Composition in the Age of Austerity, edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott. Logan: Utah State UP, 2016. 235 pp.

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Currently, neoliberalism is a much bandied-about term. Rightfully so, as neoliberalism, the idea that all things should be instantiated and driven through market ideology as a means of efficiency, is pernicious. To address this moment, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott have gathered an insightful essay collection on neoliberalism and its intersections with composition—both the discipline and the business of the discipline. One of the many strengths of *Composition in the Age of Austerity* is the portrait the essays create of the rhetorics of neoliberalism and austerity. Particularly valuable is the identification of neoliberalism's paradoxes, which foster the "theory that government best achieves the greater public good by serving private interests and privatizing government functions" (7). The editors' work defining these terms in the introduction is an essential contribution to the field. Further, Welch and Scott's emphasis on the rhetorical bait and switch of the Obama administration's higher education policy, wherein Obama acknowledged how opportunity has not been equally distributed or realized but then replaced authentic holistic opportunity with more market-driven ideologies described as "pathways," is a vital message to educators. And it is one we can see playing out in our states and institutions almost daily.

The collection is split into three parts. The first section, "Neoliberal Deformations," contains four pieces. Because of my institution's recent foray into competency-based education, I identified strongly with Chris W. Gallagher's essay "Our Trojan Horse: Outcomes Assessment and the Resurrection of Competency-Based Education." In it he sets out a terrifying final outcome for competency-based education, seeing it as an instrument and process that will reduce writing to a "discreet, commodified vocational skill," completing the marketization of students and education, and serving only economic interests (13). Gallagher's description of the tension between how many writing teachers define their work—a "complex practice" of identity and world building—and the neoliberal practices of competency-based education—which devolves writing into a set of discrete skills—is precise and sobering (22). Further, Gallagher's essay is important for showing how government definitions of progress in education have become dominated by business ideology and for showing that the implementation of competency-based education is not in fact a pathway to opportunities but a method of education that favors the privileged and that threatens to exacerbate social inequality (29).

Another essay in this section, Deborah Mutnick's "Confessions of an Assessment Fellow," takes on the dangers of assessment culture, which she sees as jeopardizing access (35). Mutnick works to frame the assessment culture as commodifying education in the name of efficiency while locking out students without means, thus undermining the democratic features commonly associated with schooling. Mutnick traces the accountability movement from No Child Left Behind through the College Scorecard, noting that completion rates end up equaling "cultural hegemony" through various means, all of which undermine the traditional values of education, replacing them with new neoliberal ones (37).

The heart of this collection lies in the experiences detailed in the second section, "Composition in an Austere World." As a member of the Nebraska Writing Project, I was powerfully affected by Tom Fox and Elyse Eidmann-Aadahl's essay "The National Writing Project in the Age Austerity." The National Writing Project's (NWP's) forty-plus year history of enacting the principle that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves has touched countless teachers and students. Even so, the organization lost its federal funding in 2011. The authors chronicle how the NWP is faced with the "very real possibility of closure and dissolution as an entity" (78) and has had to reposition itself by cobbling together funding sources. The authors point out that the age of austerity after the recession was not the beginning of these difficulties, but rather a rapid acceleration of the territory "progressive educators" have lost to "corporate interests" who profit from turning education into products like tests and textbooks (88). These are the consequences of austerity.

Even more powerful for me was Susan Naomi Bernstein's essay "Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity." In it, she details the personal cost of austerity as she loses her position and joins the dehumanizing cattle call of adjunct work. Poignantly, she describes her friend's suicide after the closing of his writing center. The price of austerity is often described in widgets or in people not returning to the workforce, but here it is made manifest as Bernstein bares herself as a human and a teacher to the reader. She calls into question the conservative logic that a lack of success equates personal failure, instead demonstrating the human consequences that inhumane systems have. Bernstein draws on Yeats' line from "Easter, 1916" proclaiming that through neoliberalism "a terrible beauty is born." The sublime suffering in Bernstein's essay is itself a terrible beauty, as is her response to counteract neoliberal ideology—namely, her dedication to leading writing workshops during both Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Sandy. Even though she suffered the loss of her position, and even her ability to write, Bernstein found "the material reality of what happens when every day people not only bear witness to suffering but also work together to attempt to ameliorate suffering" (97). She chronicles her experience to show

resistance to both the market ideology and the deficit ideology so often present in discussions of students who take "remedial" courses.

Bernstein's locally situated work lends itself to another important chapter in the book, Shari Stenberg's "Beyond Marketability: Locating Teacher Agency in the Neoliberal University," which centers the third and final section in this volume, "Composition at the Crossroads." To my mind, Stenberg is on the precipice of the call to action in this volume. Her assertion that graduate students must be brought into this discussion is a powerful call, even if it is not as explicitly activist as it might be. She writes "austerity's ideological consequences determine who and what is deemed valuable, who and what counts as a 'good investment'" (191). This sentence is important because it gets at the crux of the anxiety that graduate students experience as they aspire to be valued in academic and institutional environments that grossly value people and potential through the crude frame of the marketplace. Stenberg offers an important contribution in her coining of the concept of "located agency," which she describes as a practice of "examining, valuing, and taking responsibility for our locations" (192). She sees located agency as a resistant practice to the globalizing reach of neoliberalism. Coupled with Bernstein's chapter in the previous section, the two form a powerful synthesis of a theory and practice for resisting neoliberalism's insidious logics.

While *Composition in the Age of Austerity* is a significant contribution to composition studies—one that begins to outline possible resistances to neoliberalism—the book's omission of the two-year college context is a seemingly hierarchical slight that could have been easily avoided. The oversight is particularly surprising given that the nearly 1,200 two-year colleges in the United States serve nearly half of all undergraduates—not to mention that two-year college students are frequently the most vulnerable in our increasingly neoliberal culture. Given the complex and contradictory nature of two-year colleges as both a site of democratic opportunity and a site that reifies economic stratification, the editors missed a valuable opportunity to expand their critique of the academy in the age of austerity. And that omission may in fact reify the false hierarchical placement of positions at two-year colleges. For example, Stenberg makes a brilliant point about the anxiety of graduate students searching for fewer tenure track jobs, but she does not extrapolate this thinking to the two-year college. For a graduate student who is worried about the lack of tenure-line work, the work of the two-year college is often seen as a fallback position. It is lower in the hierarchy of the market and valued less, even though in framework of democratic opportunity the community college student is as important, perhaps even more important, than the university student who may already have privileges and opportunities they do not. Further, while the editors quite correctly point to Obama's education policy and its

connection to neoliberalism, they fail to note that he and his predecessor are using the the community college as the site of this new educational paradigm to promote neoliberal ideology.

Even so, Stenberg and Mutnick's essays in the collection go a long way in outlining the kinds of possible resistances to the totalizing neoliberal agenda. Stenberg sees the work in the located agency of graduate students, explicitly preparing them for the neoliberal environment. Mutnick echoes this by calling for compositionists to work toward comprehension of the political and economic factors which have created the accountability agenda. She believes that these forces demand our collective resistance. Reading these movements toward explicit knowledge and resistance was heartening. I would quickly add, though, that graduate students must be prepared for the two-year college and that the collective resistance Mutnick envisions must include all composition faculty, including the 400,000 plus at two-year schools.

While noting areas of neglect, this collection does important work in three areas: it defines neoliberalism, austerity, and their effect on education in clear, explicit ways, complete with meaningful examples; it demonstrates the rhetoric of neoliberalism and how it employs language that on its face appears to be about democratic opportunity, authentic learning, and student empowerment, but is instead really about low-cost, just-in-time education reduced to skill instruction and stripped of social context; and finally, the book's editors and contributors sound an alarm for composition, one that may be too late in many institutions, but one that calls for collective resistance and envisioning our work as teachers, scholars and activists. Finally, I see this collection as a window into the need for solidarity—solidarity with basic writing instructors, high school teachers, graduate students, and perhaps most significantly, with and between four- and two-year university and college educators.

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Works Cited

Yeats, William Butler. "Easter, 1916." *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. 2nd ed. New York: Scribner, 1996. Print.