

CONTENTS

Foreword

Patricia Roberts-Miller xi

Acknowledgments

Daniel P. Richards xiii

Introduction: The Politics, Praxis, and Performativity of Teacher Neutrality

Daniel P. Richards 3

SECTION I: POLITICS

1. The Limits of Neutrality: How New Graduate Instructors Negotiate Politics, Race, and Ideology in the Composition Classroom

Meaghan Brewer 27

2. Living in Contradiction: Translingual Writing Pedagogies and the Two-Year College

Jason C. Evans 41

3. Walking the Narrow Ridge: When Performing Neutrality Isn't an Option in the Vocation of the Christian Professor

Jessica Clements 55

4. Contingent Faculty, Student Evaluation, and Pedagogical Neutrality

Robert Samuels 71

5. The Non-Controversy and Controversy of Neutrality:
A Conversation with John Trimbur

Daniel P. Richards 83

SECTION II: PRAXIS

6. Strangers on Their Own Campus: Listening across Difference in Qualitative Research

Kelly Blewett, with Tyler S. 99

7. Believing Critically: Teaching Critical Thinking through the Conversion Narrative
Christopher Michael Brown 113
8. Ideology through Process and Slow-Start Pedagogy: Co-Constructing the Path of Least Resistance in the Social Justice Writing Classroom
Lauren F. Lichty and Karen Rosenberg 127
9. Transparency as a Defense-Less Act: Shining Light on Emerging Ideologies in an Activist Writing and Research Course
Heather Fester 143
10. It Depends on the Context: Cultural Competencies in First-Year English
Mara Holt 162
11. The *Métis* of Reliability: Using the *Framework for Success* to Aid the Performance of Neutrality within Writing Assessment
Tristan Abbott 176
12. Massive Open Ideology: Ideological Neutrality in Arizona State's Composition MOOCs
Adam Pacton 191

SECTION III: PERFORMATIVITY

13. Encounters with Friction: Engaging Resistance through Strategic Neutrality
Romeo García and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa 207
14. Turning Resistances into Engagement
Erika Johnson and Tawny LeBouef Tullia 221
15. Who Is Afraid of Neutrality? Performativity, Resignification, and the Jena Six in the Composition Classroom
David P. Stubblefield and Chad Chisholm 236
16. Moving from Transparent to Translucent Pedagogy
Jennifer Thomas and Allison L. Rowland 252

SECTION IV: CONCLUSION

17. Full Disclosure / Now What?

Daniel P. Richards 269

About the Authors 283

Index 287

Introduction

THE POLITICS, PRAXIS, AND PERFORMATIVITY OF TEACHER NEUTRALITY

Daniel P. Richards

Now let us turn to the terms of repulsion.

—Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*

THE SPECTER OF NEUTRALITY

Before beginning in earnest, let's clear the air: I agree that the phrase "teacher neutrality" is quite terrible—in so many ways.

And so does the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), as evidenced in their 2007 report "Freedom in the Classroom" (Finkin et al. 2007). The public-facing report begins with the following preamble:

The 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* affirms that "teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject." This affirmation was meant to codify understandings of academic freedom commonly accepted in 1940. In recent years these understandings have become controversial. Private groups have sought to regulate classroom instruction, advocating the adoption of statutes that would prohibit teachers from challenging deeply held student beliefs or that would require professors to maintain "diversity" or "balance" in their teaching. (54)¹

Not much has changed since 2007. If anything, the outside efforts to regulate have increased exponentially and in more fervent and well-funded ways. As a response to these outside forces trying to regulate the "rights" held by the professoriate, the writers of the report accumulate, distill, and address four contemporary criticisms levied at the professoriate pertaining to how academic freedom is allegedly being abused in the classroom: first, instructors indoctrinate rather than educate; second, instructors unfairly present or don't present conflicting views;

third, instructors are hostile to particular social or religious views; and fourth, instructors interject irrelevant material in courses not related to the subject. On the second criticism, which has to do with exhibiting a proper amount of “balance,” the writers of the report have the following words:

To urge that instruction be “balanced” is to urge that an instructor’s discretion about what to teach be restricted. But the nature of this proposed restriction, when carefully considered, is fatally ambiguous. Stated most abstractly, the charge of lack of balance evokes a seeming ideal of neutrality. The notion appears to be that an instructor should impartially engage all potentially relevant points of view. But this ideal is chimerical. No coherent principle of neutrality would require an instructor in a class on constitutional democracy to offer equal time to “competing” visions of communist totalitarianism or Nazi fascism. There is always a potentially infinite number of competing perspectives that can arguably be deemed relevant to an instructor’s subject or perspective, whatever that subject or perspective might be. It follows that the very idea of balance and neutrality, stated in the abstract, is close to incoherent. (Finkin et al. 2007, 56–57)

So, perhaps I spoke too soon: the AAUP *doesn’t* agree with my assessment that teacher neutrality is a “terrible” phrase. No, it’s more damning than that: its ideals are “chimerical,” its conceptualizations nearly “incoherent.”

And yet, despite our efforts to support academic freedom, that which is apparently chimerical and incoherent continues to gain steam, gaining favor among students and lobbyists alike. How is it that within the same classroom the individual behind the lectern dismisses neutrality as an impossible feat and a student not ten feet away expects it? Perhaps neutrality as a principle or practice or concept is not so chimerical or incoherent, as the rhetorical framing by conservative media outlets seems to make its supposed lack very real and very clear and very urgent. Is it possible, despite our probable aversion to the “principle of neutrality,” that we—collectively, in the humanities, as the professoriate valuing academic freedom—could do a better job at articulating our principles of non-neutrality? Might we—more narrowly, those in rhetoric and composition—make our own stances less chimerical and incoherent? Might we need to explore in more depth and with more nuance the assumptions we make about the nature and purpose of higher education and our role within it when we dismiss the increasingly pervasive and popular tropes of teacher neutrality?

It might be that teacher neutrality as a phrase or concept is terrible and chimerical and incoherent. But it also might be the case that we need a book on this very idea.

A LACK OF RHETORICAL STASIS

Historically, *neutral* as an adjective emerged as a descriptor for those who were not taking sides in an agonistic political conflict or war²—and in large part, this remains the case today. “Neutrality,” as a state of being, has strong connotations with indifference and apathy³ as well as a history of being a concept abused by those in power to establish dominant ideological frameworks as natural, innocent, or apolitical (Anderson 1997; Sullivan and Porter 1997). It seems that, on the surface, a term—*neutrality*—that denotes, intentionally or unwittingly, a position of passivity or disinterest or dispassion or aloofness or even naïveté ought to have no place in a profession—university teaching—that claims to overcome these very things. And yet, there the phrase is. *Here* it is, explicitly and implicitly in our spaces of learning and in the public discourse on higher education.

So, what do people really mean when they say they expect teachers or the institutions of higher education that house them to be “neutral”? Are those that use this language part of one of the dominant classes seeking to maintain order, the status quo? And if so, is it intentional? Or do they have a narrower scope of politics, one that focuses on the personal and performative inflections of partisanship—our buttons, our bumper stickers, our cynical intonations—and excludes the larger socio-political apparatus of higher education that maintains a certain, unique neoliberal ethic built on the ever-fading palimpsest of liberal humanism? Or even still are they recalling a mythic archetype of the Western intellectual tradition that is eternally and absent-mindedly committed to the scientific method above all else, particularly the *ad hominem* vitriol of electoral discourse? Or, finally, are they individuals who just want the skills to succeed in life and want all the agents of education around them to impart these skills without consistently bringing up every Tuesday and Thursday morning the very news stories these individuals intentionally blind themselves to? To these wordy questions, we might respond with a resounding *yes*, most likely to all of the above. To paraphrase Patricia Roberts-Miller (2004, 142) in her work on argument and conflict in the composition classroom, when it comes to conversations about politics in the writing classroom, not everyone means the same thing when they use the term *neutrality*.

And that’s really the problem, isn’t it? The decided lack of rhetorical stasis on this topic, this phrase, particularly between humanities professors who handily dismiss the very notion of neutrality as an epistemic impossibility and seemingly everyone else—parents, incoming students, politicians, media, and our colleagues in the sciences—who insists that

it does exist, or at least ought to? While it is tempting to use this contrast as an opportunity to incorporate the work of Thomas Kuhn and Sarah Ahmed and Randall Collins and use their collective positions on the impossibility of science, self, and sociology, respectively, to be anything but the material exertion of relational power as a springboard into a rigorous epistemological discussion, what I am more interested in pursuing at this point and time is how we as teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition can bring about and help facilitate some semblance of rhetorical stasis with the concept and usage of teacher neutrality.

For, while we may scoff and confidently throw theory texts at such a suggestion, the fact of the matter is that teacher neutrality is very much a real, felt thing that shapes the way our students, our administrators, our judges,⁴ the media,⁵ and politicians⁶ understand higher education. Circulated widely on social media are popular articles titled, “The Teacher’s Great Challenge: Staying Neutral with Students during a Contentious Election” (Strauss 2012), “When Do Teachers Stay Neutral?” (Anti-Defamation League 2017), and “Teaching Trump” (Miller 2016). Our insistent belief in the impossibility of neutrality does not preclude our colleagues in other departments or the public from believing otherwise, and doubling down might not be very helpful. To what extent has overwhelming consensus on the impossibility of neutrality in our field stifled conversations with these bodies and entities? How can stepping back and unpacking for others why we believe what we believe, and what our assumptions about higher education are in relation to these positions (and why), open up pathways for conversations with others with a stake in higher education and potentially put us in positions to serve as public intellectuals?⁷ We, the contributors in this collection, argue—albeit to varying degrees—that in order to address any and all of these questions, we must first pursue a more nuanced level of understanding of what we in the field of rhetoric and composition mean ourselves when we use, prop up, or critique some variation of the phrase “teacher neutrality,” and, just as important, the assumptions and implied arguments we make about the purpose and nature of institutions of higher education in the United States (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985; Berlin 1996); the role of the teacher in this mission (Bizzell 2001; Freire 1973; Shor 1992; Shor and Freire 1987); and the degree and type of agency students have in this process when we use this language (Cushman 1996, 1999). In seeking a more nuanced level of understanding in our language of “neutrality,” we might be better able to understand and build dialogic connections with the various stakeholders of higher education in the United States, including, of course,

our students, and particularly build bridges with what *they mean* when they use the phrase *teacher neutrality* or even the term *neutrality* generally in reference to educational bodies and their missions.

Unpacking what we in the field understand *neutrality* to mean or not mean in a teaching context is a tall task, to be sure, considering its connections and implications to much larger, evergreen conversations in our field, namely student resistance (Anderson 1997; Atwood 1994; Boyd 1999; Phelps 1991; Trimbur 2001; Welsh 2001), institutional critique (Olson and Gale 1991; Sullivan and Porter 1997), disclosure of identity (Baillif 1997; Elliot 1996; Patterson 2016), bodily and discursive performativity (Butler 2000; Kopelson 2003), social justice and civic action (Bizzell 1992; Delpit 1988; Fishman and Parkinson 1996), political theory (Jones 1996), writing assessment (Inoue 2015), epistemologies of writing (Bazerman 1988; Levy 2005), and curriculum design (Lindquist 2004; Welch 1987). We must also consider our own political diversity on an individual level as well as the vastly different contexts, institutions, regions, and student populations we find ourselves working in and with. As such we might find that the problem of rhetorical stasis extends far beyond just the term *neutrality* (although that is front and center in this collection) to include even more foundational differences in just what we mean when we utter innocuous descriptors like “political” or “skills” or charged academic nomenclature like “ideological.”

THE THREE ARMS OF TEACHER NEUTRALITY

To illustrate, the field of rhetoric and composition, whether in a strain of critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Giroux 1988), pragmatism (Seitz 2002), or somewhere in between (Durst 1999), ubiquitously acknowledges that all teaching is ideological regardless of its political bent; one cannot simply stand outside of ideology and politics, especially in facilitating educational processes. As James Berlin (1988) arranges it, “a way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated with ideology, and a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed” (490). From the teacher-student power dynamic, to the “subtle creep” of course texts (Welch 1987), to the assessment metrics, to the facilitation of discussion: where there is language, power, and choice, there is rhetoric, and where there is rhetoric, ideology. And if ideology is everywhere, then neutrality is nowhere—for, the two, in these constructions, cannot mutually coexist. From these standpoints teacher neutrality as a phrase, concept, or epistemic position is impossible because it stems from “false”

assumptions about how politics work—and what politics means—and how educational institutions operate as power structures.

Perhaps the most common and direct indictment on the notion of educational neutrality at the institutional level comes from the work of Paulo Freire. Richard Shaull, writing in the preface⁸ of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), states confidently—in echoing the Brazilian progenitor of critical pedagogy himself—that

there is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaull 1970, 15)

Shaull's either-or characterization not-so-subtly belies the notion—and uses a radical educator to do so—that there simply is no such thing as a *neutral* “process of schooling” (Giroux 1981). Demanding uncritical conformity into the status quo or providing critical power tools to enact social change are similar tasks; they just serve different rulers. So, whether a pedagogy focuses on cultivating student-centered skills, facilitating critical thinking, developing habits of mind, or enacting democratic participation, underlying each and every teaching praxis is a way of understanding the world and, in Shaull's Freirean framework, either functions institutionally to maintain the status quo—most likely behind some coy guise of “neutrality”—or actively change in the system. Such sentiments, I argue, have reached truism status in the field of rhetoric and composition, very much leading to a contemptuous status of the very term *neutrality*, with many of us likely seeing the striving for neutrality in teaching as a futile endeavor at best, and oppressive at worst, as it can never be achieved. This is because neutrality, from rhetorical standpoints, particularly the ones emerging out of first-wave critical pedagogy frameworks, is coded to mean “apolitical,” and not in the way of being apathetic about the outcomes of elections or maintaining a disinterest in the daily news, but in the way of having no motive or agenda. A neutral educational process is impossible because no physical body or speech act or curriculum exists outside of political ecologies and the motives and agendas that power their circulation. Claiming to have no agenda does not preclude one from unwittingly participating in education processes as mechanisms for social control—this was crux of Freire's arguments and the driving force behind his liberatory project. So, and rightfully so, healthy amounts of skepticism are directed towards those claiming their

educational goals to be “apolitical.” In this way, neutrality, pertaining to educational processes or institutions, has become somewhat of a “devil term,”⁹ to use the phraseology of Richard M. Weaver from his book *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953): a term so connoted with naïveté and myth that it is inescapably, unquestionably negative, suspect, and even repulsive in both usage and application.

Now, while Shaull was concerned with highlighting the practical value and potential overlaps of Freire’s work for the late-twentieth-century American educator, even for those who find themselves teaching predominantly young middle-class students, Freire was more careful, writing, mere pages later, that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* “will probably arouse negative reactions in a number of readers . . . Accordingly, this admittedly tentative work is for radicals” (21). Freire was right about negative reactions. But, in one of the most widely read critiques of radical cultural leftism in the scholarship on the teaching of writing, much of which found kinship with Freirean thinking and first-wave critical pedagogy, we see Maxine Hairston take issue not with the notion that education is inherently non-neutral but with the *degree* to which we engage with, focus on, or disclose these ideologies to others—who were, most importantly for Hairston, our students as well as those outside our profession gauging our legitimacy and growth. Hairston’s 1992 article, “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” contains a contention that writing courses “should not be *for* anything or *about* anything other than writing itself, and how one uses it to learn and think and communicate” (79), for to do otherwise would be to undermine the growth of our field and operate outside of our subject-matter expertise. The article can be—and was—read as advocating some semblance of skills-based neutrality as a guiding conceptual model of teaching praxis and was critiqued accordingly.¹⁰ The “new model” of composition Hairston was critiquing, mainly from what she calls the radical cultural left, “puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student [and] envisions required writing courses as vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops designed to build students’ confidence and competence” (80). Hairston was not advocating the idea or premise of apolitical teaching, but was merely concerned with the fact that our priorities—the very ones that helped establish rhetoric and composition as a distinct discipline—were being reordered by radicals. Hairston sought to get overt political instruction out of the classroom lest the field be overtaken by radical leftists, for the sake of our own discipline, yes, but also and moreover because she

thought that a liberal ethic of listening and attentiveness to the diversity of lived experience came through the acts of writing and reading and sharing themselves. Her critique was therefore not against liberalism, for as she writes, “as educators of good will, we shouldn’t even have to mention our anger about racism and sexism in society—that’s a given, as is our commitment to work to overcome it” (88), and she was not so naïve as to think that the writing-based writing classroom itself was not an ideological decision. So, while the article left room for critique based on the notion that even those who claim to just “teach writing skills” are still extolling the virtues embedded within writing (Duffy 2017), the critique would have been misguided since it was precisely the politics of writing instruction—writing, sharing, listening, reading, connecting, understanding, empathizing—that were sufficient enough for what we do. Hairston was not claiming that our institutions were or ought to be neutral in the face of oppression, nor was she claiming that her ideas were not ineluctably political; she was concerned with the direction things were headed in our course goals and curricular designs and wanted to ensure that attending to the inescapable political power of the mere act of writing was not set aside to cater to radical leftist ideologues, and, also, that the way we look through the eyes of others outside the discipline remains positive and in good faith.

Hairston’s essay helped—albeit in an overlooked way, in my estimation—drive a wedge between the reality of non-neutrality in educational institutions and the decisions we as teachers make in how we structure our classrooms and curricula. When she writes that “those who want to bring their ideology into the classroom argue that since any classroom is necessarily political, the teacher might as well make it openly political and ideological” (88), we see an attempt to pour salt on a slippery slope with the arguments we make about our own curricula stemming from our belief in the impossibility of institutional neutrality. Circling back to our trope of rhetorical stasis, we can see a case made for a clearer separation between what people might mean when they hint at *institutional* versus *curricular* neutrality, indeed between what we think about an institution and how we choose to dwell within it.

While we as a field may have reached consensus in the inescapably political nature of higher education, not everyone has, or at least not in the same way. What we tend to see is the *inverse* or *opposite* of ourselves. The inverse is the students who come expecting teachers to be beacons of neutrality. Now, our students are not dumb—they know we have politics, they know we have preferences on who wins presidential elections. One brief glance at our social media postings or the back bumpers of

our Hyundai Elantras will indicate as much. So, *neutrality* isn't really the right word in this context so much as it might be *fairness* (or *unbiased* or *impartial*) but the expectation is undergirded by some attempt on the part of the individual professor towards neutrality. Our students, many of them coming directly from a public educational setting more restricted¹¹ in terms of teacher disclosure, might think it inappropriate or unfair to show clear favor towards a candidate or for a policy.

But we also see the opposite: students who perceive, as we do, institutions of higher education as inescapably non-neutral, but under the premise that the institutions were constructed and continue to operate as potentially oppressive sites of liberal indoctrination and political recruitment. These students—and parents—might empathize with the more vocal conservative advocacy groups (like Turning Point USA) and online publications focused on covering campus politics (like *Campus Reform*), finding community and a means of relating to others about what it can feel like to be a conservative, fiscal or cultural, on American university campuses. The outward disclosure of a liberal professor's politics—certainly not an uncommon happenstance—is alienating and happens enough times for conservative students to begin to paint a mental landscape of the campus as a place not designed or run by those who think or act like them. This can lead to a distinct, often adversarial or personal form of student resistance, where students are not protesting the biased coverage of trickle-down economics but the bodies and choices of the professors themselves—publicly displaying our faces for spectacle.

In addition to the institutional and the curricular, then, there is a third arm of neutrality: it is us. Our bodies. Our words. Our dress. Our disclosures. Our intonations. We all generate student resistance in some way (and, if we're being honest, probably more so than other disciplines, because is there a course more resisted in and of itself than first-year writing?), but it would be unethical to state that we all experience resistance equally or for the same reasons (Condit 1996; Elliot 1996; Karamcheti 1995). This was the challenge Karen Kopelson was facing when she wrote her 2003 article, "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, the Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered as a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance": that her mere presence, her mere appearance gets coded politically and sounds off an alarm in the minds of those surveilling political behavior. Before even facilitating a discussion or turning a page, the "critical" pedagogical objectives are rendered ineffective, even counterproductive (118). To assuage such resistance, Kopelson sought to co-opt neutrality, the very cornerstone of elitist

and exclusionary practices of institutional oppression (Ng 1997), in a performative way to serve her own “cunning” purposes to play with the expectations of students:

For the marginalized teacher . . . the performance of the very neutrality that students expect from their (composition) instructors, and from education more generally, can become a rhetorically savvy, politically responsive and responsible pedagogical tactic that actually enhances students’ engagement with difference and that minimizes their resistance to difference in the process. (Kopelson 2003, 118)

Whereas Hairston merely hinted at performing some sense of political deprioritization, Kopelson argues that those teaching along the margins, ironically, cunningly, try to perform the exact ideology that marginalizes for the “greater good” of student engagement with diversity. The performance of neutrality for Kopelson offered a productive, pragmatic disconnect between an individual’s beliefs and their outward perceptions, for, as Kopelson also affirms, neutrality “is never a stance that believes in or celebrates its own legitimacy but, rather, feigns itself, *perverts* itself, in the service of other—disturbing and disruptive—goals” (123).¹² Stated differently: neutrality is an exercise in the “rhetoric of cunning,” which, drawing from Kenneth Burke, “feigns one purpose in the pursuit of an eventual and seemingly opposed goal” (131); it is, in exemplifying the Greek rhetorical concept of *mêtis*, in which one refuses to fight an opponent head-on, an art of redirection; it is, finally, not an epistemic statement about the viability of neutrality but a performative, metaphorical framework for behavior.

THE AIMS OF THE BOOK

Alright. So, now what? Is it enough to just dismiss the phrase *teacher neutrality* and move on? What do we *do* with these institutional, curricular, and performative frameworks of neutrality? Are they sufficient enough to help us respond to our contemporary moment? Are they dynamic enough to respond to the challenges of our current campus climates? Are they adaptive enough to bring others into conversation? Are they nuanced enough to help us reach outward to public stakeholders, to account for the vast array of difference in our daily experiences as educators of all types of students at all types of institutions? How do our collective and individual beliefs about neutrality color our day-to-day work as teachers and reveal the assumptions and ideologies to which we are so beholden? And are those assumptions shared with those around us? The field’s attunements to authority, power, and resistance have

accomplished the task of revealing that neutrality is an epistemic impossibility and a problematic holdover from a modernist past that perhaps we never had. But does Freire's oft-cited framing on the inherent non-neutrality of educational processes and Shaul's insistence that it translates to American educational milieus help us in our current contexts and conversations? Our current political climates, where we might hear partisan conversations in our campus Starbucks about just who are the "oppressed," the "dispossessed" subjects maintained through a "culture of silence" on campus? Are we willing, as Patricia Bizzell was in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* (1992), to part ways with Freirean tenets, specifically ones that oversimplify or offer a reductive vision of our practice? I'm drawn particularly to the tickling imagery that ends one of Ann George's (2001) chapters on critical pedagogy:

In an interview with Gary Olson, Freire notes the complicated position of the radical writing instructor who stands with one foot in the system, the present, today's reality, and the other foot outside the system, in the future, in utopia: "This is why it is so difficult . . . for us to walk: we have to walk like this. [With playful smile, Freire begins to waddle across the room.] Life is like this. This is reality and history." (109)

I am deeply enamored with the visual of Freire "waddling" across a room. I think it is because it humanizes him and colors him with eccentric charm. I think it is also, more seriously, because it adds a necessarily physical and mental vision of struggle and complexity to the lives of teachers cognizant of the double bind between having power and undermining it, or more pertinently: of disbelieving in neutrality (left foot) while performing a job where the public expects it of you (right foot). It is not the intention of this collection to critique Freire and his work—the limits of critical pedagogy have been explored at length (Seitz 2002, 2004; Thelin 2005). Nor is it the intention of this collection to explore further the realm of the left foot planted in the utopic future envisioned by critical pedagogy proponents. Rather, in repositioning or redirecting Freire's waddle slightly, this collection admonishes teachers of writing to explore further and more fully and honestly the ramifications of a ubiquitous position of non-neutrality—and the authors and texts we use to justify such a position—against a larger social scene that still believes in and expects neutrality in education.

For just as terrible though a term *neutrality* is, so too is *non-neutrality*. Until accompanied with a public-facing vision and articulation of how it connects to the public understanding of education in relation to the larger, and often misunderstood, nature of academic freedom, how useful is the statement of non-neutrality? Have we done a good enough job

in connecting our theoretical beliefs to the educational situation as envisioned and experienced by the student? While we as a field might have consensus in the belief that there simply is no teaching without ideology, indeed that ideology is inherently inescapable, there is ample room for conversation about the *degrees to which* we make our commitments and political affiliations apparent and what role these various approaches play in the larger conversation of public perception of higher education and, more urgently, the changing nature and forms of student resistance in our current sociopolitical moment. The problematic neutral versus non-neutral paradigm fails because it does not account for the situational inflections that vary across spaces and populations and might not be refined enough to help facilitate meaningful conversations with those who would genuinely like to have them.

In light of this exigence, this collection aims to provide scholars, teachers, and students in the field of rhetoric and composition with the first edited collection that focuses exclusively on the problematic, contentious, and (always) timely concept of “teacher neutrality.” The volume maintains specific emphasis on the practical (im)possibilities of neutrality in the teaching of writing and rhetoric, the deployment of “neutrality” as a political motif in the public discourse shaping policy in higher education, and the performativity of individual instructors in a variety of different institutional contexts. In doing so, this collection provides readers with:

- More *clarity* on the contours around defining *neutrality*.
- More *depth* in understanding how neutrality operates differently in various institutional settings (e.g., two-year-college [TYC] writing instruction versus R1 schools’ teacher-training, and graduate-student versus tenure-track positionality).
- More *nuance* in the levels and degrees of neutrality in teaching (i.e., the implications of abiding by neoliberal assessment practices versus the implications of supporting a specific candidate with a button on a lapel).

Rather than act as a polemic for teacher neutrality, or an admonishment against it, this collection consists of sixteen chapters and an interview that make wide-ranging arguments about *neutrality* as a concept or praxis that hinders or helps aspects of the teaching of writing and rhetoric. Given Irvin Peckham’s assertion that college composition is “fundamentally a middle-class enterprise” (2010), the strength of the collection resides in the much-needed diversity of ranks (tenure-track, GTAs, lecturers), institutional contexts (R1, TYC, religious), and subject positions (class, race, gender, age) covered in the text. Neutrality, or its inverse, is

inextricably connected to privilege, so to have those in tenured positions at R1 schools have sole possession of a conversation that permeates, often in threatening ways, all of our lives would be inappropriate.

The collection insists that while the field of rhetoric and composition by and large rejects the very concept of teaching writing and rhetoric “neutrally”—indeed, Berlin’s (1988) insistence that rhetoric *itself* is ideological is widely heeded—there is still more work that needs to be done, specifically as it pertains to more public work. This work includes thinking more about the implications of non-neutrality in our contemporary postsecondary educational and political moment, better communicating our non-neutral pedagogical theories to public stakeholders, better understanding our students’ expectations of our neutral positionality, and better understanding of contexts in which neutrality—performed or not—is desired and effective. Ultimately, our field’s theoretical allegiance to non-neutrality is being (and I argue, *should* be) tested in real, practical ways. To quote Ann George (2001) again, we might have strong theoretical pedagogical beliefs and allegiances but when class starts, “things get real” (94). This collection explores just such “real” situations as they pertain to neutrality in the institutional, curricular, and lived aspects of our work—framed, in turn, as the *politics*, *praxis*, and *performativity* of neutrality.

THE CONTENTS OF THE COLLECTION

The organizational strategy of division into three sections is not meant to be reductive. As you’ll read, each chapter considers to varying extents the political, the practical, and the performative, and the unique ways in which they inevitably interweave and overlap through lived experience. The decision to place each chapter into one of the three sections was based largely on what I saw as the primary driver of the arguments presented, and the decision to even have three sections in the first place reflects my argument posited above that we need more-refined distinctions about what it is we are talking about when we advocate for or disregard neutrality.

The first section of the collection—*Politics*—by sheer institutional representation alone (graduate students, TYC, religious schools, and contingent faculty) constructs an argument that theories and approaches to transparency, disclosure, and neutrality have been dominated by tenure-track or tenured teacher-scholars at four-year institutions—a more than slight irony when thinking about the contexts out of which Paulo Freire was writing. All chapters in this section direct our attention

to institutional differences, governance structures, and labor conditions as invariably determining both what we mean and what we can do about neutrality. Meaghan Brewer (chapter 1) begins this section by providing a research-based exploration of the implications of enacting a pedagogy of neutrality for new graduate instructors tasked with teaching a politically charged composition curriculum that they did not design. Jason Evans continues the section in chapter 2 with an exploration of the recent “translingual turn” in composition and how enacting this ideology at the TYC level places instructors at the “nexus of contradictions.” Building off this spirit of contradictions, Jessica Clements in chapter 3 then provides insight by way of a unique application of Kopelson’s framing of *mêtis* in a Christian higher-education setting, suggesting that it might be, rather paradoxically, the best way to get students in these contexts to achieve the academically rigorous critical consciousness these very institutions seek. Building off of Clements’s direct attention to governance structures, Robert Samuels (chapter 4) brings our attention to how the current political climate affects vulnerable—read: non-tenured, “contingent”—teachers, arguing that although we should pay attention to how *all* faculty are being threatened, non-tenured faculty are in an especially exposed position because they often lack any type of academic freedom or shared governance rights and thus require a fundamentally different disposition towards the impossible, but in this case, necessary ideals of neutrality. My own interview with John Trimbur ends this section, in chapter 5. The interview covers a lot of ground—from disciplinarity to why he no longer attends CCCC to his relationship to Maxine Hairston to surveillance to why it might not be the best idea to wear a “Fuck Trump” shirt on campus—and as such, in the words of Trimbur near the end of the interview, resembles the “complexity that emerges when you start to talk about neutrality, and to both see what it screens and hides and what it authorizes.”

The second section of the collection—*Praxis*—directs the reader’s attention away from institutional and governance structures and towards the actual courses, curricula, and projects we develop and deliver. This section begins with Kelly Blewett (chapter 6), taking a cue from Arlie Russell Hochschild’s book *Strangers in Their Own Land*. She shares how a participant-researcher relationship provided an opportunity for a conservative, Republican-identified, returning-veteran student (Tyler S.) at a Midwestern university campus to talk openly with Blewett, a liberal, Democrat-identified, doctoral candidate in rhetoric and composition. Christopher Michael Brown then keeps us in this space of the student experience in chapter 7 by offering a reframing of how

written narratives get taught. In a close reading of three “conversion” narratives, Brown shows how students submit their deeply held beliefs to careful scrutiny, uncovering and articulating the assumptions that made their “conversions” possible, ultimately suggesting that conversion narratives avoid the pitfalls of assignments that require a critical orientation toward one’s beliefs. Continuing with Blewett’s and Brown’s themes of openness and honesty, Lauren F. Lichty and Karen Rosenberg begin their chapter 8 with *clear* questions: How can a praxis of transparency work in the writing classroom and how can it help students share power in productive ways? How can we work with ideologically charged material without being derailed by unproductive student resistance? Lichty and Rosenberg explore these questions through their experience co-teaching a first-year, themed composition course titled “Gender Under Construction,” and argue that enacting a “slow start” method to teaching complex topics helps with student engagement. Heather Fester, also sharing a course design, uses chapter 9 to create space for critical readings of teacher and student narratives around ideological transparency collected during a course on activist writing and research. Fester uses the tool of “interruptive teacher narratives,” created by Chris Gallagher, Peter Gray, and Shari Stenberg, to render her own ideological assumptions as an interpreter of cultural practices in the class more transparent and to explore student perceptions of ideological bias as they shape the classroom experience. Chapter 10, by Mara Holt, takes us from projects and course designs to the administrative level, asking: When do teachers have the right to surface their ideology, their social justice concerns? When is it effective, and when and how is it appropriate to integrate it into the first-year curriculum? Holt explores the apparent contradictions in her own stances over the years, arguing that abstract beliefs about the virtue or vice of neutrality or transparency are less useful than an emerging understanding of pertinent material and historical conditions.

Continuing to move up the administrative ladder, chapter 11, written by Tristan Abbott, focuses on assessment and operates from the observation that there exists a split between how writing assessment is understood within administrative and political circles and how it is understood among specialists in rhetoric and composition. In reviewing a number of assessment tools produced within the last decade, Abbott explains how they can help compositionists realize the political goals of the field while still producing institutionally viable, *neutral-seeming* assessment. The final chapter of this section on *praxis* is more in line with the genre of a program profile and takes us all the way up to a global perspective—literally.

In it, we see Adam Pacton (chapter 12) exploring a teaching space undertheorized in terms of teacher neutrality: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Pacton argues that dislocating college composition from a purely American phenomenon provides a moment of disciplinary *kairos* that troubles performances of ideological neutrality in the composition classroom and that globalizing college composition through the unique MOOC modality reveals a paradox wherein compositionists must neutralize ideological commitments (given the extremely heterogeneous global student population) but are disciplinarily unable to do so.

The third and final section—*Performativity*—builds off institutional and curricular discussions of neutrality to theorize a site often implicated in just such discussions: our selves. As Romeo García and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa write in chapter 13 to begin this section, the body can be seen as “the preeminent material upon which inscription of culture and its particular discourses become embedded,” influencing “the ways we think and live our social relations” (Shapiro 77). García and Hinojosa offer their lived experiences and academic journeys as testament to how our pedagogical and theoretical commitments are grounded in experiences and memories. In light of this call for authenticity, Erika Johnson and Tawny LeBouef Tullia (chapter 14) continue this section by arguing that, rather than falling back into performances of neutrality, composition instructors should take heed of the benefits of authentic engagement for students from a diversity of backgrounds. Johnson and LeBouef Tullia define *authenticity* to be less a rhetorical representation of “truth” or “honesty” than it is a practice of critical and crucial engagement and use the work of Susan Jarratt to position the negotiation of conflict to become the dialogue that explores contradictions present in our classrooms. This may cause tensions; but Jarratt (2003) notes that those who avoid conflict minimize unforeseen possibilities for using argument to reconstruct knowledge. David Stubblefield and Chad Chisholm (chapter 15) connect these notions of authenticity and conflict to power by asking the following questions: How do we address the diverse needs of the discourse communities within our classes, within our various institutional settings, all while guiding them towards a common discourse? In other words, how do we both enact a democratic classroom while simultaneously transmitting authoritative norms? In addressing these questions, Stubblefield and Chisholm broach the pedagogical double-bind, as articulated by Gerald Graff (1995), where teachers need to acknowledge the power they wield while trying to challenge it.

Jennifer Thomas and Allison Rowland (chapter 16) end part three because their work provides the clearest call to action for us moving

forward. Their chapter explores how higher education in the United States has witnessed a cluster of activity around the term *transparency*, but also how different stakeholders use the term towards different ends. On one hand, transparency can refer to explicit conversation about beneficial learning practices between instructors and students. This type of transparency, which Thomas and Rowland identify as “learner-centered transparency,” assists students in understanding, for example, the learning goals of a particular assignment. By comparison, they identify “consumer-centered transparency” as the appropriation of the rhetoric of transparency in an attempt to foster distrust in institutions of higher education. Consumer-centered transparency can be particularly sly, because it often comes packaged in pro-student rhetoric, such as Turning Point USA’s *Professor Watchlist*. To mitigate defensiveness, Thomas and Rowland advance what they call a “translucent pedagogical practice.” In other words, Thomas and Rowland argue for the occasional and strategic withholding of learning goals for some classroom activities, especially in courses that critically approach gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and ability. They close their critical analysis of the transparency imperative with a case study from their team-taught first-year course on sexuality. In doing so, the chapter provides both conceptual and practical resources for navigating the emerging imperative of transparency in higher education in the United States.

Ultimately, and as these chapters reveal, addressing the specter of neutrality requires much more than what is currently being done. It requires considering and incorporating research from other fields. It requires a more holistic perspective on disciplinarity. It requires more critical attention to public discussions of academic freedom. It requires more nuanced understandings of neutrality and all its rhetorical usages—whether it is framed as the paramount value of higher education, a political dog whistle, a naïve assertion, or anything else. It requires classroom research on the observable effects of our decision to engage in self-disclosure. It requires rhetorical-centric longitudinal research on how and why students experience intellectual and emotional change in college. It requires more articulation on our parts about our own assumptions of the purpose of higher education and what our presumed authority is within it.

The collection ends with a conclusion (chapter 17), titled “Full Disclosure / Now What?,” which outlines—in full, honest consideration of all the chapters prior to it and a poignant experience I had teaching presidential rhetorics in the fall 2016 semester—a call for us as scholars, as teachers, as public agents of change, as mouthpieces, as

representatives of a network of institutions of higher education currently embattled with partisanship to bring some semblance of stasis on teacher neutrality and bring our students along for the ride. For the phrase is terrible, but, alas, there it is. Here it is.

NOTES

1. The AAUP notes that Missouri House Bill No. 213 (introduced January 3, 2007) “would have done both.”
2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces *neutral* as both a noun and an adjective back to the fifteenth century, primarily in warlike contexts. As a noun, the primary definition is “a person or state remaining neutral in a controversy, dispute, war, etc.,” with relevant textual examples coming largely from agonistic contexts: e.g., 1601 Ld. Mountjoy *Let.* in F. Moryson *Itinerary* (1617) ii. 173, “The whole Province either is joyned with them, or stand neutrals.” In its adjectival usage, *neutral* as a descriptor pertaining to people (as opposed to chemicals) is related to “senses of partiality, determinacy, etc.,” namely “not taking sides in a controversy, dispute, disagreement, etc.; not inclining toward any party, view, etc.; impartial, unbiased,” with relevant textual examples coming from political contexts: e.g., (1) 1876 J. B. Mozley *Serm. preached Univ. of Oxf.* x. 237, “They discard a middle and neutral relation as lukewarm”; and (2) 1987 D. Rowe *Beyond Fear* viii. 317 “Dorothy has . . . no axe to grind. She’s completely neutral.”
3. According to its primary definition in the OED, *neutrality* as a noun emphasizes the *ontological* and the *emotional*: “an intermediate state or condition, not clearly one thing or another; a neutral position, middle ground.” A secondary definition is given as “the state or condition of not being on any side; absence of decided views, feeling, or expression; indifference; impartiality, dispassionateness.”
4. For a useful overview of the pertinent Supreme Court decisions and state policies relating to advocacy and free speech in the elementary, middle, and high school classrooms, see Underwood (2013).
5. See *This American Life* podcast, episode 614 (“My Effing First Amendment”), for a journalistic account of conservative student advocacy on state university campuses.
6. State legislatures such as those in Wisconsin are voting on policy related to free expression in and by state university systems. For example, Assembly Bill 299 requires that “institutions must remain neutral on public policy controversies” (Wisconsin State Legislature 2017), with the intended effect of penalizing those who protest the presence of controversial guest speakers on campus (most recently, Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos).
7. See John Duffy’s guest spot on NPR’s *All Things Considered* from 2016, titled “Professors Take A Different Approach In Responding To ‘Leftist Propaganda’ Claims” (NPR 2016), about how he and others dealt with the surging popularity of Turning Point USA’s *Professor Watchlist* professor-tracking website (npr.org/2016/12/10/505109280/professors-take-a-different-approach-in-responding-to-leftist-propaganda-claims).
8. I chose this edition with the foreword by Shaull because of the rhetorical work he does framing the first English translation for an American audience in terms of application:

If, however, we take a closer look, we may discover that [Freire’s] methodology as well as his educational philosophy are as important for us as for

the dispossessed in Latin America. Their struggle to become free Subjects and to participate in the transformation of their society is similar, in many ways, to the struggle not only of blacks and Mexican-Americans but also of middle-class young people in [America]. And the sharpness and intensity of that struggle in the developing world may well provide us with new insight, new models, and a new hope as we face our own situation. For this reason, I consider the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in an English edition to be something of an event. (Shaul 1970, 10)

9. *God terms* are those powerful words that seem to be beyond critique and immediately infuse a phrase with unquestionably positive meaning, stemming from the “inherent potency” of the term itself. Inversely, *devil terms* are what you would expect after learning what god terms are. For Weaver (1953) and his historical moment in the 1950s, *progress* and *freedom* were god terms; *Communist* and *un-American* were devil terms. Weaver’s argument was that rhetoricians ought to apply an ethical rhetoric to such vague and potentially propagandist terms and “hold a dialectic”—yes, in the Platonic sense of it—with oneself to gain deeper understanding of the intention behind the usage of the term. It is a fair reading to conceive of this very book as doing this sort of dialectical work on the term *neutrality*. Of further note, it could also be considered that *neutrality* is a god term in that it could be used by ideologues to forward whatever they think it means to suit their purposes. I’m thinking of how Turning Point USA and their *Professor Watchlist* might hold up teacher neutrality as an abstracted ideal against which to judge and publicly blacklist those who, wittingly or unwittingly, don’t follow suit.
10. See *College Composition and Communication* 43, no. 2 (1992): 179–193, and subsequent responses in the following issue, namely John Trimbur’s (1993) response. Trimbur, included in this collection by way of interview, reflects on his experience writing the piece and his relationship with Hairston later in this collection.
11. Consider that in 2008 the New York City School District enacted a policy (based on *Weingarten v. Board of Education* [680 F.Supp. 2d 595 (S.D.N.Y. 2010) at 597]) on the visual aspect of partisanship: “While on duty or in contact with students, all school personnel shall maintain a posture of complete neutrality with respect to all candidates. Accordingly, while on duty or in contact with students, school personnel may not wear buttons, pins, articles of clothing, or any other items advocating a candidate, candidates, slate of candidates, or political organization/committee” (<https://casetext.com/case/weingarten-v-bd-of-educ-of-city-school-dist>). The New York City School Chancellor rationalized the policy by stating that when “teachers wear political paraphernalia in schools, they may improperly influence children and impinge on the rights of students to learn in an environment free of partisan political influence” (quoted in Underwood 2013, 30). The phrasing in these excerpts—of teachers being “on duty” and maintaining a “posture of complete neutrality”—seem to hint at an ideology, much like the French vision of higher education, that teachers are first and foremost public servants and, like other types of public servants, must posture, or perform, neutrality in school settings.
12. See Kopelson (2020) for her reconsideration of her approach to cunning and neutrality.

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