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Review of Nancy Welch and Tony Scott's *Composition in the Age of Austerity*

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Welch, Nancy, and Tony Scott, editors. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Utah State UP, 2016. 240 pp.

Coincidentally, I was reading *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, in the weeks leading up to the faculty strike of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF), a union spanning fourteen institutions, including my own, Kutztown University. When our faculty contract expired in 2015, Pennsylvania was operating without an approved budget, and we toiled in the wake of enormous cuts to public education funding. In 2014-2015, Pennsylvania was [ranked 48](http://keystoneresearch.org/sites/default/files/KRC_PBPC%20Higher%20Ed_0.pdf) in higher education [funding per capita](http://education.illinoisstate.edu/grapevine/Table4_GPV16_Rev_Jan29.pdf) (Herzenberg, Price, and Wood; "State Fiscal"). Each campus had suffered in the wake of austerity measures, as "PASSHE university administrations went on a [destructive frenzy](https://ragingchickenpress.org/2016/06/28/apscuf-sets-date-for-strike-vote-pa-state-system-intent-on-gutting-faculty/)—eliminating programs, firing faculty, and gutting staff" (Mahoney). By summer 2016, I found myself taking part in picket planning. At stake in contract negotiations with the PA State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) were decreases in shared governance, increases in the number of adjunct faculty, and an increase in adjunct workloads.

By September 2016, APSCUF President Ken Mash reported that austerity measures remained front and center in negotiations, with PASSHE demanding \$70 million in operational cuts (Morton). At one point, APSCUF Vice President Jamie Martin reported that "At the bargaining table, they [PASSHE] once said they wanted to turn our temporary faculty into 'teaching machines' [http://apscuf.com/news-center/press-releases/264-sides-remain-far-apart-in-faculty-negotiations-sept-29] by suggesting that their salaries be cut or their workload be increased by 20 percent" (qtd. in Morton). Writing for *Inside Higher Ed*, John Warner observes that [approaches like PASSHE's](https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/admitting-we-might-not-be-doing-job-anymore) are not at all unusual: "progressive and permanent austerity has made 'doing more with less,' standard operating procedure."

On October 19, 2016, the faculty went on strike, a job action lasting only three days due not only to the resolve of our union, but also to the groundswell of support from our students. Faculty accepted a reduced salary package and increased contributions to health care coverage in exchange for taking the majority of the other proposals off of the table, at least until the contract expires.

And so, writing about *Composition in the Age of Austerity* has been deeply personal for me, and the collection is comprised of deeply personal works of scholarship. Welch and Scott describe their collection as a response to "a felt sense of crisis" among writing teachers in a neoliberal landscape (4) that includes rising tuition, reduced state and federal funding, accountability programs, corporate partnerships, focus on entrepreneurship, and increased use of contingent faculty. Contributors cover an impressive span of issues, divided into three sections: "Part I: Neoliberal Deformations" includes critiques of and resistance to so-called reform movements rooted in capitalist motives. "Part II: Composition in an Austere World" provides both historical perspective on the economics of composition and accounts of present-day teachers and programs operating with reduced funding, or no funding at all. "Part III: Composition at the Crossroads" suggests possible ways forward.

What I read in these pages was the emotional toll of working in higher education restructured by neoliberalism, as well as the professional, intellectual, and even physical costs of finding, and sometimes failing to find, a way forward. This book *moved* me in ways that scholarship too infrequently does. In almost every chapter, the authors situate their work in concrete contexts, most often their own. Shari Stenberg argues in her chapter, "Beyond Marketability: Locating Teacher Agency in the Neoliberal University," "If we do not pay adequate attention to location, both material, embodied location and the specific contexts that simultaneously enable and prohibit our enactments, it is too easy to slip back into neoliberal assumptions of level playing fields and individual autonomy, which are deepened by austerity measures" (195). Another benefit of contextualizing is that it assists the reader in applying theory and analysis to her *own* location: as I read, I couldn't help but to draw parallels to my experiences, and subsequently to reframe and rethink them. That is a strength of this collection.

In fact, the emotions at the core of this book give it its power. My own emotional reactions took many forms: relief to discover I am not alone; guilt that I am perhaps not doing all that I should; joy for comrades who overcame challenges; hope that I might do the same. After one particularly tough day, which included a divisive meeting over hiring priorities, the announcement of a strike date, and a dear friend at another campus finding out his staff position had been labeled "nonessential," I came home and read Susan Naomi Bernstein's "Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity," in which she describes her persistence during a period of un- and under-employment and the suicide of a colleague and friend. I cried for thirty minutes.

I read in these chapters echoes of discussions and initiatives on my campus, as well as my own personal struggle in dealing with them, including the uses of assessments to justify the expense of writing courses, concerns over administrative hiring limits, pushes to recruit and retain students in the face of dwindling enrollments, and, most immediately, the decision to take collective action in the face of austerity measures.

In “Our Trojan Horse: Outcomes Assessment and the Resurrection of Competency-Based Education,” Chris Gallagher warns that “We have been bamboozled,” arguing that outcomes assessment forces us to frame writing as “a discrete, commodified, vocational skill” (22), one easily realized in a competency-based [CBE] model. When composition is reduced to a testable outcome, rather than “a means of participating in social and civic contexts” (29), more students can test out, saving the system the cost of teachers. All this “without any evidence that it results in improved learning” (27). Gallagher’s case is compelling and familiar, using Southern New Hampshire’s CBE program as a case in point. Yet I kept wishing Gallagher would more fully explain his alternative to CBE, what he calls the “valuable *experience*” (24) of first-year writing. Indeed, as a discipline, we need to do a much better job of documenting and explaining that experience to administrators, politicians, and the public if we are to take a stand as Gallagher urges.

Deborah Mutnick’s “Confessions of an Assessment Fellow” complicates Gallagher’s call to action, noting that we have essentially been threatened into the “busy work” of assessment, believing “that faculty needed to participate in order to ward off administrative as well as governmental interference” (38). Mutnick is not anti-assessment, but recognizes that the forms most often recognized by administration oversimplify literacy learning. She points to the real underlying problem behind student success, as many in this collection do: socioeconomic inequality. Despite the sham that is assessment at many institutions, Mutnick insists we *must* do it, as “refusing to participate” is “pointless if the result is to shift the burden of responsibility to other colleagues or jeopardize accreditation” (46).

Here, Mutnick may embody an “angel in the architecture” described by Nancy Welch in her chapter, “First-Year Writing and the Angels of Austerity.” Welch describes how work progresses in a writing program after all funds have been cut, administrators relying on teachers’ dedication to quality education to sustain labor. Without “monetary support” or “formal workload recognition,” Welch observes that, “the work of tending to the minds, skills, outlooks, and attitudes of the current and next generation of students...is carried out but by a faculty increasingly expected to self-provision” (137). She notes the gendered nature of this work, which frames us “*not* as powerful boss compositionists but as dutiful wives practicing small economies with a shrinking purse” (141). As a female Coordinator of Composition of a small first-year writing program and the editor of a tiny, labor-focused journal^{1} [\[#note1\]](#), having to negotiate space for both anew with each semester, each issue, I felt recognized by Welch’s scholarship in a way I have not experienced previously. Like so many of my colleagues, I press on, trying my best to do good work with less and less.

In contrast, in “Animated by the Entrepreneurial Spirit,” Tony Scott reminds tenured faculty “we still have the power to say no” (216) when tasked with work that serves neoliberal ends. I’m pleased that Scott and others in the collection recognize the power differential among employment statuses, yet I don’t think saying no works unless that right is extended from tenured to contingent faculty. More and more, contingent faculty are given work once reserved for the tenure-track, including assessment and committee work. I can say no; the adjunct who gets the job after my refusal may not have that luxury. Scott knows this, and I don’t mean to oversimplify his position. Rather, I mean to underscore the need for political resistance and collective action both on and beyond the campus for which Gallagher, Mutnick, and so many others in this collection call, emphasizing that it must be inclusive of all ranks of teachers to be successful.

While most authors acknowledge the role of the [new faculty majority](#) <http://www.newfacultymajority.info/> of adjuncts in their discussions, Ann Larson faces it head on in “Composition’s Dead.” The hard truth of her title is that “composition does not defy our rotten economic system; it exemplifies it” (164). She observes that compositionists have conflated the struggle of their marginalized contingent faculty with the struggle of the discipline for academic respectability, concluding that “Composition as a discipline has never recovered from this category mistake” (168). While the *field* has benefited from this co-opting of labor’s complaints, actual writing teachers have not: “working conditions have stayed the same or deteriorated during the period that composition scholars fought for disciplinary recognition” (172). As a fully recognized field, composition can abuse labor even more efficiently.

This chapter changed me. That’s not an exaggeration. In my scholarship, while advocating for contingent faculty, I have also insisted that disciplinarity matters. I’ve conflated labor concerns and academic respectability in just the way Larson describes, arguing that, sure, yes, we need to protect adjuncts and improve their conditions, but we also need to ensure they are credentialed compositionists, protecting the field—a field that is built on exploitation. I’m moved by her argument that “We can acknowledge that expanding the political rights of marginalized groups within an already oppressive system is not liberatory” (173). I’m seeing that my energy is better spent collectively resisting and reshaping the system of higher education writ large than in bolstering my discipline: “the goal ought to be dispensing with the business of building a discipline and joining the struggle to build a movement” (174).

The APSCUF strike in defense against the state’s proposed austerity measures gave me perhaps my first concrete experience of what coalition building feels like, and the accounts of the authors in these chapters, of their colleagues and their communities as they kept the lights on at the National Writing Project (Fox and Eidman-Aadahl) or Chicago’s South Side Community Art Center (Cain), instilled genuine hope.

While much of the work in the collection is born out of pain, frustration, and loss, hope is a key element of its message. This book comes at a time when faculty can benefit not only from reflecting on the strategies and analyses of the collection’s authors, but from the emotional strength that can be taken from shared struggle and endeavor. In an interview regarding their book *Austerity Blues*, Michael Fabricant & Stephen Brier assert that the [current moment](#) <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/11/02/qa-authors-book-austerity-public-higher-education> is ripe with possibilities: “The rise of neoliberal attacks on public institutions, largely unchecked for 30-plus years, are now being questioned if not actually openly attacked....the citizenry’s increasing discontent with the outsize political and economic power of the 1 percent opens up possibilities for political movement on critical social and economic issues, including the need to respond to the crisis of public higher education and student indebtedness” (Seltzer).

I have a renewed belief in the power of solidarity and resistance after walking a picket line. As I revise this review, Donald Trump has just been elected president. We don’t yet know what his brand of conservatism will mean for higher education, but with this collection, I feel

better armed for what may come. *Composition in the Age of Austerity* covers more components of higher education, history, resistance, and survival than I can discuss in a brief review; I recommend you pick it up and discover for yourself.

Notes

1. I suffered a moment of hurt pride when the editors of *Composition in the Age of Austerity* called *Forum: Issues about Part-Time & Contingent Faculty*, the NCTE journal I edit, “*College Composition and Communication*’s occasional stand-alone section” (6). That the single journal in the field dedicated to labor issues wasn’t at least called by name seemed odd. *Forum* appears inside the print copy of *CCC* each Fall and in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* each Spring; it is peer reviewed and maintains a separate website. ([Return to text. \[#note1 ref\]](#))

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