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The Perennial Question—"What Do We Want from Public Writing?": A Conversation with Susan Wells

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Abstract: In this interview, Susan Wells discusses the teaching of public writing and the work of public rhetoric as they respond to both shifting and recurring political and social contexts. Drawing on insights from her extensive and current work on public rhetoric, including her foundational essay "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?," Wells discusses the possibilities public writing instruction holds for cultivating students' public agency, while also exploring the boundaries between what can and cannot be accomplished in the public writing classroom.

Chris: This special issue has been framed by the question you posed in your article "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing? I thought that we might begin by thinking about this question at our current moment. As teachers of public rhetoric, what do or perhaps "should" we want from public writing at this time?

Susan: Well, I wrote the "Rogue Cops" essay as a composition teacher. I use the word composition, which nobody does anymore, right? Mostly, I was working in and around writing programs and writing across the curriculum programs. I had a lot of goals in that essay. One of the most substantial ones was just to bring Habermas to Composition Studies as I saw them at the time. Because everyone said "Oh Habermas, ideal speech situations, so boring, so impossible." I wanted to change that.

Also, I wanted to open windows in composition classrooms and raise the possibilities of other kinds of writings besides an academic research paper—a paper that didn't even have subheadings, let alone illustrations, but the form that we would send our students out into the entire world with a limited mastery of. That desire is probably fulfilled more than any single academic desire I have had because that's not what writing classrooms are like anymore—that's not the way we teach, that's not even the way we describe ourselves. I look at the question more as a citizen at this moment. As somebody who's shocked by our current situation, I've become more politically active than I had been at any time since I was in graduate school probably.

There's a difference between the kinds of knowledge that I thought were needed when "Rogue Cops" was published and the kinds of knowledge that I feel are needed now. Back when I was writing "Rogue Cops," I thought we needed to understand something about public writing. What we needed to understand was not all that difficult, not all that complex. We needed to understand why public writing was hard, that it had to be constructed, and that it had a history. Those are all pretty basic things. I think everybody understands those things now, and I wasn't the only person saying them.

Now we're in a situation where what we really want to know is what makes public writing work. What makes it actually persuasive, as opposed to just counting as reasonable participation in public discourse? Possibly, this is because we feel that, or I feel that, our situation now is much more precarious in many ways. It's not a matter of teaching students how to become reasonable participants, but figuring out how any writing subject, whoever, could enter into a sphere of discourse with people who were not in our immediate circle and hope for some kind of efficacy.

It's a different kind of desire. In a way, it's a less writerly and more rhetorical desire. You know? That basic thing that Aristotle said was that rhetoric deals with the means of persuasion. It doesn't deal with making true statements or even being the best arguer. It means actually changing real minds that are like your mind—imperfect, situated. I would say that is one gigantic change. It's not a change that I have any answers for. We've all seen a lot of forms of

persuasion that everything would tell us should not have worked, and we've seen them work. We've also seen forms of persuasion that everything in our discipline tells us should have worked, and they did nothing.

This is a strange time to be doing this kind of work. I have a colleague, who's a sociologist, and she does a lot of work for the Democratic Party's Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). She was working on a presentation for their national meeting, where she was going to explain that a lot of political decisions are made on emotional grounds, and not so much on the basis of arguments. I was saying, "Julia, there is a discipline that has studied this." Then I realized that I was not at all sure that we had anything to say that would be productive in that situation, let alone to the DCCC, which has its own problems. That's the short and overly complicated answer to a really good and pressing question.

Chris: I would like to continue to explore your thoughts on the kinds of knowledge that you felt were needed when you composed "Rogue Cops," and the kinds of knowledge that are needed now. You talked about a shift towards what makes public writing work. If you were asked to outline three or four areas that we should be focusing our teaching of public writing on at this time, like you did in "Rogue Cops," what might you suggest?

Susan: That's a good, meaty question. When I was writing "Rogue Cops," I think that one of the questions uppermost in my mind was the question of how various kinds of expert knowledge could be deployed in a public sphere, which is a pedagogical version of the question that Habermas asked way back in *Legitimation Crisis* about the differentiation problem.

It seems to me that right now we are facing a situation where we have two really different kinds of publics. I'm talking here about segmented and discontinuous publics. We have a number of *publics of expertise*. We have climate change scientists, who back in 1990 would have been very reticent, I think, to come forward in the way that they're coming forward now to provide scientific information about climate change. We have health administration experts, who were virtually silent during the Clinton healthcare debate. They did not in any way engage the right-wing response, where the couple was worrying at their kitchen table{1}. Now we have public health experts really deployed actively in the healthcare debate, but no one is calling for dialogue anymore. People are calling for specific changes, but not at all, as Clinton did then, for a discussion of healthcare. Then, we see this weird torqueing of the term universal—some other scholar should do some work on that. Name the issue, and there's an expert public that has emerged and organized around it from various points on the political spectrum.

Then we have *publics of engagement*, publics where people come together. Every Tuesday in Philadelphia there's a group that I usually go with. We stand in front of Senator Toomey's office and ask him to hold a public town hall in Philadelphia. We really annoy him, we trade information, and we get to know about things going on in the city. We are a presence. Whereas I thought back then that there were rogue cops and there were problems in healthcare and that would be an interesting essay and that the pedagogical problem was constituting students as experts with the right to speak and giving them the tools to do that speaking in some version of a public sphere.

It seems to me that we have a more intractable problem now of how to establish persuasive and effective consequential linkages between publics of expertise and publics of engagement. That's just another way of asking the question "what do we do in the world of alternate facts?" What do we do in a world where there's no agreement among participants in a really consequential series of debates about what constitutes evidence?

That is not exactly a question that you solve in a classroom. That's a question that gets resolved discursively, I think, out in the world. We see some ways in which that happens. We see some people who have been able to present climate change information in a way that's broadly convincing. I'm also thinking of Bernice Houseman's vaccination information project, where she and her students have gathered a lot of historical information, established actual working relations with anti-vaccine groups, and provided very good information to public health advocates. This creates a discursive space in a very, very difficult situation, because people who believe that they shouldn't vaccinate their children are hard to reach, very hard to reach. I wonder what it would be like if we had a police misconduct project that was like Bernice Houseman's vaccination project. We sure need one because that problem has not

mitigated. It has become much worse since I wrote “Rogue Cops.”

Chris: You bring up a really interesting question, which is the question of our expectations for what we can accomplish within public writing classrooms, even when those classrooms are located outside of the traditional classroom in community literacy and service learning classes. How might we frame our expectations for what we can solve or do within a public writing classroom, and what should we have a healthy understanding of, or humility about, in terms of what we cannot accomplish, and what has to take place in other spaces?

Susan: I can only speak from the experience I had as a teacher. Paradoxically, some of my best success in helping students to engage in public writing came from teaching a class that used Crowley and Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. I mean, I'm sure they would not work for all teachers, or in all situations, but the progymnasmata were invented assuming that the student learned materials that would eventually lead them into the public sphere. My students took swimmingly to encomium and vituperation, increasing useful for us today, and really genres that have never gone out of fashion.

In that class, as I assume in many classes that use that very useful textbook, the final project was to find a real issue and a real audience and produce a real text. I had one student who decided to intervene in the gamergate debate and he asked me if he could have cursing in his project. He was going to produce a podcast— because why would you produce a paper? I asked, “well the people who hear it, are they going to be upset by cursing?” We had to close the classroom door when he presented his work. [Laughs] I had a student producing materials for the parents of children who were on the autism spectrum about sex education. Apparently, there's not much information out there. The student produced an excellent website, which was also a piece of advocacy for a certain way of seeing a certain kind of disabled (but not for that reason) desexualized body.

In those situations, I think two things were critical. The first was locating a body of knowledge that the student could speak from with some authority. The second was affirming the pleasure of this risky discourse. The students always understood that there was something at stake here, that they could do something wrong, because God knows, as somebody said a long time ago, the history of so many issues of social difference in this country is so vexed that almost any serious statement can be rightly offensive to somebody. It is very easy to make mistakes. It can be very productive to learn from them.

These are very, very modest pieces of pedagogical counsel. It's not rocket science, and I don't have much in the way of experimental results to back them up. I think that one of the hallmarks of where we are now is that there's this terrific disparity between what counts as an excellent classroom experience, and what is needed in the world outside the classroom. They are operating on two completely different scales. My student’s hilarious, profane video essay on gamergate does not begin to touch the level of misogyny around that issue, which leads to other questions that as a retired lady who just shows up on Tuesdays I'm not in a position to answer. [Laughs]

Chris: This raises another question that comes out of your work and that has become a key area, I think, of the discussion of public writing, which is this idea of authenticity. You were just speaking of some of the ways that our classrooms can, sometimes even in very modest ways, enable students to perceive their agency. I am curious to ask you about how you see public writing and its relationship to students’ future public participation. Do you see a clear link between our work in the public writing classroom and students’ public participation within society? Are there specific challenges to fostering that link that you see?

Susan: I think there are huge challenges to fostering that link. Possibly one of the biggest is the political economy of college education right now, where students are leaving higher education with debt that would have been unthinkable when that essay was written. That load of debt, in itself, both spurs students into action and radically limits the way that they can act and how much they can act. One of the things that's been interesting to me over the last few years has been to see various experiments that explore how we might act in this new context, some of which were extremely interesting but died on the vine, like Occupy, others of which are adopting a more sustainable model like Indivisible. It's unclear how those move forward in this strange situation.

Personally, I've seen this in a class that I regularly teach on political rhetoric. The first time I taught this class, I had students going to political events around the Philadelphia mayoral race, which was happening that same semester. Philadelphia's not a small town. Millions and millions of people live here. But my students became recognizable at political events. There were only nine of them, and they were not Democratic or Republican party operatives, but they were there so regularly that people were saying, “Who are you?” ”Oh, there you are again …”.

That experience of physically showing up, which I think is not all that hard to foster in different classrooms, breaks down more of the critical barriers to a certain level of public participation. I mean, there’s the agora model where we all meet up in the big public square, but that ain't going to work. On the other hand, for many students, being in the

presence of people feeling a political emotion is a significant experience, and I know it has led students to engage with different kinds of political action.

I think those tactical interventions can be very useful. When “Rogue Cops and Healthcare” was written, I could never have imagined the uses to which such a homey and clunky tool as Facebook would have been put politically. I think in a lot of ways it really depends on those who are coming into political activity now to find the bridges between what we do in the classroom and what can happen in the public sphere, although teachers can watch what is happening, help to amplify it, suggest ways to facilitate it, and open it to different kinds of participants.

Oh, and there's something I wanted to say, actually, which is not likely to come up immediately or spontaneously. That has to do with the student whose letter to the editor started this whole thing, Arthur Colbert. This morning I was thinking, what happened to him? I don't know. I don't have a definitive answer. The active press coverage for him ends in about 1998. He's described as a social work student who was moving to Detroit. There is an Arthur Colbert who is a licensed practicing social worker in Detroit. Yay, Arthur Colbert! I wonder if he knows what an iconic role he has in this small corner of a small academic field.

Chris: Throughout your work, we encounter writers like Arthur Colbert who draw on rhetorical savvy to construct a public space for their claims. I’m thinking specifically here of your books *Out of the Dead House: Nineteenth-Century Women Physicians and the Writing of Medicine* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Work of Writing*. I wanted to ask you to think about how examples of public rhetoric, like those that you have written about in those books, might point us to possibilities for cultivating rhetorical practices that might enable students to intervene in and construct public space. What can the work of rhetoricians, practitioners, collectives, even teachers of composition in the past, teach us about the ability to foster and create a space for public discourse now?

Susan: The work of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective demonstrated both the possibilities and the limits of a certain kind of intervention. They invented an entire genre, the women’s health book, which did not exist, absolutely did not exist, before they wrote *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. There were family health books, there were marriage manuals, but nobody thought women would be interested in a book about taking care of themselves. They established the authority of women in a certain range of medical situations, having usually to do with reproductive health, to claim authority for their own experience. They did not get to the issues of old age for many years—menopause was unimaginable in 1970. Although, they've had other information about that since.

As medicine changed from 1970 to 2017, and as the ways of disseminating medical information changed—people don't read books, they go to WebMD—the really, really important interventions of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective became compromised, and it became important for the group to establish collaboration with people who were reliable allies within establishments of medical knowledge and to take on means of dissemination that required them to build a very stable, very successful institution, the Boston's Women's Health Book Collective. It's now called Our Bodies, Ourselves.

I guess one of the things that I would want to take from that experience is that all of these rhetorical interventions are time bound. They work for certain speakers and writers at certain junctures, and when the discourses or sources change, when the practices of knowledge change, they have to change and many of their initial exigencies fall away and become muted, maybe nostalgic even, which is a terrible thing.

Then other people figure out other ways to act, or they don't. There are no guarantees to this process. I think we see in movements like Black Lives Matter an attempt to reanimate things that in the 60s and 70s were mediated by forms like the weekly left tabloid newspaper, which was a form that depended, among other things, on the development of the technical resources of photo offset printing, which meant that basically any group of ten people could put out a newspaper. Ten people and some press type, you were good to go. [Laughs]

Those newspapers functioned as ways of reporting on police activity, suggesting tactics for intervention, bringing publicity to problems. And, then they didn't. None of those newspapers, that I know of, still exist, although some of them have morphed into something quite different. But cell phone photos exist, films exist, live cameras exist. Some of the same work gets carried out in that way.

Chris: You're touching upon something that's really central to the way we teach public discourse, or public rhetoric. We often think about teaching public writing and public action as rhetorical acts, but we don't think about them as having life cycles like you've discussed. Even when we engage students with community partners, we might not be asking students to think about how certain campaigns and even organizations have a limited shelf life, a limited life-cycle, and that certain campaigns and certain organizations themselves will actually disappear after a limited amount of time.

Susan: That is not failure.

Chris: Right.

Susan: It can be failure. But, not necessarily.

Chris: It speaks to efficacy in public rhetoric. How might looking at the lifecycle of a movement like the Boston Women's Health Book Collective give us a more nuanced understanding of what is success, what is failure, in public rhetoric?

Susan: I think what's critical is to ask students to begin to define what they mean by those terms. The starting question is "what do we want from public writing?" The question that's consequential is "what can our students want from public writing?" If students understand the stakes of success as ending global warming, discouragement is likely to happen. We can't argue people out of that. Of course, students want to end global warming, like tomorrow. Who doesn't? There's nothing wrong with that desire. It's not a mistake. It's experiences like talking to people who have invested decades in the struggle, or people who have won provisional and local victory after five years. Those are the experiences that help students understand the long-time commitment that that kind of public writing involves.

I was at a meeting recently. It was a town hall meeting where a state representative was saying, "don't expect to get any change from the Pennsylvania legislative assembly in a year. Even if you have a popular issue and you're organized, it takes five years." I mean, legislative action is slow, but other kinds of action can be much slower and much harder, until it isn't, until things break and change in a minute, which can also happen. Having a healthy pedagogy around kairos is, I think, also really important and useful, whether or not a teacher decides to use that term. The notion of occasion is salient enough in everyday life that it's not an alien idea to students who are living in the same society we are.

Organizations and forms of writing, I think, come and go. The engagement is something that continues. If we see ourselves not as teaching students forms (and I don't think many teachers see themselves as doing that anymore) but rather as teaching students how to analyze exigencies, make generic choices and adaptations, and think about audiences, then I think it's much easier for students to be quick on their feet and respond to changes in the possibility of public discourse. Because those aren't going to stop.

Chris: Your answer to this question makes me think about the relationship between public writing and the literacies students need to access publics. This is something I think is so important at a time when, like you've said earlier, we are confronted with exceptionally complex rhetorical exigencies like climate change. Here, for example, the division between scientific consensus and public belief about manmade climate changes is often driven by misinformation campaigns, but the science can sometimes seem unapproachable for non-scientists. It seems to me that one of the central threads of your work, from *Dialectics of Representation* to *Sweet Reason: Rhetoric and the Discourses of Modernity* and on to your recent work on Robert Burton, is a focus on analysis as a way of challenging and reconfiguring our visions of social and political change. I was wondering if you might explore that connection a little bit, the connection between literacy, analysis, and rhetorical performance.

Susan: I want to stray to my current project at this point. As you mentioned, my current project is on Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* which is a book that I encountered when I was taking my comprehensive exams at Texas. I had no idea what to do with it. Who does?

Working on the questions of the gendered body in both *Out of the Dead House* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Work of Writing*, one of the things that struck me in both of those projects was the lacing together of lay and expert discourses, and the power that that combination had at particular junctures. It wasn't powerful forever afterward; it wasn't powerful before, but at those junctures, it changed and realigned medical practice.

I thought that maybe after thinking about the rhetoric of bodies for a while on those projects, I could return to the *Anatomy*, and I could have some tools that might be useful. Burton addresses the question "what am I doing writing about these medical issues? I'm supposed to be a clergyman," in his book. Doctors gave spiritual advice all the time. He might have thought, "Why can't I cross the line? Body/soul, soul/body, same two". That permeability, the ability to exchange information across disciplinary boundaries that had not yet become serious—not yet changed from being boundaries of professional practice to become also boundaries of intellectual participation—it generated a different kind of knowledge, a very strange kind of knowledge, and one that, again, did not have a very long life. I'm still grappling with the problem of figuring out what can we learn from this pre-differentiated, or incipiently differentiating domain of knowledge practices as it was deployed by this very strange bachelor, living almost entirely at Oxford his whole life long, never getting promoted because he wrote in English instead of Latin, but writing twenty percent of his English book in Latin anyhow. What are the possibilities that this past practice of reading might have for us?

Again, this works around that question of expert publics and engaged publics. How do students gain the authority to responsibly read expert materials and make judgements based on their own values and interests about what those materials say? How do we as teachers, without requiring students to go to engineering school or do other laborious things, how do we being to tease out the possibilities of various mediating forms of discourse?

I have taught a course called Texts and Cultures of Science, which was populated half by scientists and half by English majors because it was a writing intensive course. That was incredibly fun, because the students who weren't science majors really demanded a certain level of engagement and clarity from the science majors, who really wanted their writing to become consequential and accessible in some of its modes. And so we worked with those problems on a day to day basis. Do I use end notes? Should I do Chicago style? Well, what do your readers expect? What would make your writing have authority in this situation?

That kairotic exigency is something I think is critical to any kind of pedagogy that's going to attempt to grapple with what public writing is.

Chris: We saw that really come to play in our current political context, especially in the disdain for experts and academia that we saw in Brexit and in the 2016 election and after. I'm thinking of British UKIP politician Michael Gove's statement "people in this country have had enough with experts" (qtd. in Mance) and the many attempts by some on the right to castigate American academics as liberal hoaxers. As teachers and intellectuals, how might we engage this sometimes promising, sometimes troubling nexus between expertise and public perception of knowledge?

Susan: Well, Gramsci said in one of his essays that the proletarian intellectual is not wrong in rejecting the opinion of experts because, given his exclusion from intellectual capital, if he accepted the opinions of experts, he would be required to change his mind several times a week on critical issues.

This is not an easy position to argue against. [Laughs] Our culture is full of tropes like "Oh, they say this food is bad, but then next week they'll say it's good. They say this is good, and then they'll say this is bad." It seems to me that there might be a kind of a pedagogy that deploys this skepticism, which is entirely self-protective and reasonable, and acknowledges the fact that although all of these experts cannot be right, some of them must be more right than others, and that there is a reason to figure out who they are.

Now, that's the question of providing exigency in the classroom, or opening the classroom to exigency. And that implies that students feel that they have enough agency—that it's consequential for them to decide among the various squabbling experts that they're going to meet. This is the sort of activity in the public sphere that keeps changing, so it's really difficult to figure out how to locate a version of the public sphere you can talk in. That becomes harder, or more complicated maybe, not harder. Yeah, these are questions, I think, that are going to be with us for quite a while.

Chris: Absolutely. I want to turn now to the work of the archive and its role in public writing. Two of our contributors to this issue are working with archives in public writing. Lauren Obermark and her students are archiving stories from Ferguson, Missouri, and Risa Applegarth is working with the archives of the Children's Peace Statue Project in New Mexico. Your widely-cited chapter, "Claiming the Archive for Rhetoric and Composition," points to the gifts of the archive. I was wondering if you might explore the types of gifts that the archive might have for teachers of public writing and how teachers of public writing might also pursue archival work as part of their own work.

Susan: Definitely. There's one pretty technical issue. I've been working with a communications scholar, Nathan Stormer, who does work on rhetoric of medicine, for a collection on teacher directions for rhetorics of health and medicine, and we are talking about the need for continued historic work in this field. The collection is just out from Routledge, edited by Lisa Meloncon and Blake Scott, titled *Research Methodologies in the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine.*

When I started work on *Out of the Dead House* in 1995, the archives were utterly open. It didn't matter what use you were going to make of this material. If you weren't dealing with a living person, then all bets were off. I mean, legally, at that point, dead people in the United States had no privacy rights. So, I'm looking through the requests that a woman physician made to her dean about public autopsies of her reproductive organs. I'm thinking, man, I don't feel quite comfortable citing the deceased person by name, but I have a point to make. I asked the archivist, and she's like, "Sure. No prob." [Laughs]

And then, HIPPA happened. And in one of the earliest iterations of HIPPA, dead people did have privacy rights. All dead people had privacy rights forever on any medical information that concerned them. The only way a scholar could look at those documents would be if they were dis-identified, which meant that 20 separate pieces of

information had to be eliminated from them. You may have heard stories about this from other places.This meant that a lot of scholars in the rhetoric of medicine and health who normally would have included an archival piece in their research suddenly found the archive closed to them, because for the archive there is no pay off in having a researcher there. All that can come to them is a privacy lawsuit under HIPPA. HIPPA relaxed these rules in 2013. It is now possible to write pretty freely about anybody up to the end of the Civil War, which is not nothing, and other possibilities exist.

All of this is a long example of how it becomes clearer every year how political the constitution of the archive is. This is kind of a truism in archival studies and Composition and Rhetoric. And this means that unless scholars who have commitments to social movements and the possibility of public discourse on the part of people who are marginalized and disenfranchised help create an archive, those archives will not exist.

There are also archivists who very carefully collected the most ephemeral and difficult documents of the Occupy actions. Then there are technical problems that need to be solved about how to archive the enormous amount of digital information, and once archived how it can possibly be sorted through in the way that we're used to sorting through the acid free boxes.

So, in our chapter, Nathan and I talk about the need to think about historiographic methods in the present and using the methods of historiography to study issues of, in this case, health and medical rhetoric right now. And we also talk about the need to ground that study and studies of historical moments in the history of medicine. I think that similar arguments could be made for what needs to happen with the rhetoric of public discourse.

There are organizations in every city that have, if anything, cardboard boxes of their old, frustratingly incomplete meeting minutes that can teach us a whole lot about how a group of people organized or associated themselves and formed a little public space, or a big public space, and were able to succeed or not succeed in addressing some problem they faced, even if that problem was just “we need a place to go at night.” [Laughs]

Chris: What about involving students in this process? How might work in archives of public rhetoric enable students to understand some of the elements of public rhetoric we’ve been talking about, from its kairos to the life cycles of particular movements? How might involving students in archival work on public discourse and rhetoric sponsor their rhetorical agency?

Susan: I’ve seen it work in this way, and not necessarily with just textural archives. A student of mine, again in the Ancient Rhetoric class, produced a website on Furness buildings in re-gentrifying neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Furness was a really, really important Philadelphia architect. There are buildings of his with check cashing signs on them, and then there are other buildings that developers have designs on, and they're not designs for community centers, believe me.

That was a remarkable project. The student had to learn something about the history of architecture, since that wasn't her field or her interest, and so she went and talked to people and got collaborators, and did what we would do if we faced a project like that. But mostly, she felt that these buildings that she passed every day suddenly became narratable stories, and that she had as much to tell about them as anyone. I think that's not enough, but that's something.

Chris: Thinking about your student’s project makes me think about the relationship between aesthetics and public space, and I wanted to ask you about the relationship you see between aesthetics and public writing. In particular, I wanted to touch upon your work with literary genres and public discourse, I’m thinking of your work in *Sweet Reason: Rhetoric and the Discourses of Modernity*, where you explore narration, along with language and action, as the key terms for “intersubjective rhetoric” (4), your work in *Dialectics of Reason*, where you examine the public impact of literary texts, and your current work on literary genres and rhetorical genres in Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy.* Given the historical clash between Literature and Composition, do you see aesthetics and literary genres expanding our understanding of public writing?

Susan: Well, I think students don't make these distinctions in the way we do. If you have students who are doing their own writing, it's much more likely your students are writing poetry and short stories than they're writing medical papers or grant proposals. [Laughs]

There's that question, the question of actual literary genres, and their attraction, which I think is pretty perennial and has not waned for students and for many people who are teaching in this field. But I'm also thinking of Deborah Brandt’s new book, *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy.* It’s such an amazing book! She shows that people who are doing large, large amounts of writing under pretty serious institutional constraints for their jobs still engage those writing tasks aesthetically, that they want it to sound a certain way, look a certain way.

I think we don't do ourselves any favors by saying that choices of genre are entirely open to students except for literary genres, which they may not touch, which are not our business, which are adequately covered by our colleagues in other places, or by excluding considerations of how a text satisfies aesthetic desires as well as other kinds of desires. And aesthetic desires aren't apolitical desires, by any means. We do ourselves no favor by saying these are not questions for us, that we are not going to worry about them. Doesn't mean everybody has to worry about them, doesn't mean that every class or every student has to take them on, but there is certainly, I think, a lot to be gained by keeping them alive as possibilities.

Chris: I was wondering if you might reflect upon your own work as work that is public writing, that has both public and scholarly agency. I'm thinking about the role of the researcher, the role of those of us who are in Composition and Rhetoric as people who are engaging publics. What roles might, or should, we play in public discourse?

Susan: The projects that I've undertaken as writing projects, I have to say, I generally did not undertake in order to move the field in a certain way. I undertook them because there was a problem I wanted to think about, a problem that I wanted to think about for a long time, and that I wanted to think about it in a form that gave me space to move around in. The first public, for me, is the public of my colleagues. If I wanted to affect that public in any way, it was to open possibilities for our field to show that there are certain kinds of writing, certain kinds of research, that might look to be not real comp stuff or something, but they kind of were. Essays on dark matter, and you know, poems written by women physicians.

I wanted to open those possibilities up. As I begin to see the pattern that my work has taken over the years, I see that there's just a constant interest in this question of expert discourse and public consequence. I think that's a good question for somebody in a university. It's not the only question, but a good question for somebody in a university to be fussing over, because here we are, an institution that sees itself as producing expert knowledge and that also often, especially in public universities, sees itself engaged with public questions.

Those are the things that come to mind in answer to that question. Mostly, for me, boredom is the enemy, and I don't want to bore myself with my work. I have been really successful at avoiding that.

Chris: Well, you've certainly keep and continue to keep your readers interested!

Susan: It's really moving to hear that. Thank you very much.

Chris: This brings me back to the question of engagement and stamina in teaching public writing. This question is inspired by *Our Bodies, Ourselves, the Politics of Writing*. I'm fascinated by how the work of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective took on a sense of melancholy because of the political backlash. I think a lot of us who are teaching public writing right now are thinking about this, especially given the reappearance of a deep rhetoric of suspicion of higher education and the appearance of initiatives like keeping watch-lists of professors. Looking at "Rogue Cops" from our current vantage point, do you see the work of public writing teachers taking on a melancholy tone?

Susan: Well, you know what Brecht said, he who laughs has not yet heard the terrible tidings. I don't think there's a lot of reason for anybody to be happy with the public situation right now. It was kind of a shock to me when, after not having looked at "Rogue Cops" in decades, absolutely decades, I realized that the issues that I was engaging are still completely unresolved. We still have no national agreement or parameters on what kind of healthcare system is appropriate. Police misconduct, especially in African American communities, but also other communities of color, has had its ups and downs, but it has not resolved as an issue. That is sobering. That is sobering.

I've talked to a fair number of people who describe themselves as depressed or tired at this moment. Maybe it's just an artifact of having a lot more time now that I'm retired, and not having just finished grading, like you probably have, 150 papers or something like that. I find lots of reasons to be pissed off right now, but I'm not especially melancholy.

Melancholy implies something lost that's profoundly lost. Burton defines it as fear and sadness without a clear reason. Well, we've got a pretty clear reason. And that kind of semi-pleasant, semi-despondent melancholy, that's not the mood I feel. Also, it seems to me that the aftermath of this election has led to a kind of granular level of engagement that I didn't see after the 2008 or 2012 election. The 2008 election involved a lot of mobilization of people who hadn't been politically active, and that was like water going through a sieve. There was no structure to hold it.

There was also no popular movement around the Clinton healthcare proposals. There were no street demonstrations. Nobody was demanding that it happen. It was a sort of astroturf-y event. I don't see that right now. I see 250 people that are going to meetings that are variously labeled, Indivisible, The Resistance, or What's Next? in

my neighborhood in Philadelphia. I mean, not even in the whole city, just in the northwest quadrant.

I went with a group of young people and their moms to the women's march, and as often happens at these big political events, I was so far from the rally that I could not hear the speeches at all. I saw the news, and I said, “What, they had bleachers? I never saw bleachers.” [Laughs] Many of the young women who were in the Air B&B house, a choice we never would have thought of back in the day, had listened to four hours of those speeches. The little snippets I caught were not telling me something brand new, but for them, that was their political education. They were enlightened and engaged by that information.

We've had much, much better rhetorical situations as progressive people engaged in a public sphere over the last decade. We don't do any good by pretending things are okay, because they're not. But, I don't think we've ever had the same level of grassroots self-organizing, seeking sustainable forms, that I'm seeing right now. That makes me a lot more hopeful than melancholy. Sometimes I get tired. I rest, and I come back. What else are you going to do? So, I'm learning new rhetorical genres like the legislative alert. There are plenty of new forms out there, and it would be a sovereign cure for melancholy to investigate, to experiment with, to modify, to figure out how to use them in a classroom, how to study them in a classroom. We’re not going to be happy, but we're not going to be bored, and we'll learn stuff. We'll definitely learn stuff.

Chris: I can’t think of a more inspiring note to conclude on. I've been thinking a lot lately about an idea Judith Butler takes up towards the end of her book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*—an idea from Adorno about living a good life in a bad life as a form of ethical subjectivity. Within a political system that sometimes exploits, harms, even kills, is it possible to craft a good life? Your answer gives me hope that there definitely is that possibility.

Before we conclude, I wanted to ask you if there is some part of your work on public rhetoric that we have missed, something you would like to address further.

Susan: Well, there are all the things I did wrong in “Rogue Cops.”

Chris: I would love to hear your thoughts on that!

Susan: I treated the student writer as an isolated figure. I didn't talk about all the other things that were going on around him that made writing his complaint have some efficacy. It wasn't just because it was a good piece of writing. It wasn't just because we had that “tell us about the time your life was in danger” assignment in basic writing then. There's a similar issue where I fell into the never-ending problem with presidential rhetoric, treating Clinton as a lone rhetor and not taking into account more of the contextual situation around him. Then on the other hand, I wanted to get this written while it was still an issue.

Nobody would do those things today. Nobody would write about a student text, for one thing, without contacting the student, which never occurred to me; or, for another thing, without thinking a lot about the whole situation within which that text became consequential, and the kinds of associations and collaborations that it spoke of. We really learned something since then. That's a good thing because we need to keep learning.

Notes

1. This image will remind readers of a series of television advertisements from 1993 and 1994 that were funded by the Coalition for Health Care Choices in opposition to the Clinton health care plan and became known as the Harry and Louise advertisements. In an interesting about face, the same actors then appeared in a political advertisement supporting President Obama’s Healthcare Refore Act in 2009. Thanks to Brian Bailie, interviews editor at *Composition Forum*, for reminding me of these ads. (Return to text.)

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