

# Review:

## *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era*

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This isn't a book about Donald Trump. In *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era*, out from Routledge in 2020, editors Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek set their sights on pushing against neoliberalism, a nebulous term that has gained favor in the past few years in articles and classrooms. Neoliberalism "stands for laissez-faire economic measures, including austerity, deregulation, financialization, and privatization, linked to a conception of society as consisting of individuals, whose interests eclipse those of collective identities" (4). To combat the expansion of neoliberalism, the contributors and editors call for "a political turn (a left turn) informed by Marx's theory of historical materialism" (2).

The "book's overarching aim is to contribute to efforts to reclaim (or redefine) democracy as an egalitarian, inclusive political economic system that supports human and all planetary life and well-being" (3). The

book is presented in three sections—"Mapping the Political Turn," "Variations on the Political Turn," and "Taking the Political Turn"—and issues a clarion call to teachers, students, scholars, and activists to take a political turn in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, to embrace the field's capacity to engage politically both within the walls of the classroom as well as on the streets outside them.

Scholars and students new to Rhetoric and Composition will find the book's first section, "Mapping the Political Turn," to be more than just a history lesson. John Trimbur's contribution, "Composition's Left and the Struggle for Revolutionary Consciousness," notes a "vague yet unmistakable feeling in radical sectors of composition that something was going wrong, that composition no longer was the 'beacon of democracy' that once inspired its ranks" (27). This is not a swan song for a declining field, but a jarring reminder of its capacity for the type of turn being advocated for in this volume. Trimbur concludes with hope by mentioning recent political wins on the American Left, and he sets the stage for an interview with Angela Davis, which motivates those considering this turn to stand up and get involved by eloquently discussing the human role in activism. Davis warns us, as scholars interested in social justice, "not to assume that these new social media can actually to do the work" of organizers, putting the impetus solely on the humans who must do the heavy lifting (53). When readers encounter Nancy Welch's "Marxist Ethics for Uncertain Times," she skillfully frames the fast-moving nature of today's political moment, connecting neoliberal encroachment in politics through the recent Supreme Court hearing for Brett Kavanaugh. Welch notes the sexual harassment controversies surrounding Kavanaugh's nomination, arguing it "exposes that while sexist ideas circulate at all levels of society, institutionalized misogyny and sexual predation serve specifically to groom white male elites for power, including over women's bodies and lives" (64). By the end of the section, readers know the discipline can and should get more politically involved, and Deborah Mutnick calls on instructors directly, noting "education has a decisive role to play in informing and mobilizing a multi-issue mass movement" (84).

As the embers of a budding movement are fanned into flames, the book's second section, "Variations on the Political Turn," makes

explicit the need to include the entire Rhetoric and Composition discipline in this political turn instead of speaking only to the segment of teachers and scholars more interested in activism. Paul Feigenbaum's "Nudging Ourselves Towards a Political Turn" provides a new line in activist thinking through what he calls "severing the concept of nudging from libertarian paternalism and reorienting it toward progressive ends" (141). Feigenbaum offers a lesson in adapting tactics made use of extensively by Conservatives, and it is well worth the price of admission. Vani Kannan's "Taking a Lead from Student Movements in a 'Political Turn'" encourages teachers to view students as those who can be stood with in solidarity, while Darin L. Jensen's call to include two-year college instructors, those he calls "invisible" to others in the field, solidifies the section's call for inclusion of students, scholars, activists, and instructors of all levels (163).

The book's third section, "Taking the Political Turn," manages to contextualize and historicize the problems we are seeing in starker terms in this political moment, but the authors are clear to note this administration is a symptom of larger structural problems, not the single issue the discipline must confront. Tamara Issak's "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem at the 9/11 Museum?" is an absolute showstopper, as it frames Islamophobia as an American problem that spiked right after 9/11, one that persists reinvigorated by the Right's racist tendencies, amplified by Trump's rhetoric and policies. Issak does this while commenting on the structural racism that the 9/11 museum is perpetuating by stereotyping Muslims. Issak deals with the body as rhetoric—and how a person can be read through wearing religious garb such as a hijab or presenting in a way that Americans have been prejudiced against—through the lens of a museum that "oversimplifies history, conflates Muslim identity with terrorism, and presents an 'us' versus 'them' narrative" (179). This trend in today's political rhetoric of Othering based on ethnic makeup that Issak talks about is furthered by Stephen Alvarez in "Dismantling the Wall: Analyzing the Rhetorics of Shock and Writing Political Transformation." In this article, he minces no words: "the wall became a way to disparage the perceptions of Latinx and Latin American immigrant communities and question citizenship status, while using racism as a tactic for pushing through privatizing austerity measures" (192).

The trends this section follows are given historical perspective through Shannon Carter's "Pass the Baton: Lessons from Historic Examples of the Political Turn, 1967-1968." Tracing the racism that John Carlos experienced before, during, and after the Mexico City Olympics (1968), Carter lauds Carlos as someone who "sought to expose the inexcusable, mutable contradictions between the promises and realities of America in 1968 and my [rural Texas] community in 1967" (207). This article continues the trend started by Trimbur, opening the volume, of providing a historical precedent both for the persistence of the struggles the book argues Rhetoric and Composition should be fighting against, and also by bringing that previous experience into the new political moment. The metaphor of passing the baton is both apt for the subject as well as useful for what the discipline should be doing now, according to the volume, to address the racism, climate crisis, and neoliberal destruction in which we find ourselves mired. Tamera Marko's "The Visa Border Labyrinths: 310 Colombian and U.S. Artists and Scholars Write Their Way Through" closes this section with a personal account of brokering a collaboration between students and artists across national lines. Fostering a literacy through education and integrating into pedagogy the act of navigating the visa process, Marko teaches us "to see what those who do not have to experience the visa process had been trained to not see" (255). Chronicling more than the bureaucratic nightmares that this process prompts, Marko explains some of the unique cultural difficulties that the process can bring out, like writing about yourself being considered a boast and a cultural taboo, which renders something readers won't have considered a difficulty in terms they can understand as almost aggressively American.

As tempers, temperatures, and sea levels rise, the sheer volume of work to do can be paralyzing. *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era* gives students, instructors, and activists a life preserver of practical thought, sage advice, and instantly-usable pedagogical tools to push back against the tide of neoliberalism and all that it has broken. Far from just a critique of the moment, this book is a field manual in the battle against political ideologies and economic movements that still haven't destroyed us, at a time when (hopefully) the field of Rhetoric and Composition is ready for it.

## REFERENCES

Carter, Shannon, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek, eds. 2020. *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era*. Kindle ed., Routledge.

**Brian McShane** graduated from Heritage University with a master's degree in Multicultural English Literature and Language where he continues to teach undergraduate literature courses online. He is currently a PhD. student at Texas A&M University – Commerce where he also works as a graduate teaching assistant. There he teaches composition with a focus on individual as well as group literacy. His focus of study is Rhetoric and Composition and he is primarily interested in the connections between protest music and political activism, with the early 2000s serving as a model that could apply today. Further research interests include Science Fiction – particularly the rhetorical construction of gender from an alien's perspective and the continued importance of clothing in human society. Originally from New Jersey he currently resides in Texas.