

Review:

Democracies to Come: Rhetorical Action, Neoliberalism, and Communities of Resistance, by Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008. 142 pp.

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Community literacy workers and publicly engaged teachers of writing have long been concerned with questions not only of learning and writing, but also of social change, equity, and justice. Whether we trace roots through Myles Horton's Highlander School to critical pedagogy and activism (Branch) or through more institutionally focused efforts of land-grant colleges and organizations such as Campus Compact, our collective efforts have taken us out of campus spaces into surrounding local communities to write and learn with others. In *Democracies to Come*, Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney give educators and activists a critical pedagogy and set of rhetorical tools that move "into broader contexts of democratic struggle, extending well beyond and across the classroom walls of academe" (4). They critique the structures and sutures of global neoliberalism, uncovering how it ruptures in local contexts. These ruptures, as they describe, provide opportunity for rhetorical action, intervention, and the possibility for more robust democratic struggle.

Riedner and Mahoney situate *Democracies to Come* at the nexus of cultural studies, rhetoric, and composition studies, bringing cultural critique, rhetorical action, and pedagogy to bear on the work of learning across a variety of cultural spaces. They describe *Democracies to Come* as an essay in the tradition of Adorno (xv). In this way they weave theory with descriptions of experiences in classroom and activist spaces, uncovering connections locally and globally that demonstrate their call to ... “pedagogy as a public, democratic practice that exceeds the bounds of the classroom and the university space and establishes affective relations that sustain and create new networks of affinity that are the life-blood of social movements” (4). Their exploration of the affective dimensions of neoliberalism and global capitalism – especially the production, consumption, and value of benevolence, despair and critical hope – offer to deepen our understandings of the learning and teaching of writing for social change. As the first in the Lexington Press series Cultural Studies/Pedagogy/Activism, which aims to “pose and imagine exigencies within the current neoliberal hegemony” (xiii), *Democracies to Come* moves beyond a static critique of global neoliberalism, pointing to pedagogical possibilities across contexts.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Riedner and Mahoney describe their expanded approach to pedagogy and trace how pedagogical sites in and beyond university classrooms offer potential for rhetorical action. By approaching pedagogy as “a space of learning—not simply ‘teaching’—whose purpose is to develop an understanding of social structures and networks” (xiv), they understand critical pedagogy across contexts as a force for democracy inasmuch as it seizes opportunities for rhetorical action that intervene in neoliberal structures, logics, and learning. The April 16, 2000 IMF protests in Washington, DC, as well as writing classes in more formal educational settings, offer opportunities for seeing not only how neoliberalism teaches hegemony, but also how language can be a mode of agency “to build new educative relationships and recreate ... material conditions” (34).

Riedner and Mahoney deepen their exploration of the logics and structures of neoliberalism in Chapters 3 through 5, describing how affect circulates in service of global capitalism and how it might

provide pedagogical opportunities for intervention. Through a re-reading of protests of the Progressive Student Union at George Washington University, the contexts surrounding it, and the responses of university administration, they describe how consent is produced and policed within a particular site. This critique leads to explorations in Chapters 4 and 5 of how benevolence circulates to reproduce capitalist and colonialist orders, and how rhetorics of despair and hope offer opportunities for “affective intervention” (69). Although Riedner and Mahoney do not directly point to pedagogies of service-learning and public writing as sites where the circulation of benevolence can be especially apparent, the critique is rife for the making. Others have made similar moves, questioning what students learn when they do not critically engage across difference (Mitchell), or when they work with non-profits and other organizations that may participate in systems of global capital and the rhetorics that sustain them (Rabin; Vogelsang & Rhoads). Riedner and Mahoney help educators and activists deepen this critique and move toward affective interventions and rhetorical action across contexts.

Chapter 6 closes this book-length essay through an exploration of rhetorical action and the possibilities for affective openings as seized through writing by Zapatistas and cultural studies scholars. Riedner and Mahoney help us return to an understanding of rhetorical action as disruption to and ruptures of the familiar, as “new literacies that create openness for new pedagogies, and ... emergent structures of feeling that make possible new affective relations and politics” (88). While they articulate the possibilities for critique and intervention across classroom and activist spaces, Riedner and Mahoney leave room for other scholar-activist-teachers to explore additional local out-of-classroom moments and contexts for pedagogy and praxis. While service-learning courses, community literacy work, and writing center work can be understood within contexts of neoliberalism, the frameworks for critique, pedagogy, and praxis offered in *Democracies to Come* provide alternative ways of understanding and engaging in literacy work (i.e., rhetorical action) with others against “fast capitalism” (Grimm) and neoliberal ways of knowing, writing, relating, and feeling.

Democracies to Come may prove particularly useful for community engaged educators, activists, and composition scholars as it leaves us with lists of questions that lead to reflective praxis. As an educator, scholar, administrator and activist, I will use these questions - and the frameworks for critique that occasion them - in classroom and community contexts to foster my own and others' critical reflection and "epistemological curiosity" (5). Service-learning and literacy educators like myself might also use the frameworks and pedagogical examples to develop new or deeper ways of engaging with our own and students' affective responses and emotional (dis)connections with power structures. Whether we work with non-profits or individual community members, in correctional facilities or with activist organizations, *Democracies to Come* provides ways to understand our everyday work with language as action that has the potential to rupture geo-political and shift geopolitical systems. It provides a path toward critically engaging across the individual and systemic, as well as the local and global, a challenging move because of the neoliberal frameworks which constrict our work and relationships, but a necessary move if we wish to work toward "the ought to be" (Horton as quoted in Branch 18).

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