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Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics, Phyllis Ryder

Rachael Wendler^a & John Warnock^a

^a The University of Arizona

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Phyllis Ryder. *Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (Lexington Books), 2011. 325 pages. \$80.00 paperback.

Rhetorics for Community Action is for “activist educators” teaching university service-learning courses and more generally for people wanting to teach, practice, and promote “public writing.” Just what is the “public writing” being considered here? “Public writing, as I see it,” Phyllis Ryder writes, “refers to all the actions people do in the name of ‘the public good’ and to the rhetorical work it takes to carry out those actions” (55). In this book Ryder undertakes to offer a “useful theory of how people come together to form publics and the rhetorical moves they draw on in their public writing” (12), with “writing” defined broadly to include not just articles and speeches but, for example, tweets and social protests, both of which are specifically addressed in the book.

The subtitle of the book is *Public Writing and Writing Publics*, and the equivocation in the second half of the subtitle is not accidental. Phyllis Ryder is considering both publics who are writing and people who are performing the kind of writing that may bring them into being as a public, which she analogizes to the way students “invent the university,” in the well-known terms developed by David Bartholomae, but with a difference. “Public writing,” she writes, “has the power to bring people together with a shared sense of how the world works, how democracy works, and how their power as the people can effect change” (55).

Ryder lays a foundation for analyzing and producing public writing and public writing pedagogy by creating a matrix of theories on democracy. The three axes represent what the government’s purpose is, who has the power to make decisions, and what tactics should be used to effect change. As Ryder demonstrates, public writers must align themselves with a particular point on each of the three axes when they write, and these versions of democracy manifest themselves in rhetorical choices. Ryder argues that “this move of claiming one set of goals, actors, and actions as truly public is the central, powerful move of public writing” (12). Given this importance, Ryder invites us to use the matrix to

better understand our own conception of democracy, so we can recognize how a public writing pedagogy stems from that conception; to more acutely analyze the impetus behind the rhetorical choices of public writers; and to map the fluid positions of audiences and organizations in order to write and teach more effectively.

Ryder builds from the matrix to advance public sphere theory, inviting us to consider subpublics and counterpublics in relation to particular conceptions of democracy and their concomitant rhetorical strategies. Ryder works through public sphere theory to critique the idea of “the public” as an “idealized public,” a public, we may say, of the sort that is usually imagined, or simply assumed, as the audience for academic writing and traditional media, “the public” as a group that may have differences of opinion but is united in its commitment to rational enlightenment discourse. The book’s critique is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s critique of “the nation” in his book *Imagined Communities*. But Ryder’s book goes farther than to take exception to the idealization. It unfolds the way we may think more usefully about a concept like “the public” by exploring the rhetoric of subpublics, smaller publics whose values align with the idealized public sphere, and counterpublics, publics whose “expectations about ‘proper’ democratic communication conflict with the idealized public sphere” (135). The book goes even farther in offering ideas for how we may negotiate among these publics with students in service-learning classes.

A corollary of Ryder’s critique of the idealized public is a critique of the idea of “public writing” that assumes an idealized public as audience. We need to think of public writing, Phyllis Ryder argues, more as “rhetoric,” or something like what Kenneth Burke took it to be, discourse that is “addressed,” addressed, in this case, to the *particular* publics we have identified as our audiences rather than the “general” or “educated” public. This is just the thing that makes rhetoric a scandal in the university, as it suggests we might not always want to keep our discourses constrained within the realms of *logos*, or, to use the more common (by no means synonymous) term today, “knowledge.” Phyllis Ryder escorts us bravely and skillfully into this dangerous realm in her consideration of nonprofit mission statements and street newspapers as public writing.

A particularly significant contribution of this book, in our view, is how gracefully and skillfully it models an authorial voice and stance not often to be found in academic writing. It is a voice not of the one-who-knows-and-is-demonstrating-the-point but instead the voice, we might say, of praxis—the voice of someone who is posing problems for herself and with her readers that have arisen from her actions and experiences in the world and her reflection upon them. It is the voice of one not content to offer “findings” or to unfold theory for others to “apply.” It is the voice of the living committed teacher in action.

Yet the account is by no means devoid of academic virtue. Ryder freely speaks of matters like “my first missteps” (11) but she gives us something quite different from a narrative of my-adventures-in-my-service-learning-classes. She is not shy of narrative in this book, but the narrative always advances and contextualizes the inquiry. The account is in conversation with authoritative others who have considered similar problems and offered arguments pertinent to the matters she is dealing with, as good academic writing should be. The book engages theorists and community activists, from Jürgen Habermas to Saul Alinsky to Ellen Cushman. It characterizes those other accounts sympathetically, fairly, and with specificity, and outlines her differences with those accounts in a way that is pertinent to her own undertaking. Ryder seamlessly moves from sophisticated, yet clear, theoretical discussion to implications for pedagogy, ending nearly each chapter with a section titled “What Does This Mean for a Public Writing Course?”

In the balance of this review, we will give a more specific account of how Phyllis Ryder develops her arguments. Once Ryder develops her democracy matrix, she employs this matrix to problematize the trend in service-learning of validating only one model of public action, one location on the matrix: participatory democracy focused on teaching citizens to rally for political change. Many activist scholars have urged service-learning teachers to avoid placing students with charity-based nonprofits. Ryder challenges this widely held dismissal of private nonprofits by complicating the binary of justice and charity, demonstrating that nonprofits function rhetorically, as they often resist the charity discourses they are forced to speak within in order to maintain funding. She also argues that direct-service nonprofits do often accomplish significant public work, and in order to teach students how to analyze publics and invoke them in writing, we need to facilitate exposure to a variety of organizations that view democracy in different ways.

Those of us who have read community literacy scholars such as Steve Parks and Linda Flower will recognize key differences here between their approach to partnerships and Ryder’s. Flower and Parks aim to create substantial change through large-scale, institutionalized community partnerships, while Ryder’s primary goal is to use a range of smaller partnerships to prepare students for future public writing roles. Ryder’s approach, which we may perhaps call *tactical* following Paula Mathieu, certainly requires fewer institutional resources than Flower’s Community Literacy Center or Parks’s New City Press. Yet her course design also calls on instructors to build connections with multiple nonprofits, which might make deep relationships harder to maintain, and it asks service-learning teachers not to focus the class on their own beliefs about democracy

or their own community projects, tradeoffs instructors will have to weigh when considering Ryder's pedagogy.

Once Ryder has built a case for working with a variety of organizations, she unpacks several common rhetorical strategies for invoking a public, grounding these strategies in her democracy matrix. In one insightful example, she discusses how a DC nonprofit working to reclaim public parks emphasizes different aspects of its origin story when it expands to work with a new neighborhood as a way to foster identification with the new community. Ryder then turns to an often overlooked aspect of public writing, circulation, and builds an argument for how circulation strategies are also linked to certain understandings of the social contract. She demonstrates how traditional media rest on an assumption of the idealized public sphere, invoking a rational, deliberative public, while counterpublic writing, such as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera*, recognizes the embodied, contested nature of knowing, and Ryder explores how these different kinds of writing interact during circulation. Ryder also takes her analysis of public formation to online spaces, again using contextual analysis to challenge our temptation to dismiss certain kinds of publics. She analyzes the social networking of a soup kitchen, arguing that the choice not to invite homeless individuals to participate in the digital interactions is an appropriate move given the context, not a failure of deliberative democracy. In this section and throughout the book, Ryder urges us to avoid oversimplification in our application of academic theory and resist passing immediate judgment on who is doing "real" public work; instead she asks us to seek an expansive, nuanced understanding of public writing that views "each public as a moment of struggle" (12).

The book concludes by presenting academic discourse as a type of public writing, discussing how "inventing the public" can serve as a bridge to "inventing the university." At the same time, she builds from an analysis of the connections between capitalism and democracy threaded throughout the book to call her colleagues to push back against the growing neoliberalism in the university. Therefore, while this book analyzes public writing, it also invokes its own public and seeks to create its own change, asking us to "actively write ourselves into the publics we wish to be" (272).

To provide her readers with tools to enact this change, the book ends not with calls for further research but with materials that have practical pertinence. In the appendices Ryder offers a series of assignment sheets and sample course documents that reveal particular enactments of her theory. Her volunteer portfolio assignment is one particularly valuable addition to our field's toolbox of assignments that asks students to "write for" community organizations, because students can offer feedback on their volunteer experience even for organizations that may

not need a specific deliverable. Ryder lays out her assignment sheets in order, presenting an arc for a public writing course. Again, the spirit of the offering is the spirit of praxis. The materials are clearly to be taken not as an ending but as a platform for further conversation about what we must, or might, do.

RACHAEL WENDLER
JOHN WARNOCK
The University of Arizona

Omar Swartz, ed. *Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Suffolk, UK: Abramis Academic, 2011. 301 pages. \$39.95 paperback.

There is a growing sense that the work of John Dewey speaks with a revitalized voice to a new generation of democratic educators. Evidence of this is found in Omar Swartz's new edited collection of essays, *Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, which presents "divergent and multidisciplinary voices" that expand the scope of creative democracy to and from an audience on the margins of society "often denied fair representation" but critical to the democratic community (43). In these essays the authors take a wide array of texts, objects, and theoretical frames and apply them to a diverse twenty-first century community. The book is arranged into two parts. The first section supplies theoretical interpretations of Dewey's account of creative democracy. The second section puts creative democracy to work in practices in the multimediated civic life and classroom.

The theoretical half of the book is dedicated not only to reinvigorating but also to filling out Dewey's "admittedly vague" notion of creative democracy (1). Despite the notion being more "implied than articulated" in Dewey's work, Swartz is quick to add that there remains a "vision of hope" to be exploited for the purpose of resisting the domination and oppressive ideology and practice (3). The first four essays are dedicated to fulfilling this hope by making democracy and its commitments more explicit, with each essay emphasizing a certain quality of creative democracy. Cynthia Gayman, in her essay, claims creative democracy is the act of problematization while Scott Stroud highlights its characteristic of harmonization. Annette Holba calls for more play while Margret Torrell writes