part) with how conditions shaping ideas about how writing in school might be reshaped in light of the experiences of particular groups, Mary Soliday’s *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines* provides focused case studies of those conditions in action. Soliday’s book extends from her work as the coordinator of the City College of New York (CCNY) Writing Fellows Program, an initiative extending from City University of New York’s efforts to support writing as students move through college.

In light of the rigid conceptions of writing reflected in documents like the CCSS, one hopes that Soliday’s analysis of successful (and less than) assignments and products might open a broader dialogue about what students really write in college. “Readers and writers make everyday genres interactively,” Soliday argues in the opening section of the book. She then focuses on how CCNY’s Writing Fellows program provides students “access to a situation where they could interact with readers and be exposed to [faculty] expectations in some way” (3). The access reflected in this position comes through genre theory, particularly the idea that “writers in university situations must learn what constitutes a typical, as opposed to an imitative, expression” (3) within particular conventions (and constraints) posed by typical genres that are assigned within one class or groupings of classes (such as public health or education or sociology).

The results of extensive research are presented in three, tightly constructed chapters. The analysis is supported by extensive empirical research: interviews with students; analysis of “language that faculty used to describe their assignments” (31); analysis of student papers; and evaluation of student writing. These data sources, along with the exigency and context for the research, are described in the book’s first chapter, “Sharing Genre Expertise.”

The next two chapters, “Stance in Genre” and “Content in Genre,” constitute the core of Soliday’s analysis. Stance, she explains, is critical to the
performance of academic writing. It constitutes a writer's “angle of vision”—the ways in which writers communicate their perspective, their relationships to the epistemologies of disciplines and to the evidence that is used in writing, and the expectations of their audiences (36). But because stance is closely aligned with disciplinary epistemologies, Soliday says, it is critical for assignments to call for genres that are situated in disciplines and for students to understand relationships that are called for between their own ideas and those genres/disciplines. To this end, Soliday invokes Paul Prior’s notion of “genres in the wild”—that is, genres that live in their disciplines and actual situations of use—rather than their “domesticated” equivalents, tamed school genres. The critical point illustrated in Soliday’s analysis—one that is definitely not addressed in the CCSS—is how study of and practice with “wild” genres can and should allow writers to explore and practice the practices associated with disciplinary expertise.

To explore issues of stance, which she defines as the ability to represent one’s own position or interpretation in the context of the broader work of the field, Soliday focuses on three case studies, all richly supported with interviews and analyses of student papers. Discussion of an education course shows how a faculty member helped students through moments of struggle with concepts key to disciplinary participation. Descriptions of work from a general education music course show an instructor striking a balance between core concepts associated with general education—critical, close reading, analysis and practice with conventions of writing—and those associated with the study of music. Soliday then examines how students successfully adopted these stances in their writing. These courses stand in contrast to students in a psychology course. Here, the assignment of a more “domesticated” paper that lacked specifics about the genre’s characteristics, purpose, and motives for writing made it more difficult for students to make decisions about and adopt appropriate stances.

The next chapter takes up the equally complex issue of how to support writers as they turn “content into evidence” (emphasis in original) (71), a practice carefully situated within the disciplines where the writing takes place. Reviewing ideas of social participation and invention, Soliday examines successful assignments in architectural history, biology, communication, art, and anthropology and shows how they asked students to participate in the social practices associated with genres in the wild. Here, as in the previous chapter, the close analysis of assignments provides a finely grained look at what constitutes successful writing in a specific context and looks at how those contexts are
constructed (and, in some instances, not constructed) through assignments. She reiterates the importance of this work in the book’s conclusion, which returns to the critical point of access. Teachers and institutions “provide explicit access to genres,” she notes (104). The efforts described here are situated within broader questions of access—for students to the institution, for faculty members to disciplinary participation.

Questions of access and about how to prepare students for credit-bearing college-level writing courses are also front and center in Myra M. Goldschmidt and Debbie Lamb Ousey’s *Teaching Developmental Immigrant Students in Undergraduate Programs: A Practical Guide*, a hands-on handbook published as part of a series for teachers working in the classroom. Developmental immigrant (DI) students are “first or second generation immigrant students who need (extensive) developmental course work” (11). The problem, say Goldschmidt and Ousey, is that institutions often lack the courses that these students require.

Underscoring this book is the idea that DI students must be appropriately supported in order to learn to analyze and participate in the academy. The book provides strategies “to help students understand what academic literacy is” (Crosby v) and to help them “acquire academic literacy” (Goldschmidt and Ousey 22). The use of the singular in these two passages, though, illustrates a significant issue with the text. While it includes practical discussion of issues faced by a vulnerable population and hands-on solutions to some of those issues, it also reflects assumptions about writing that parallel those in the CCSS. Here, writing is a skill. It is so distinctly separate from content, in fact, that the book’s sixth chapter, “Teaching a Content-Based Course: American Studies” opens with a bullet point summary explaining that “Content-based instruction enables students to acquire academic literacy through a combination of academic learning and language instruction” (75). The implication is that language instruction isn’t academic learning. Ultimately, it’s disappointing that Goldschmidt and Ousey did not look to work in writing across the curriculum or even writing about writing—even to explain why these approaches were not appropriate for DI students.

While I found the separation of “writing” and “content” something of an Achilles heel, this book does provide valuable insights into the experiences of DI students and useful strategies for working with them—though in any discussion of writing, the genres here are largely domesticated. The book’s first section, “Developmental Immigrant Students and Academic Literacy,” defines DI students and outlines why access is such a critical issue for them.
The admirable question that these authors tackle, then, is “how [to] best serve these students that have been admitted, and how [faculty] can give them the opportunity to thrive” (17).

The second part of *Teaching DI Students* outlines the answers. This section includes two practical, well-documented chapters focusing on strategies for helping DI students develop what are sometimes (mistakenly) dismissed as “soft skills”—activities for keeping track of work, scaffolding writing, and problem solving. Also here are echoes of the flip side of Soliday’s work, as the authors provide hands-on tips for helping DI students understand course expectations, talk with instructors about assignments, and learn to understand and navigate the realities of college life.

The third section of the book, “Teaching Academic Literacy within an Academic Framework: Suggested Approaches,” is especially problematic because it’s here that writing is primarily framed as a “skill”—though, to be sure, a skill that is complicated and critical for students’ success. The first chapter of this section, which focuses on academic integrity, outlines some valuable strategies that instructors can use to teach students about the cultural and practical properties associated with citational practice.

But the next chapter, “Teaching a Content-Based Course: American Studies” (75), distinctly separates writing and content. The course described here “offer[s] students the reading, vocabulary, and background knowledge needed to understand American history and culture” (76); indeed, it seems engaging and important. But I kept asking: why this? The argument throughout this book is that academic discourses and strategies for participating in them are unfamiliar. Since this is the context closest to these students at the time of instruction, why didn’t Goldschmidt and Ousey draw on the growing body of research examining the possibilities for studying *writing* in a writing class in their discussion?

The following chapter, which focuses on writing instruction, continues to separate writing and content. The authors lay out principles and practices that are important for DI students. But here, too, the writing that these students do through these practices is thoroughly “domesticated”—they move “from paragraph to essay and from personal writing to analytical writing to writing that incorporates research” (104). Certainly, there are many reasons not to plunge novice writers into expert genres like research-based writing. On the other hand, since the mid-1980s basic writing researchers (e.g., Del Principe) and at least some in ESL/ELL (e.g., Murie, Collins, and Detzner) have advocated...
for the use of more authentic genres in courses for students labeled “basic writers” and Generation 1.5 students. The authors also seem to concede this point, noting that the five- or six-paragraph essay that might be taught in DI writing courses is “a useful reference tool . . . , but not acceptable in discipline-specific writing courses” (114). Composition is a discipline—so why teach this inauthentic, domesticated genre? And why not help these students learn to analyze the expectations of courses—this one and others—so that they can make decisions about their writing? The frustration of Teaching DI Students is that while it addresses critical questions about a population at risk for college success, it does so in a way that doesn’t seem to take into account the last twenty years of research in writing and genre or the current policy contexts shaping ideas about writing and access. Additionally, the vision of “writing” in this book is considerably more aligned with the CCSS than any of the other books discussed here, a possibility that I also find troubling.

What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors, a collection edited by Greg A. Giberson and Thomas A. Moriarty, provides a provocative counterpart to Teaching DI Students. The focus here is on the undergraduate writing major. While the book’s essays attest to the wide variety of issues stemming from the creation and content of these majors, one point is clear: in all, writing is a subject of study, not a skill to be appended to other courses. Many of the book’s chapters also take up the implications of these majors as they pertain to conceptualizations of writing and instruction that run through Goldschmidt and Ousey’s work.

The eight essays in the book’s first section, “Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Issues for Writing Majors,” focus on the development of writing majors and programs of study. Two of these question some of the fundamental premises that might potentially underscore the writing major itself. In their essay, Rebecca deWind Mattingly and Patricia Harkin call for a “post disciplinary” writing major in the research university. They define this as a major grounded in the teaching function of writing studies, which, they say, serves as a point of connection between writing studies researchers and teachers, other faculty, and business leaders outside of the academy. Working from this position, the authors argue, writing studies can have a degree of authority in the research university that might not be available to them otherwise. David Beard, too, looks at institutional structures, focusing on what he sees as a system separation of writing and rhetoric. In the process, he contends, “rhetorical production” has been devalued “in favor of critical consumption” (131–32). But where deWind
Mattingly and Harkin call for a “post-disciplinary” major. Beard contends that the study of rhetoric, which he deems critical for undergraduates, cannot be accomplished in undergraduate writing majors as the field is currently configured.

The other six essays in this portion of the book address issues grounded in the development of writing majors at specific institutions. Two essays, Randy Brooks, Peiling Zhao, and Carmella Braniger’s “Redefining the Undergraduate English Writing Major: An Integrated Approach at a Small Comprehensive University” and Lori Baker and Teresa Henning’s “Writing Program Development and Disciplinary Integrity: What’s Rhetoric Got to Do with It?,” address some of the issues raised in Beard’s lament. Both describe majors that have explicitly attempted to incorporate rhetorical concerns related to what Beard conceptualizes as a distinction between production and consumption of texts. They have also tried to provide students with experiences and support for developing understandings of theoretical issues related to the development and consumption of texts. Wallis May Andersen’s “Outside the English Department: Oakland University’s Writing Program and the Writing and Rhetoric Major” also provides some support for the contentions in DeWind Mattingly and Harkin’s essay, showing how holding out for a major and a department enabled the department to “overcome second class citizenship” in her institution (75).

The three other chapters in the book’s first section speak to and, sometimes, provide strategies for navigating the interpersonal and institutional complexities of the writing major. Grounded in a discussion of the development of the writing major at their institution, Lisa Langstraat, Mike Palmquist, and Kate Kiefer’s “Restorying Disciplinary Relationships: The Development of an Undergraduate Writing Concentration” uses lenses borrowed from restorative justice to examine the complicated processes and discussions among faculty as their institution created a writing major. I wondered what might have happened had William Macauley and the late Kelly Lowe, authors of “Between the Idea and the Reality . . . Falls the Shadow: The Promise and Peril of a Small College Writing Major,” read “Restorying,” as their chapter describes a writing major that, once created, did not result in the changes to the department or the status of writing that they expected. I also wondered if Rodney F. Dick, the author of “The Writing Major as Shared Commitment,” the chapter following Lowe and Macauley’s focusing on a later iteration of the major at the same institution, had approached the complicated discussions that Lowe and Macauley describe through lenses like those described in the “Restorying” chapter. Together, these three chapters provide insights into how faculty might consider engaging in
discussions about these majors, and what can go right—and wrong—in these discussions.

Essays in the second portion of the book focus more specifically on the curriculum for undergraduate writing majors and courses. These chapters provide compelling examples of how faculty conceptualize good writing and good study of writing within that study in order to build programs and courses. Dominic DelliCarpini and Mike Zerbe’s “Remembering the Canons’ Middle Sisters: Style, Memory, and the Return of the Progymnasmata in the Liberal Arts Writing Major” is a compelling (and practical) description of curriculum that reintroduces style and memory in an upper-division writing course. The ways it brings together theory and very concrete practice extending from a particular rhetorical issue marks it as one of the strongest chapters here. Similarly, Joddy Murray’s “Composing Multiliteracies and Image: Multimodal Writing Majors for a Creative Economy” focuses on the production of multimodal texts that reflect students’ abilities to produce “rhetorically constructed images” (217) along the way to becoming “innovators for a new creative economy” (217). Celest Martin’s “Not Just Another Pretty Classroom Genre: The Uses of Creative Nonfiction in the Writing Major” also focuses on production-focused activities as part of the writing major, examining the roles that creative nonfiction can play in a writing major as it helps students carefully attend to language, form, and craft within the context of specific purposes, audiences, and genres.

Other essays in this section center on particular theoretical stances in writing majors. Moriarty and Giberson’s essay provides food for thought in the age of the “college and career readiness” frame that has driven the creation of the Common Core State Standards. The authors argue that “civic rhetoric” is an issue to which writing majors and programs might anchor themselves, “provid[ing] . . . an ever-evolving, dynamic set of concerns that will motivate, animate, and invigorate our work for years to come” (204). They then call for composition and rhetoric professionals not to rely too heavily on the rhetoric of the job or in the idea of writing as preparation for career, since doing so “inadvertently diminish[es] the prospects for rhetorical education” (213). Jennifer Courtney, Deb Martin, and Diane Penrod’s description of the Rowan University writing arts major demonstrates the ways in which that department has successfully amended its focus around the core concept of “writing as discipline” (246) as it has grown and changed over a ten-year period. Sanford Tweedie, Jennifer Courtney, and William I. Wolff’s “What Exactly Is This Major? Creating Disciplinary Identity through an Introductory Course,” which focuses on
the introductory course in Rowan’s curriculum, describes how it introduces students to theoretical, historical, and practical elements of the writing major at that institution.

The last essay in this last section, finally, serves as a useful endcap to the collection. In “Toward a Description of Undergraduate Writing Majors,” Lee Campbell and Debra Jacobs draw largely on 2007 data collected about such majors to map these majors onto two continua—one that extends from general (e.g., the study of theories of language and rhetoric) to specific (e.g., using language in specific contexts), and an intersecting one that reaches from liberal (examining writing as a literary act) to technical (practicing with writing in specific fields). This spectrum, then, fairly effectively describes the programs described in this collection.

In her afterward to Giberson and Moriarty’s book, Susan H. McLeod notes that the CCCC survey of the writing major found twenty-seven more majors in 2009 than in 2007. If this growth trend has continued, one wonders whether (and how) the writing major might serve as a capacious umbrella under which questions raised in these books can be addressed in the age of the Common Core State Standards. What should—and what can—writing be, especially in school? How can we continue to seek to define contexts and contents for writing that don’t proceed from a “norm” and accommodate difference, but that address possibilities for difference in their very construction? And even when we pursue these questions through our best, most theoretically informed assumptions, how can we seek to create and maintain dialogue with those inevitably on the margins? Each of these texts provides food for thought about writing and writers.

Works Cited


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Call for Papers: 2013 International Conference—Rhetoric in Europe

An international and multidisciplinary conference on rhetoric will take place at the University of Saarland and the University of Luxembourg, October 9–13, 2013. The central theme is Rhetoric in Europe, and we will be examining what is European in rhetoric and what is rhetorical in Europe.

Research on rhetoric from a European perspective means to explore historical and contemporary rhetoric as a discipline; it also encompasses the practice of rhetoric as communication in terms of intercultural and transcultural relations. We pursue questions such as: Can the transculturality of rhetoric as a discipline be of use or not in the history of a rhetoric of intercultural communication? How can the transculturality of rhetoric be made interculturally fruitful in various sectors, especially forensics, politics, economy, and science?

Speakers and participants will be scholars from all of Europe, the Arab world, Israel, and the Americas. Sections include Speaking and Learning: Rhetoric of the Classroom; Rhetoric, Translation, and Intercultural Communication; The Power of the Image: Media-Rhetoric; Rhetoric and Policy; Forensic Rhetoric; Homiletics: Rhetoric and Religion; Argumentation: Pistis, Logos, Ethos, Pathos, Topoi; and Rhetoric and Philosophy.

Send your abstract by January 15, 2013, to Europäisches Institut für Rhetorik EIR/Institut Européen de Rhétorique IER, Prof. Dr. Norbert Gutenberg, Email: eir-ier@mx.uni-saarland.de.