

REVIEW ESSAY

HIGHER EDUCATION, WRITING STUDIES, AND AUSTERITY: HOW WE GOT HERE AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Kaitlin Clinnin

- Fabricant, Michael, and Stephen Brier. *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016. 320 pages. ISBN 978-1-42142-067-7.
- Stenberg, Shari J. *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*. Utah State UP, 2015. 176 pages. ISBN 978-0-87421-991-3; 978-1-60732-388-4.
- Welch, Nancy, and Tony Scott. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Utah State UP, 2016. 240 pages. ISBN 978-1-60732-444-7 (paperback); 978-1-60732-445-4 (eBook).

Professional habitats and practices in education are increasingly shaped by austerity. Yearly budget crises, declining tenure-track faculty positions, continued reliance on marginalized contingent labor, and soaring student debt are only some troubling conditions of education in the age of austerity. Although these realities of teaching in contemporary higher education may appear to be inevitable, they are the intentional result of neoliberal ideologies realized through austerity measures. Writing educators must constantly articulate the value of their work and justify its cost or risk further cuts that

undermine the purpose of writing education and the best practices known to support student writers.

In this review essay, I examine three recent texts that represent the status of higher education and composition in austere times: Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier's *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Education*, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott's edited collection *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, and Shari J. Stenberg's *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*. Each text illustrates the impact of neoliberal ideologies and austerity policies on higher education at the national, institutional, and classroom levels. The three texts occupy different professional positions and incorporate ranging disciplinary theories, methodologies, and pedagogies to address the same set of questions: How did we get to this moment of austerity? How is austerity changing the work of education and writing? And most importantly, What do educators do now? *Austerity Blues* presents the broadest perspective on austerity as it historicizes the emergence of neoliberal ideologies in education through the twentieth century and documents changes in higher education due to austerity conditions. Adopting a narrower focus, the contributions to *Composition in the Age of Austerity* detail the impact of austerity on writing education in K-12, postsecondary, and community writing contexts. Finally, *Repurposing Composition* presents methods to resist neoliberalism and austerity measures through composition studies disciplinary scholarship and pedagogical practices.

Regardless of their differing perspectives, the texts make it clear that allowing the neoliberal austerity agenda to continue unchecked will have a devastating impact on higher education and students, especially those from vulnerable communities. Just as importantly, the texts identify individual and collective resistance methods, many located in the writing classroom. In this review essay, I address the following questions that are at the heart of each of these texts:

- What is austerity, and how is it affecting education?
- How is austerity impacting composition scholarship and practice?

- How can educators, especially writing scholars and practitioners, confront austerity policies?

It is my hope that this review essay will help writing instructors identify the impact of austerity policies in their own professional contexts and transform inequitable social-economic structures by starting in the writing classroom and disciplinary practices.

What is austerity, and how is it affecting education?

Today's austerity conditions are not isolated incidents but rather the culmination of decades of neoliberalism. *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* presents the rise of neoliberal ideologies through the twentieth century and the subsequent implementation of austerity policies throughout society including in public education. Authors Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier draw on a wide range of higher education histories, social and political theories, and economics to contextualize the impact of austerity policies on the mission and practices of higher education. The book is divided into three major sections: Part One contextualizes the neoliberal shift in society and austerity policies through a re-reading of higher education history; Part Two illustrates the impact of present-day austerity policies on higher education institutions; and Part Three offers some concluding thoughts on resisting austerity.

Fabricant and Brier define austerity as a set of ideologies and policies implemented in a neoliberal society to respond to uncertain economic and social times. Neoliberalism is an economic theory that believes the free market is better able to create wealth and serve the public than the state, which at best is viewed as less efficient than the free market and at worst as actively obstructing the market and therefore progress (Fabricant and Brier 14). Neoliberalism has widespread social and political consequences as it fundamentally changes the relationship among the state, its citizens, and the market. Neoliberalism shifts public goods and services away from

the government by privatizing the state's goods and services, so citizens must access previously public services through private means. However, the market does not necessarily meet the needs of society's most vulnerable populations (including poor people, people of color, people with disabilities, the elderly, and the young) because the market follows a "survival of the economic fittest" philosophy. In a neoliberal society, vulnerable populations that had previously received support through public programs like welfare or public education must instead find market-based alternatives, which are scarce or cost prohibitive as the market is more concerned with generating profit than serving the public good. Neoliberalism views the inability for some individuals to survive in the free market as the result of an individual's personal failings, not as the failure of the market and state to provide needed public services to support citizens.

The neoliberal transformation of the state, economy, and social systems creates the conditions for austerity. Fabricant and Brier describe the process by which neoliberal theories become austerity practices. Austerity policies often begin with a crisis such as the 2008 global economic recession. The state responds to the economic crisis by implementing austerity measures such as rationing resources and disinvesting from public services. Public services must adapt to austerity conditions by competing for limited resources and stretching their available resources through increased efficiency, productivity, and accountability. Public services search for ways to reduce costs, often by using technology to reduce labor costs, and to generate profits by privatizing public resources. Because public services are less able to meet the demand for their services, industry may step in to offer a private, market-based alternative. As public resources are reallocated to private holders and public agencies reduce their services, society's most vulnerable citizens receive substandard services, resulting in a growing sense of disenfranchisement and desire for large-scale change. Finally, as economic and social inequality continue to grow amid social and political unrest, there is a greater public and private investment in surveillance, control, and

repression technologies that disproportionately target and harm the vulnerable communities.

Fabricant and Brier's description of the rise of neoliberalism and austerity policies explains much of recent challenges to higher education. The 2008 recession precipitated substantial public disinvestment from education across all grade levels and institution types. Educational institutions searched for funding from private sources, which often tied funding to educational excellence and efficiency as measured by standardized tests. Fabricant and Brier argue that the emphasis on excellence and efficiency reshapes education by defining "excellence" based on students' performance on standardized tests; as such, curricula emphasizes test preparation rather than critical thinking, reading, writing, and civic engagement. In addition to the curricular changes, education's material conditions deteriorate resulting in degraded educational quality. Class sizes grow larger, part-time instructors teach the bulk of classes under poor working conditions, and massive content delivery models replace interpersonal pedagogical methods. These changes to education disproportionately impact poor students and students of color who do not have the market resources to access other educational opportunities, resulting in a segmented educational system that reproduces social inequity. Education has long been viewed in the United States as the great equalizer, but the impact of decades of neoliberal austerity policies causes Fabricant and Brier to question if education is achieving social transformation or further entrenching social hierarchies rooted in discrimination and inequity.

The current austerity crisis provides the immediate context for *Austerity Blues*, yet austerity has been a movement in progress since the last half of the twentieth century. The greatest strength of *Austerity Blues* lies in the authors' careful tracing of neoliberal ideologies and austerity policies in a larger social and political context. The historical methodology reveals a limitation to most current discussions of austerity: Focusing only on the current austerity conditions of education risks perpetuating an ahistorical and decontextualized perspective that naturalizes austerity. Fabricant

and Brier repurpose Margaret Thatcher's famous capitalism maxim "There is no alternative" to describe the representation of austerity as natural and inevitable. Naturalizing austerity or suggesting that austerity conditions are inevitable, which ultimately serves neoliberal interests by maintaining its inequitable social-economic structures. Yet Fabricant and Brier argue that austerity policies are "neither accidental nor natural, but rather the product of conscious political and economic decision making to redistribute public resources upward and remake public institutions into diminished, quasi-private offerings" (205). People enact austerity policies informed by neoliberalism, and therefore it is possible (albeit difficult) to adopt a different social, political, and economic orientation and initiate new policies. By adopting a sociohistorical perspective on neoliberalism and austerity policies, educators can draw on histories of public education and institutional activism to inform current resistance strategies to neoliberal austerity conditions.

To provide this sociohistorical context for future resistance, Fabricant and Brier historicize contemporary higher education in the United States, focusing specifically on public investment in education and traditions of campus activism. Throughout Part One, the authors present federal and state governments' responses to previous economic and social crises like the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War through massive public investments in higher education such as the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, the GI Resettlement Bill, and the National Defense Education Act. This history of public higher education demonstrates that educational disinvestment, deregulation, and degradation are not the only responses to crises. Rather, higher education history reveals a previous conviction that the public must invest in education for the good of society. Continuing their summary of higher education history, Fabricant and Brier trace the history of campus resistance movements' fight for educational access and equity. Fabricant and Brier share the mixed successes of campus protests from the 1960s and 1970s as a tradition of campus resistance that current higher education activists can return to for strategies and inspiration. The higher education history of public

investment and campus activism presented in Part One of *Austerity Blues* counter the maxim “There is no alternative” by showcasing historical alternatives to economic and social crises. Furthermore, the educational history demonstrates that resistance in higher education institutions is possible and can be successful in thwarting hegemonic structures.

Informed by this higher education history, Part Two of *Austerity Blues* shifts its attention to the present state of higher education and the impact of neoliberal “reforms” on higher education’s mission and structure. The conditions of higher education in times of austerity indicate changing public values regarding education. In contrast to earlier convictions that the public should invest in education as a public good for the betterment of society, neoliberal society represents education as a private good for which individuals must bear financial responsibility. The neoliberal restructuring of education as a private good then allows for austerity measures to be enacted during times of economic crises like the 2008 recession, as illustrated by Fabricant and Brier’s description of the neoliberal-austerity process from Part One. Fabricant and Brier identify soaring student debt, the standardized testing regime, and diminished teacher agency as some of the most damaging effects of austerity policies in education. Although each of these concerns is critical and requires greater examination, Part Two focuses on the authors’ two major concerns with education under austerity: the corporatization of the university through educational technologies and the reproduction of social inequality through educational practices.

The chapter on public higher education’s complicity in reproducing social inequality is the most challenging to educators who may think of ourselves as victims of austerity without necessarily considering how the current educational system perpetuates social inequity. Fabricant and Brief summarize the impact of austerity on educational inequity, “The conjunction of fiscal austerity, imposition of a neoliberal business model, and consequent institutional restructuring has resulted in public higher education becoming an active agent in the growth rather than the reduction of social

inequality,” which they identify as austerity’s most harmful effect (118). Social inequity in education results from several linked factors including inequitable resource allocation policies, insufficient resources to prepare students for higher education or support them through higher education, and the individual burden of educational costs. Educational institutions must compete for limited resources due to state disinvestment from public education; however, the resource allocation process reveals systemic inequity throughout K-16. Fabricant and Brier examine K-12 public education as an already segmented educational system divided by race and class. As state support for education declines, communities and individuals are increasingly responsible for supporting education through local taxes, fundraising efforts, or personal contributions. Due to a lack of resources, poor students and students of color are more likely than their richer, whiter peers to receive a substandard K-12 education that will eventually underprepare them for higher education and future employment, thereby continuing the cycle of inequity. This same inequity continues in higher education as institutions that serve more diverse student populations often receive less funding than more selective institutions that often enroll fewer low-income students and students of color. Institutions that serve underrepresented populations require more resources to support their students’ success, yet they are less likely to receive those resources. For both K-12 and higher education institutions, the lack of resources means that schools must make due with less. Educators must teach more courses with larger class sizes and less time to engage with students and offer a rigorous educational experience through innovative curriculum and effective pedagogical interventions. Students experience less individualized attention and an education that costs more but may produce fewer critical skills and eventual economic benefits. Finally, the cost of education disproportionately burdens the students with the fewest resources. Even with full federal and state aid, the remaining educational costs are a greater percentage of a low-income student’s limited resources than for a student with a higher socioeconomic status. Low-income students must then pay for college by accepting loans

(contributing to skyrocketing student debt) or working more, which can negatively impact their academic success and completion. Throughout the chapter on educational inequality, Fabricant and Brier remind educators that we are complicit in a system that creates the inequality in society that we often rebel against, and as such, it is partly our responsibility to resist austerity as a social justice action.

Part Three of *Austerity Blues* addresses the future of higher education under austerity conditions. Fabricant and Brier return to the struggles that currently define higher education such as the high cost of a college education, the resultant student loan debt crisis, the reliance on contingent instructors working without labor protections, and the disparity in educational access and quality across race and class divisions. The authors offer multiple solutions to alleviate the pressure of austerity by investing public resources in K-16 education, improving labor conditions for educators, and using technology to improve (not replace) teaching and learning. However, implementing these solutions on a case-by-case basis will not fundamentally change the neoliberal system and its reproduction of social inequity. Therefore, Fabricant and Brier suggest that there needs to be a “political movement to emphasize within popular discourse and policy” that can confront “the growing racial and class divides in access to quality public higher education” (207). Fabricant and Brier identify potential resistance in contemporary grassroots campus protests, but it is uncertain how individual campus protests will transform and expand into a larger movement in the future. Although they suggest that large-scale coordination through a social movement is needed, the authors do not offer insight into how to form this massive social revolution. They do recognize this limitation, and in their conclusion, Fabricant and Brier present a series of questions about the characteristics and methods of the anticipated anti-austerity social movement, notably asking, “How do we establish a coherent language and politics that penetrate beyond the surface of individual, destabilizing events to their unjust collective essence?” (247). Although Fabricant and Brier

pose the unresolved question to the reader, writing studies scholarship on austerity activism may provide an answer.

How is austerity impacting composition scholarship and practice?

Austerity Blues illustrates the widespread impact of austerity policies on higher education, but to understand the impact on writing education more specifically I turn to *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. While the strength of *Austerity Blues* lies in its macro-level survey of austerity's origins in neoliberalism and large-scale effects of austerity policies in higher education, the strength of *Composition in the Age of Austerity* results from its specificity and rootedness in the work of writing education. Edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, *Composition in the Age of Austerity* features essays from compositionists who occupy positions as administrators, tenure track professors, part-time instructors, and non-profit employees at a range of institutions and organizations. Based on their differing professional and personal locations, the contributors present diverse perspectives on austerity's challenges to writing education in a neoliberal society.

Composition in the Age of Austerity is organized around three major goals: To document and contextualize the effects of austerity policies on the work and mission of composition, to critically examine the field's ability to respond to austerity rhetorics, and to explore rhetorics and strategies of collective resistance. The first section of the collection, "Neoliberal De-Forms," addresses the intrusion of neoliberalism into composition, illustrating the subtle ways that composition has contributed to neoliberal values and austerity policies by participating in reforms such as assessment, course redesigns, and standardized writing curriculum. The next section, "Composition in an Austere World," examines austerity as a threat to writing initiatives like the National Writing Project, basic writing, prison writing programs, community writing programs, and first-year writing. Finally, "Composition at the Crossroads" encourages compositionists to reflect on composition's complicity

in austerity and to develop new theories, coalitions, and actions that can resist neoliberalism and austerity policies.

The first section, “Neoliberal De-Forms,” features essays that interrogate the ideologies and assumptions inherent in austerity educational reforms such as course redesigns and standardized curriculum. These initiatives ostensibly reform education by establishing consistent educational standards across contexts and holding institutions accountable to maintaining and exceeding these standards through assessment. However, the essays in “Neoliberal De-Forms” question these reforms by demonstrating how such neoliberal interventions degrade educational quality and contribute to educational inequity. The first two chapters, “Our Trojan Horse: Outcomes Assessment and the Resurrection of Competency-Based Education” by Chris W. Gallagher and “Confessions of an Assessment Fellow” by Deborah Mutnick, recount the authors’ experiences participating in institutional outcomes assessment. Both authors become disillusioned with outcomes assessment as it divorces assessment from the purpose of improving teaching and learning and instead reinforces narrow understandings of educational quality and standards. Gallagher argues that outcomes assessment has led the way for alternative educational methods like Competency-Based Education, which dilutes the educational experience for students. Mutnick finds that assessment has shifted from valuing inputs, or the resources and infrastructure that create the best conditions for education, to instead emphasizing outputs, or the “proof” of excellence often measured by standardized tests and curriculum. Continuing the critique of austerity-based standards of excellence, Emily J. Isaac’s contribution, “First-Year Composition Course Redesigns: Pedagogical Innovation or Solution to the ‘Cost Disease’?,” illustrates one way that higher education institutions attempt to achieve excellence through course reform. Isaac examines the course redesign movement, which promises to reduce educational costs and improve educational quality by redesigning courses, often by using technology to reduce labor costs and replace or supplement instruction. Isaac argues that the most effective writing course redesigns simply implement best

practices in disciplinary knowledge such as reducing course size, scaffolding curriculum, and teaching writing as a process with multiple drafts. In contrast, most course redesigns feature “a reinvigorated focus on grammar and other lower-order concerns, and procedural, lowest common denominator interpretation of writing as a process,” a narrow focus that does not align with disciplinary expectations for writing standards or excellence (52). Marcelle M. Haddix and Brandi Williams’s chapter “Who’s Coming to the Composition Classroom? K-12 Writing in and outside the Context of Common Core State Standards” also addresses educational reforms intended to achieve excellence. Haddix and Williams argue that the Common Core State Standards limit students to specific forms of writing, privileging argumentative, informative, and research-based genres, modes, and purposes while erasing other forms of literacy and writing rooted in creative expression that may appeal to young writers. Haddix and Williams share their experience working with a community writing project that helps working class students and students of color see how writing can connect to their lives and their communities. The essays contained in “Neoliberal De-Forms” reveal the intrusion of neoliberal values and practices into the work of composition from assessing the efficacy of writing education to presenting a limited understanding of writing purposes and contexts as part of standardized education.

The chapters in the second section, “Composition in an Austere World,” document austerity’s detrimental impacts on institutional and community literacy and writing initiatives. Both community and higher education writing programs are vulnerable to austerity policies because they are costly initiatives that resist commodification and corporatization in a neoliberal social-economic system that values privatization and profiteering. Each chapter examines a community or institutional initiative that confronted neoliberal logics of accountability, efficiency, productivity, and competition. One such initiative is the National Writing Project, a national non-profit organization that connects K-12 and higher education writing instructors in a variety of programs including community

writing workshops and teacher professional development. Tom Fox and Elyse Eidman-Aadahl's "The National Writing Project in the Age of Austerity" traces the NWP's post-2008 financial challenges that have fundamentally changed the organization's ability to offer community writing education. Similarly, Tobi Jacobi examines the declining number of prison college programs in "Austerity Behind Bars: The 'Cost' of Prison College Programs." Despite evidence that prison education programs provide numerous benefits including decreased recidivism, the number of programs nationwide has decreased due to budget cuts and increased prison security regulations, preventing inmates from accessing educational opportunities. Although Fox, Eidman-Aadahl, and Jacobi focus on the loss of fiscal resources needed to support community writing initiatives and community writers, Mary-Ann Cain's "Buskerfest: The Struggle for Space in Public Rhetorical Education" examines the loss of space as a public resource. Weaving together the histories of two community art collectives, Cain identifies public spaces as one of austerity's casualties as more public, third-spaces are turned into locations for private businesses and residences. Cain argues for the rhetorical and activist importance of public spaces as places to form coalitions and organize resistance to hegemonic forces, and she calls for communities to preserve public spaces from dominant economic interests. Basic writing and writing programs are also threatened by austerity. In "Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity," Susan Naomi Bernstein asks readers to imagine a pedagogy that bears witness to human suffering in times of austerity, especially in basic writing courses that educate traditionally underserved students and yet are often the first programs cut during budget crises. Bernstein's contribution takes the costs of austerity from the national and program level to the individual human element, showing how instructors and students suffer under neoliberalism and austerity conditions. Finally, Nancy Welch considers the redistribution of labor in first-year writing programs in her essay "First-Year Writing and the Angels of Austerity: A Re-Domesticated Drama." Welch points to the

institutional desire for the effects of a writing program without the costs of a writing program, which results in the labor of writing program management shifting from recognized labor to private service.

Despite the many challenges faced by each of the writing initiatives featured in this section, the work continues for now. Fox and Eidman-Aadah point out that the National Writing Project continues to support a national network of writing instructors across grade levels and institutional types, although much of the financial and structural support has shifted to the network itself and site locations. Prison college writing initiatives continue with support from individual instructors and their institutions as well as some progressive state governments. Cain's students create activist, rhetorical moments within the public third-spaces that remain. Basic writing courses and writing programs continue to function and adapt to austere conditions, although Bernstein and Welch question for how much longer. The essays that are part of "Composition in an Austere World" stand as a testament to the human and disciplinary costs of austerity policies. They document not only the losses of funding and employment but also the intangible losses such as the further damage to vulnerable populations like incarcerated and basic writers and the loss of public resources like community outreach initiatives and spaces. The contributions in this section articulate the losses from neoliberal cost-cutting measures in the hopes of encouraging resistance.

The chapters in the final section, "Composition in the Crossroads," encourage readers to move from documenting losses to resisting neoliberalism and austerity. Jeanne Gunner calls for new methods of critique in her contribution, "What Happens When Ideological Narratives Lose Their Force?" Gunner argues that current critical theories have not provided the anticipated resistance to hegemonic narratives, and instead the theories and practices of critical theories have been coopted to serve austerity values. Gunner argues that a post-hegemony framework is needed to envision alternatives to hegemonic power structures and austerity. As Gunner calls for radical changes to composition theories, Ann Larson argues for

radical changes to composition's labor practices. In "Composition's Dead," Ann Larson focuses on the adjunctification of higher education and composition's dependence on contingent labor. Larson identifies labor issues as the starting point to transform current neoliberal conditions by engaging in labor resistance strategies such as strikes and coalitions with low-wage workers across industries. Eileen E. Schell also attends to higher education's problematic labor conditions in "Austerity, Contingency, and Administrative Bloat: Writing Programs and Universities in an Age of Feast and Famine." Schell examines the issue of administrative bloat, or the growing number of institutional administrative positions to manage the work of higher education while instructional resources and support are cut. Schell finds that writing program administrators (WPA) have benefited from administrative growth and argues that WPAs must develop a critical rhetoric that can respond to and resist the neoliberal university's desire for greater productivity, efficiency, and accountability at the cost of its students and instructors. Attending to instructors' positionality in neoliberal and austere education settings, Shari J. Stenberg's "Beyond Marketability: Locating Teacher Agency in the Neoliberal University" considers the potential for teacher agency. Stenberg shares new composition instructors' experiences of using their often-marginalized positions as disabled, queer, or non-native English speakers to locate new possibilities for what Stenberg calls "located agency" in the classroom. Located agency values the specific positionality of an instructor and recognizes the positionality of students to create a relational model of education, a concept I return to more in the review of *Feminist Repurposing*. Finally, Tony Scott examines how composition studies has been coopted by neoliberalism in "Animated by the Entrepreneurial Spirit: Austerity, Dispossession, and Composition's Last Living Act." Scott compares composition to a newly created zombie; composition is now part of the neoliberalism problem (as evidenced by the presence of values like innovation and entrepreneurialism in scholarship and pedagogy) but is currently experiencing a moment of self-awareness that can provide a

turning point. Rather than give into neoliberal, destructive urges for innovation and risk-taking, Scott argues that composition can chart a new path that would “renew its commitment to teaching and scholarship for the benefits of writing education in a just society, and devote itself to radical, creative possibilities at its material sites of production” (216).

Throughout *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, the contributors draw attention to the complicity of composition in the current social, economic, and political moment. From one perspective, Chris Gallagher reflects on how compositionists’ desire to improve teaching and learning was unwittingly used to further austerity reforms. He writes, “We might have thought we were being good citizens. We might have thought outcomes were just a neutral tool. We might have thought we could have it all. If so, we were wrong” (24). In contrast to Gallagher’s regretful perspective, Ann Larson criticizes composition for adhering to “failed politics of respectability” in which composition willingly aligned with neoliberal values to attain greater disciplinary status in the university at the expense of vulnerable laborers. She puts it bluntly, “Composition does not defy our rotten economic system; it exemplifies it” (164). Larson argues that as composition has established itself as a recognized research discipline in higher education it has done so by creating a segmented labor force divided between those who teach composition with poor labor conditions and those who manage or research composition with labor protections.

Although composition bears some responsibility for austerity’s effects on education, the chapters in *Composition in the Age of Austerity* position composition’s complicity as a starting point to resist neoliberalism and austerity in classroom, institutional, and public settings. Gallagher and Scott suggest that compositionists capitalize on the unique skills and experiences that they can offer. Gallagher articulates writing instructors’ unique skill sets, specifically that writing instructors know “how to build environments and experiences that promote students’ learning of it. And we know our students—not as bundles of competencies, but as human beings in the midst of rich social and contextual learning experiences” (31). Scott echoes

Gallagher's attention to the social experience of learning, "Compositionists can appeal to values that are shared among faculty, students, and parents, who, by and large, value personal relationships and face-to-face interactions between students and faculty, and curriculums that are open-ended and responsive enough to provide opportunity for unanticipated discovery and creative innovations" (216). However, Gallagher and Scott's arguments can be coopted to support the same neoliberal and austerity values of competition, productivity, and innovation that they critique and seek to replace. Gallagher writes, "We are not just another set of content providers; we are expert shapers of educative experiences for individuals and groups. We offer a kind and quality of experience—in courses and curricula, and in and through writing—that cannot be replicated or by-passed by vendors" (31). According to Gallagher, composition offers valuable products (courses, curricula) that other competitors in the market cannot, and therefore composition is valuable to higher education. Other contributors identify ways that composition can use its position within the neoliberal university to resist neoliberal values and austerity policies. Schell and Larson call for activist compositionists to develop a critical rhetoric for WPAs and create labor coalitions outside academia. Lil Brannon resists austerity and the commodification of labor by reclaiming bodies, locations, belonging, and collectivity. In the "Afterword" to the collection, Brannon writes, "Reclaiming our embodied locations, orienting ourselves differently in relation to neoliberal austerity measures and building coalitions with others in our communities can give us new ways of working" (225). Confronting austerity and neoliberalism is not easy as neoliberal values may inadvertently coopt resistance. Perhaps, as Brannon suggests, the most promising resistance methods lie in reclaiming what is discarded by neoliberalism to create new alternatives to neoliberalism and austerity.

How can educators, especially writing scholars and practitioners, confront austerity policies?

The chapters in Welch and Scott's collection illustrate how austerity is changing writing education to serve neoliberal values of productivity, efficiency, and accountability. Much like Fabricant and Brier in *Austerity Blues*, the authors in *Composition in the Age of Austerity* point out that austerity policies in education are an effect of neoliberalism's larger restructuring of the public and private spheres. It is easy to feel rather helpless and hopeless after reading the texts, overwhelmed by the belief that austerity and neoliberalism values have taken such a hold that they are impossible to confront let alone change. Each of these texts ends with a section that poses the question, what can be done about austerity? Fabricant and Brier suggest that a mass social movement is needed, although they leave it up to the reader to form such a large-scale social revolution. The last section in Welch and Scott's collection focuses on ways writing practitioners may resist austerity policies. Yet some solutions reify neoliberalism, suggesting that compositionists work within austerity conditions and leverage neoliberal values to advocate for writing and education. The solutions exemplify composition's commitment to confronting austerity; however, it is unclear if the purpose is to dismantle neoliberalism and austerity or to improve composition's position within neoliberal austerity conditions.

Stenberg's *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Intervention for a Neoliberal Age* offers a concrete method individuals can employ to counteract the harmful effects of neoliberal ideology without participating in the problematic system. Stenberg offers feminist repurposing as a set of tactics to recast neoliberal values as feminist practices to subvert the current social-economic system. Feminist repurposing tactics include illuminating and critiquing existing conditions, locating possibilities to work in and against current systems, reclaiming the excess and reusing it for new purposes, and finally enacting new pedagogical, relational, and cultural possibilities (10-11). Illuminating reveals the underlying

neoliberal logics that appear natural, universal, or inevitable and opens these logics up to critique and alternatives. The next two tactics reframe neoliberal logics and values through feminist frameworks and practices. The tactic of locating possibilities asks individuals to adopt a new perspective on the social context. Stenberg suggests that a shift in perspective can offer new ways of being, acting, and relating. The other tactic, reclaiming and reusing the excess, rescues the values and practices that are devalued in neoliberalism and uses the “waste” to challenge normative conceptions. The final tactic, enacting new pedagogical, relational, and cultural possibilities, creates new logics, values, and practices to disrupt and replace the “entrenched mode of neoliberalism” (11).

Employing the four tactics of feminist repurposing is not necessarily a linear process. Instead, as a testament to her feminist framework, Stenberg pays close attention to location, positionality, embodiment, and social context while encouraging her readers to do the same. Depending on the social context or an individual’s positionality, a tactic may not be appropriate or effective at resisting neoliberal structures. Feminist repurposing is therefore also a rhetorical repurposing, using feminist values and practices to identify the most appropriate tactic for a rhetor’s contextual position. The focus on positionality stands in contrast to neoliberalism, which erases difference by claiming equality for all while simultaneously operating under a social-economic logic that disproportionately harms poor communities, communities of color, and other marginal communities. Stenberg reclaims positionality and argues for compositionists to practice “located agency” that “includes examining, valuing, and taking responsibility for our locations and that opens possibilities for marginalized locations to serve as resources for teaching, learning, and knowing” (100). Located agency uses the contextual possibilities and constraints of bodies and the relations to other bodies to imagine and enact alternative modes of belonging and acting. Stenberg’s feminist repurposing framework offers alternative modes of belonging, acting, and agency that can disrupt neoliberal structures across various locations including the writing classroom.

Throughout *Repurposing Composition*, Stenberg practices feminist repurposing to reclaim composition from neoliberalism. As the contributors to *Composition in the Age of Austerity* illustrate, the composition classroom often serves neoliberal interests as the work of writing education has been coopted and aligned with market values. Compositionists experience a double-bind constituted by the need to prepare students to write in a neoliberal economic-social system while also desiring to disrupt and transform the system. Stenberg offers feminist repurposing as one way out of the double-bind. She argues, “Feminist repurposing allows us to consider how we can take seriously our students’ material needs for job readiness as well as to highlight and enact the feminist ideas that may otherwise be obscured in the neoliberal university” (40). Throughout *Repurposing Composition*, Stenberg identifies key terms that she argues can be repurposed to disrupt neoliberalism and its intrusion into writing education. The terms include *emotion*, *listening*, *agency*, and *responsibility*. In each chapter, Stenberg illuminates the normative understanding of these terms and how these understandings reinforce harmful neoliberal logics. Then, Stenberg examines feminist theory and rhetoric and composition scholarship to illustrate how scholars have repurposed these terms through the tactics of identifying new possibilities, reclaiming the excess, and enacting alternatives. Finally, Stenberg demonstrates how the key term can be repurposed in typical disciplinary work such as teaching academic writing, training graduate student instructors, and assessing writing programs.

Writing instructors can employ the feminist repurposing framework to identify the overlaps between writing education and neoliberal interests and then reclaim the work of composition and resist neoliberalism and austerity by enacting alternatives. Chapter Three, “Repurposing Listening—From Agonistic to Rhetorical,” reveals how current approaches to teaching academic writing can problematically reinforce neoliberal values. In this chapter, Stenberg analyzes listening in industry and the composition classroom. Listening, as she notes, is a valuable market skill because people like to feel listened to, which then impacts market

services such as customer service experience and work place dynamics. Although feminist theories value listening to relate to others, in industry listening is a desired skill because it creates more economic value. The industry purpose of listening is “fine-tuning an existing structure, not revising its logics or values” (76). Similarly, academic writing enacts a superficial form of listening in which alternative positions are identified primarily to support one’s own position. Students are taught to identify and “listen” to various perspectives as they write, but the purpose of listening is to “pave the road for one’s own contributions, not to engage in genuine dialogue with other scholars” (79). For both industry and academia, the appearance of listening to others matters, not the transformation of one’s position that can occur when listening creates dialogue. Using the illuminating tactic, Stenberg shows how listening in industry and academia reinforces neoliberal values of individualism, competition, and profiteering. Stenberg moves from illuminating to reframing and reclaiming by presenting scholarship on feminist rhetorical listening and silence as alternatives to neoliberal listening. In contrast to neoliberal listening, feminist rhetorical listening is “an active, generative practice that allows us to hear beyond our entrenched positions and assumptions” (76). Unlike neoliberal listening, feminist rhetorical listening engages multiple perspectives in dialogue to foster understanding and change. The last section of the chapter describes how Stenberg enacts repurposed listening as she teaches academic writing. Stenberg’s classroom practice follows the feminist repurposing method as she works with students to illuminate the assumed values in academic writing, consider alternatives, and then enact alternatives in their writing. Students analyze cultural norms surrounding listening including methods of teaching listening, characteristics of effective listening, and intercultural listening differences. Stenberg also introduces alternative theories of argument that engage multiple perspectives to understand rather than popular forms of argument that debate across binary positions to persuade. Stenberg shares a dialogic argument assignment that asks students to practice feminist rhetorical listening as they write about a social issue.

Students “listen” to multiple perspectives by coming to a rich understanding of the position and then representing these perspectives without critique. In the second part of the assignment, students contribute their perspectives to the ongoing conversation. Students represent all perspectives with respect and engage ethically across the positions as they search for the connections, differences, and insights that become apparent when engaging with various perspectives from a desire to understand rather than to win an argument. Stenberg’s attention to rhetorical listening is particularly relevant given the current state of public discourse characterized by arguments rather than dialogue, divisions rather than coalitions, persuading rather than understanding. Instead, Stenberg’s dialogic argument assignment prepares students for different ways to engage with diverse perspectives and enact change based on these engagements.

Like *Austerity Blues* and *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, *Feminist Repurposing* reveals the presence of neoliberal ideologies in writing education and scholarship, but unlike the first two texts, *Feminist Repurposing* offers a method to confront neoliberalism and austerity. The book is not a resistance manual that presents clear instructions to confront austerity challenges such as program cuts, budget shortfalls, or the standardized testing regime. Stenberg’s classroom practices cannot be adopted wholesale by a reader; the writing instruction, professional development, and assessment examples illustrate Stenberg’s feminist repurposing in her institutional context. Nor should Stenberg’s specific interventions be adopted and applied in any context. Instead, feminist repurposing is a method that compositionists can apply in their own contexts to identify the neoliberal values and practices present and to then reframe, reclaim, and enact new possibilities. Stenberg reminds readers that “important moments of resistance often occur at the microlevel” (11), which offers a more manageable starting point for writing instructors to resist neoliberalism and austerity than Fabricant and Brier’s call for a mass social movement. Instructors can engage in feminist repurposing to disrupt neoliberal structures in small ways by reframing and reclaiming writing education from

the ways it has become aligned with neoliberal values. Stenberg's feminist repurposing offers a new way of thinking and acting outside of neoliberal structures and subsequently results in the social movement that Fabricant and Brier and other scholars argue is the only way out of austerity.

Conclusion: What Happens Next

It is difficult to write a satisfying conclusion for these texts about education in times of austerity as each day brings another report of a new educational crisis due to austerity measures. Most recently and significantly, the Trump administration announced its 2018 education budget, which cut more than \$10 billion from federal education programs. The budget would reduce or eliminate funding for programs including those focused on college access and success for disadvantaged students (TRIO), college affordability (federal aid and grants, subsidized student loans, public-service loan forgiveness) and federal research (the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Institutes of Health). For K-12 education, the proposed budget directs funds towards school-choice initiatives such as charter schools and voucher programs. Although early discussion from politicians suggests that the proposed budget is unlikely to pass in its current form, the budget does signal that the Trump administration intends to continue, and in fact, accelerate neoliberal ideologies and austerity policies in education.

Reviewing these three texts illuminates the neoliberal ideologies that structure education today. Illuminating reveals that the austerity policies in local contexts are not isolated misfortunes but instead they are the intended outcome of a neoliberal economic-social system that values individualism, competition, and profits over communalism, collaboration, and equitable distribution of resources. For example, when the current executive administration proposes to reduce funding for college access programs like TRIO that serve predominantly poor students and students of color, it becomes apparent that the decision is about more than reducing government expenditures. Instead, the illumination process reveals

fundamental beliefs about who should be able to access higher education. In a neoliberal economic-social system, decisions about resource allocation will rarely be based in social justice or equity, and vulnerable populations will continue to suffer under austerity. And yet, the authors of these three texts remind the reader that austerity is not natural or inevitable. The age of austerity is the result of intentional decisions about resource allocation that reflect neoliberal ideologies, and therefore it is possible to make economic and social decisions that reflect a commitment to social justice and equity.

Austerity Blues, *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, and *Repurposing Composition* contextualize the rise of austerity measures and the impact on writing education. But the three texts also challenge compositionists to do something about it. None of the texts offers easy solutions because no easy solution exists. Neoliberal ideologies enacted through austerity policies permeate all aspects of society. The stakes are high for composition, for students, and for local, national, and global communities. *Austerity Blues* calls for a massive social movement to resist neoliberalism and create new social-economic structures. *Composition in the Age of Austerity* and *Repurposing Composition* present disciplinary-specific ways that writing instructors can confront austerity by changing theoretical, labor, program administration, and classroom practices. However, compositionists must quickly articulate the goal of confronting austerity: Do we want to confront austerity to elevate our own position in an unjust social-economic system to reap the systems' benefits? Or do we want to dismantle neoliberal structures and create more equitable social-economic systems?

Across the three texts, the authors seem to lean towards the second option, yet even the resistance strategies they offer can be twisted to serve neoliberal interests and maintain its harmful structures. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112). Educators must be constantly self-reflexive and self-critical lest we inadvertently find our well-

intentioned labor repurposed to reify neoliberalism. Additionally, we need to develop alternative theories and practices that can offer new forms of belonging, agency, and resistance outside of normative neoliberal modes. As educators and compositionists move forward in the age of austerity, we must remember that we are not necessarily the victims of austerity as in many cases we are complicit, and as such it is our responsibility and opportunity to initiate genuine change.

Works Cited

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Sister Outsider*. The Crossing Press, pp. 110-13.

