

## Review Essay: Around the Bend

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In 2014, *College English* published a special issue edited by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander titled *Reimagining the Social Turn*. In the introductory essay to the issue, Rhodes and Alexander describe the social turn as a series of turns over the last three or four decades. They explain the impetus for this collection is their feeling that the “assumptions and theoretical bases upon which the ‘social turn’ in composition studies emerged have shifted—again” (481). The metaphor of a series of turns or shifts in a much larger turn allows us to view the developments in our pedagogies as both part of a trajectory that comes from situating writing and writers in socio-political and economic contexts and, necessarily, the subjective relationships writers have to these contexts in their current moment. The latest turn toward community engagement and embodied activism, what Elenore Long and Paula Mathieu, among others, call the public turn, has moved writing outside of academic contexts and situated it locally and at the intersections of economics, race, gender, and class. Rhodes and Alexander write that one of the many challenges facing our field is to reimagine how to teach writing “*right now*, in this particularly vexed sociopolitical and economic context” (emphasis in original, 485). That is, shifting economies and new material realities have once again changed the contexts in which writing takes place. The essays in this issue attempt to understand these shifting contexts and where the next turn is taking us while providing ways to remain committed to ethical action and social responsibility.

To my mind, one of the more interesting essays to take this up is Jonathan Alexander and Susan Jarratt’s “Rhetorical Education and Student Activism.” In this essay Alexander and Jarratt use an instance of student activism at their campus to discover how protesters understood the relationship between rhetorical principles and the tactics they employed and, more to the point, whether their protest was influenced by their rhetorical education in writing courses. In this particular protest, students from the Muslim Student Union used the tactic of interruption to protest a speech by Michael Oren, then Israel’s Ambassador to the United States. One by one the student-protesters stood, loudly declared a statement that challenged Israel’s occupation of Palestine and Oren’s involvement in Israeli military actions, and walked out. Jarratt and Alexander interviewed five of the protesters and discovered that this strategy was implemented because of the Muslim Student Union’s continued exclusion from public forums in the campus community. The protesters also felt it was important to be heard because a string of conservative, university-sponsored speakers were normalizing pro-Israeli, anti-Islam, and anti-Palestinian messages.

Alexander and Jarratt found a profound disconnect between the “world of ideas” of the classroom and the “world of action” (539) in this incident. The students reported that although they were exposed to critical theory that allowed them to think and question the world, none of this work created the possibility for action. The students’ sophisticated understanding of activism and the available means for intervention came from extracurricular, self-sponsored activities. Alexander and

Jarratt are not shy about recognizing the failure of the social turn to effectively influence students' knowledge of rhetorical practices and engagement. Ultimately, their essay questions the efficacy of the kinds of deliberative democratic discourses privileged in our pedagogies and classrooms and these deliberative discourses in the lived experiences of our students' public lives.

The notion that institutional discursive spaces are closed to many, particularly women and minorities, is not new to composition. Increasingly, though, our field's legitimate anxieties about the privatization of public life, corporate protections from public oversight, and limited forums for discussing public matters—so eloquently articulated in Nancy Welch's *Living Room*—have generated a felt need for what Welch calls rhetoric from below: teaching alternative forms of public writing and activism that assert rhetorical space in a privatized and individualized society. If, as Rhodes and Alexander describe it, composition studies is taking yet another turn, the books reviewed here allow us to see around the bend. In their own ways, these texts respond to our anxieties about the decline of public life in a neoliberal era and, like Welch, ask us to consider and adjust our pedagogies to implement rhetoric from below and renew the efficacy of our public engagement.

Frank Farmer's *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur* argues for the importance of public sphere theory in our public writing pedagogies. To think in terms of publics and counterpublics requires us to include the study of oppositional discourses and alternative discursive spaces in our pedagogies and challenges the sometimes limited forms writing takes in narrowly conceived public writing assignments. For instructors who, like Alexander and Jarratt, question the efficacy of our instruction or want to supplement our models for going public, Farmer's study of counterpublics and what he dubs the "citizen bricoleur" offers new possibilities for public engagement. Counterpublics, Farmer argues, are an important, and in our field overlooked, aspect of social formation and public participation. Although not prescriptive in its pedagogical suggestions, *After the Public Turn* is intended to have us consider what counterpublics mean to rhetoric and writing studies, and how this can give our students a greater "understanding of what qualifies as democratic participation, of what counts as authentic public engagement, of what a *citizen* is" (emphasis in original, 19). With this focus, *After the Public Turn* provides an important juncture for the social turn and its pedagogical commitments.

In the introduction, Farmer provides his readers with an understanding of publics and counterpublics informed by Jürgen Habermas' theory of the bourgeois public sphere and important critiques of it by Nancy Fraser, Rita Felski, Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, and Michael Warner. These critiques give the reader a sense that counterpublics are pluralistic and, importantly, there are multiple kinds of counterpublics that are always oppositional to dominant publics. For Farmer's purposes, Warner's conception that publics and counterpublics are formed through the production and reflexive circulation of texts provides the most generative theory. Farmer describes that publics, unlike audiences, have a temporal aspect that ebb and flow as exigencies inevitably shift. With this understanding of counterpublics Farmer writes that publics "can be discovered in some surprising places and can express a range of very different social, cultural, and political viewpoints" (21). Because counterpublics can form outside institutional spaces and introduce oppositional discourses, Farmer cannot overstate the important implications public sphere theory has on composition's public turn.

After introducing his readers to the foundations of public sphere theory, Farmer divides his book into two parts. The first, “Cultural Publics,” introduces the reader to one of Farmer’s most important concepts, the “citizen bricoleur.” *Bricolage*, a term at its most basic meaning to cobble something new from old materials, takes on new significance for Farmer when the citizen bricoleur cobbles a new cultural artifact from everyday materials. This act is at once culture-forming and public making. The act is also subversive in that instead of participating in cultural consumption, the citizen bricoleur, “situated at the intersection of (certain) cultures and (certain) publics,” participates in alternative world making by “mak[ing] texts, and the worlds within which they circulate” (68). To illustrate the citizen bricoleur, Farmer turns to a study of anarchist and punk “zines” and the rudimentary ways in which they were crafted and circulated. Farmer’s interest is not zines’ subculture status but the way in which their material production and reflexive circulation also crafts counterpublics through creating oppositional discursive space. In the second chapter of this section, Farmer makes a case for including zines and cultivating citizen bricoleurs in our classrooms. He argues that zines and the counterpublics they form offer a distinct mode of public address, and, because they are varied in tone, register, topic, and multiple voices, they are a site of democratic discourse and public participation. Most importantly, the process of making zines allows students to forge their own publics and forums.

In his second section, “Disciplinary Publics,” Farmer applies the understating of counterpublics to academic contexts. He argues that in certain contexts, some academic disciplines might be defined as “disciplinary counterpublics.” A disciplinary counterpublic might emerge when members of a discipline “locate their work within the ‘groves of academe’ but who desire that their contributions not remain there” (106). A disciplinary counterpublic might also emerge when members of a discipline with an already established public orientation go public in unsanctioned ways (122). To orient disciplinary counterpublics, Farmer examines three cases of going public from different disciplines—architecture, teacher education, and science and technology studies—that can be understood as working from disciplinary counterpublics. In the following chapter, Farmer uses the lens of disciplinary counterpublic to make the case that composition is a counterpublic of a certain kind. Farmer revisits the idea of the citizen bricoleur and suggests that because of its institutional positioning, compositionists might make use of the bricoleur’s tools in the ways we go public with our pedagogies. The bricoleur, from a compositionist’s perspective, will find new ways of performing the critical function of our public engagement, in the public spaces we make, and in the activism we perform.

Farmer returns to the concept of the bricoleur in his epilogue, offering a composite sketch of who s/he might be, the projects s/he takes up, and how to find her or his work. The citizen bricoleur, he argues, is an important model for understanding the intersection of publics, counterpublics and contemporary rhetoric. This is especially relevant for complicating the underexamined public writing tasks of the composition classroom. Although ambitious in its calls for reorienting our public turn, *After the Public Turn* is nonprescriptive by necessity. If we are to authentically “go public” through adopting the ethos of the bricoleur, then we, and our students, must cultivate our own resourcefulness in ways pertinent to the publics we hope to form.

If *After the Public Turn* asks us to consider ways in which our pedagogies can help students create their own publics, then Amy Wan’s *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times*

asks us to consider how our pedagogies of citizenship integrate students into already formed publics and cultivate public subjectivities. Wan's book is at once a critique of the ambient and unspecified ways citizenship is used to justify literacy education and a call to examine how literacy training is implicated in and used as a tool to produce habits of citizenship aligned with the needs of the emerging global and service economies. By calling attention to the historical linking of literacy to citizenship and by recognizing the limitations of our assumptions that literacy leads to a full liberatory and participatory citizenship, *Producing Good Citizens* asks us to consider what values and practices are being promoted and excluded in our classrooms, and it asks us to cultivate pedagogies that promote more robust notions of citizenship that are politically and materially situated.

*Producing Good Citizens* draws a parallel between our current moment of profound economic and social change and a similar moment of industrialization and mass immigration a century earlier. Through a study of three sites of literacy and citizenship training—immigrant naturalization classes, union worker education programs, and the university—Wan's book uncovers how “themes of work and productivity have been integral to how we imagine the citizen” and how the “good citizen” is evaluated by their potential for economic productivity (15). Though, as Wan writes, it is “not a neat parallel,” what both moments share is “education through literacy as a mass strategy to shape citizenship [and its practices]” to particular economic ends (3).

Wan presents an historical and theoretical framework of citizenship that contextualizes the ambient and uncritical ways citizenship has been taken up in our classrooms. It investigates how citizenship as a concept is entangled with literacy's function in credentialing the “good citizen.” The first chapter challenges the ways in which our lack of specificity about the meanings of citizenship make it a kind of “superterm” that “allows us to elide crucial concerns about the access to, impact, and exercise of citizenship” (17). By examining how citizenship is taken up in various composition pedagogies, Wan uncovers our belief that through literacy, citizenship is an achievable status and thus can create political equality and equal access to rewards. Though these assumptions about literacy and citizenship are not limited to our classrooms, they provide Wan with a lens for examining how the literacy training found in her case studies transmits certain values and habits of citizenship.

Three case studies, each an individual chapter, provide historical analysis of specific sites of literacy training in the 1910s and 1920s. The cases provide insight into how literacy training of the late Progressive era served to produce workers for the emerging industrial economy and how citizenship was defined through one's work potential. The documents Wan examined, “labor newspapers, federally produced citizenship textbooks, conference proceedings, hearings, journals” (12), demonstrate the underlying rationale and goals for teaching literacy in immigrant naturalization courses, worker education programs, and higher education. More importantly, the documents reveal how the habits of citizenship cultivated in these educational spaces craft public identities for the students that are aligned with the objectives and interests of the sponsoring institutions. For instance, the readings and assignments for naturalization courses attempted to teach newly arrived immigrants to identify their citizenship as individuated and through their work. They promoted obedience and loyalty to employers, and the lessons, Wan writes, “served to transform immigrants into workers who could be exploited, and literacy training enforced particular habits of work that kept workers from being

to excitable or amenable to radicalization” (69). In union-sponsored worker education programs, unions sought also to identify citizenship in relationship to work; however, they attempted to teach a critical literacy specifically designed to cultivate a working-class consciousness. They taught workers to be critical of exploitation in a mass production economy and to think of work and workers in collective terms. In much the same way, the first-year composition course shaped the citizen-worker to usefully employ their advanced literacy skills in managerial positions of an industrial society. Educators in higher education attempted to demonstrate the relevance of English education by linking it to the communication practices necessary for the office work and scientific management that accompanied mass manufacturing.

Wan concludes by connecting the case studies to contemporary sites of citizenship negotiation that are tied to literacy. These include immigration policy like the DREAM Act, campus-wide strategic plans, and education reform like the Common Core State Standards and *A Test of Leadership*, more commonly known as the Spellings Report. All three sites, Wan points out, “defines students almost exclusively in terms of their productive capacities” for the knowledge economy. Ultimately, *Producing Good Citizens* recognizes literacy as an important tool for producing citizens and public subjectivities and asks us to consider what kind of societies we are helping to produce when our rote invocations of citizenship don’t question citizenship’s implications for students when they leave our classrooms.

Both Farmer’s and Wan’s texts speculate about the kinds of public subjectivities our pedagogies teach and the lessons students take away about being public. Both raise questions of citizenship, and both ask what are the possibilities for publicness afforded by our pedagogies. In other words, at a time when public identities are limited by a closing public sphere, how can we teach students ways of authoring their identity and authorizing themselves to be public? Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes’ answer to that question is multimodality.

Unlike other texts on new media and digital technologies, *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies* doesn’t uncritically champion multimodality; rather, it carefully considers how new media can broaden the disciplinary bounds of composition studies by expanding its practices and purposes. Although Alexander and Rhodes recognize the potential for the inclusion of new media to fundamentally reconfigure our work, they see composition at a crossroads and argue that because “multimedia and multimodal composing have become key ways of meaning-making among younger generations of college students” the study and teaching of twenty-first-century textual production is crucial for the further development of our field (18). Citing Cynthia Selfe, Alexander and Rhodes navigate this crossroads, arguing that rhetorical practices “are in fact the domain of composition studies” (2).

By situating rhetorical practices at the fore of composition studies, Alexander and Rhodes clear room for bringing new forms of authoring and composing into our classrooms and suggest that new media is a way to teach other ways of invention, delivery, and rhetorical possibilities for composition. As part of the purpose of the book is to explore the richness of what new media has to offer and to broaden the scope of composition studies, Alexander and Rhodes encourage us to examine new media and multimedia for their rhetorical capabilities, distinct logics, and different affordances

(19). They caution against perceiving all forms of multimodal composition as equally valid, and they caution against reducing the various media and modes to one another. This includes viewing new media through “print-driven compositional aims, biases, and predispositions” (19). That is, though multimodal texts are composed, *everything* is not writing. It is not lost on Alexander and Rhodes that multimodal composition is necessarily circulated and consumed in different forums and that to teach multimodality also requires us to “teach students to participate productively in different public spheres ... [and] engage a more rhetorically sophisticated *techné* of such participation” (20).

Much of the exploration on multimodality comes from Alexander and Rhodes, and their colleagues’ own experiences with working with and teaching it. *On Multimodality* is intended for composition teachers who have only recently come to multimedia or who are looking for an access point into this subfield of composition. That is, the audience for this book is the novice practitioner of new and multimedia. As such, the first chapter traces a history of new media in composition studies and the pedagogical and disciplinary pressures that have shaped its uptake thus far. What’s more is that while laying down this foundation, Alexander and Rhodes provide an excellent literature review of the texts that continue to influence the field’s ideological perspectives of new media as well as important theoretical texts in new media studies and publics theory. This is work that has helped compositionists in this area reimagine and broaden how multimodality can be taken up in composition studies and that has influenced Alexander and Rhodes’ own thinking in the “logics” and “affordances” of different media and technological platforms.

The next three chapters examine some of the more common “genres” of multimedia composing that are found in composition classrooms. Each chapter is dedicated to one genre: video narratives, photo manipulation and photo mashups, and video gaming. These chapters are at once a critique of the ways print-centric approaches to composition are often privileged in the production and study of these genres and also an exploration of the generative rhetorical possibilities afforded by these genres. Criticism is strongest in the first of these chapters, “Direct to Video: Rewriting the Literacy Narrative.” Alexander and Rhodes survey videos produced for composition and advanced composition courses that have been posted online. They find more often than not these assignments simply replicate text-essays and their structures in video form. They examine some of the reasons why these assignments result in the lackluster forms they do and suggest our attentions should focus on genre and expanded models of how students engage with and ultimately play with it. The rest of the chapter attends to generative questions and the generative capacities video affords. They also offer detailed assignment descriptions of their own and of their colleagues along with descriptions of the units and scaffolding that lead students to engage with video as its own form. Without being prescriptive they provide enough variety in materials and approaches that teachers can feel comfortable in developing their own assignments and projects.

The next chapter on photo manipulation offers the clearest example of the generative capacities of new media to communicate ideas in ways print cannot. It argues that in an image-laden world, students can learn to be “prosumerists” in that they can both understand how they are formed by the messages of the images they consume while at the same time they can produce images that challenge those norms and cultural narratives. Alexander and Rhodes imagine that the spectacle of representa-

tion allows students to participate in their own public authoring. They use their own their own photo manipulation projects in which they queer gender norms to demonstrate how manipulation can be used “as a pedagogical tool to provoke critical reflection” and be used in rhetorical action (117).

The third chapter on video games turns to the “collaborative and interactive ways in which composers engage media spaces as sites of literacy development” (127). Alexander and Rhodes avoid the obvious text-centric justifications for bringing gaming into a classroom, that on a basic level games are “textually and visually rich and require quite a bit of reading, writing, and multimodal thinking” and instead want to use games to consider “multimodality as both multiple modes of communication and multiple paths and possibilities of communicative interaction” (128). The case studies Alexander and Rhodes provide not only demonstrate the various modes and interactions that occur in these spaces and how they are navigated by gamers, but more importantly they focus on how gamers manipulate these gaming spaces to “write” their own experiences. That is, the case studies examine the ways in which gamers collaboratively play against the designs of the game creators and play according to their own ideas about the game space. Alexander and Rhodes argue that the literacy practices to do so are highly complex and require “compositional flexibility” (168). They also suggest that there is great possibility for transferable skills and robust communicative practices” to be learned in these highly collaborative spaces (168). The chapter concludes with suggestions as to how gaming can be brought into the composition classroom. These range from the more basic, using the game itself as a text for discussion and reflection on students’ own literacy development, to more complicated projects of students creating and designing their own games. With each suggestion, Alexander and Rhodes provide lenses that encourage students to critically engage the rich literacy environment and generate meta-analyses and meta-writing that examine such environments.

Up to this point in the book, Alexander and Rhodes examine particular kinds of multimodal composition, their rhetorical possibilities, and their importance to the composition classroom. They also explore the possibilities for students to author their own public subjectivities through developing an understanding of the rhetorical affordances available through that specific media, including an understanding of the way it circulates. The final chapter of the book changes course, drawing attention to how representation and the construction of subjectivity is crafted and enforced through engagement in multimodal online spaces. At the heart of this chapter is their concern that the “networked sphere has implications for the subject and our sense of subjectivity” that cannot be ignored (175). Alexander and Rhodes use a variety of multimedia responses and their normalizing discourse to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting as a case study to theorize how persuasion works in multimeditated public spheres. This case study is intended to model a pedagogy that helps students consider how media “purposefully or unconsciously” can be used to discipline and normalize subjects (200). Alexander and Rhodes write that “[w]e cannot robustly teach students how to mine the rhetorical affordances of media unless we also enact pedagogies that think about mediation and subjectivity together” (200). And so the final chapter acts as a check against the previous chapters. By examining how multimedia environments also produce normalizing discourse it cautions us against uncritically assuming multimodality is liberatory and democratic, ideas we are quick to champion as they have been woven into our pedagogies at least since the social turn.

Although studies in multimodality and multimodal pedagogies have been a particular subfield of composition studies for thirty years, if not longer, the rapid development and proliferation of new media and digital technologies has made multimodality an increasingly important aspect of our field. These sudden changes call for theorizing about new media and its application and relevance in composition studies. With a strong commitment to pedagogy, *On Multimodality* invites teachers to develop new practices and participate in discussions that have the potential to broaden our field.

The three books discussed here, despite their distinct subject matters, offer a glimpse of what is around our current turn. They recognize that by taking the social turn we commit our pedagogies to social justice; in a moment when the closing of public spaces and the politics of discourse create narrow public subjectivities that offer little in the way of affecting change, of acting and enacting, our pedagogies must teach students to create publics and also explore the rhetorical possibilities available for composing our own subjectivities and enacting our own citizenship. These books embrace rhetoric as both an analytical and a productive art and understand that the two are not mutually exclusive. Forming publics lends itself to multimodality, and multimodality lends itself to forming publics; and so our current turn is a rhetorical turn in which students are productive in writing their own citizenship and subjectivities.

Like Alexander and Jarratt's essay, these texts challenge the perceived efficacy of our public engagement and the relevance of the institutional literacies we teach to public life. Wan's book makes clear that literacy instruction and our citizen-subjectivities are often informed by and serve the needs of the institutions we inhabit and which sponsor instruction. Pressures from an increasingly corporate university that include budget austerity, accountability assessment, and an emphasis on efficiency push our instruction toward literacies that are useful for the knowledge-economy and away from meaningful public engagement. Yet by committing to the social turn, we commit our pedagogies to social justice and ethical action. In order to teach a rhetoric from below and teach students ways of engaging, ways of producing their own public subjectivities, and ways of acting in the world there needs to be a more robust engagement with publics and counterpublics theory and multimodality within literacy studies scholarship. Farmer, Wan, and Alexander and Rhodes begin that process and continue the trajectory of the social turn.



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