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Composition Forum 37, Fall 2017

Review of Kelly Susan Bradbury's *Reimagining Popular Notions of American Intellectualism: Literacy, Education, Class*

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Bradbury, Kelly Susan. *Reimagining Popular Notions of American Intellectualism: Literacy, Education, Class*. Southern Illinois UP, 2016. 171 pp.

In a recent speech to gun rights advocates, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, Wayne La Pierre, warned his audience, "It's up to us to speak up against the three most dangerous voices in America: academic elites, political elites, and media elites. These are America's greatest domestic threats" (Price). La Pierre identifies these "domestic threats" in terms of elitism, which has become a floating signifier used by people across the political spectrum to designate something as corrupted and anti-American. It's an easy enthymeme. As Kelly Susan Bradbury demonstrates in *Reimagining Popular Notions of American Intellectualism: Literacy, Education, Class*, "intellectual" often plays a very similar role in popular culture. As she illustrates, for many people intelligence is good, desirable, and accessible to anyone with common sense and earned wisdom. Lots of people, even people without formal educations, see themselves in terms of intelligence. By contrast, intellectualism is pedantic, arrogant, exclusionary, and even elitist. Lots of the same people who see themselves as intelligent are quick to distance themselves from intellectualism.

Bradbury's central goal in this book is to challenge and redefine intellectualism in ways that recuperate and reinvigorate it as a meaningful concept. Bradbury diagnoses a common presumption in the popular American imaginary that equates intellectualism to academic success in elite institutions of higher education. This view of intellectualism, by definition, excludes other educational sites, experiences, and even accomplishments of non-elite students and citizens. And for Bradbury, this view of what intellectualism is has important—negative—effects on people's attitudes and actions with regard to learning, intelligence, and education. "Of great importance to rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies scholars," she writes, "these views also mediate the public's—and our students'—attitudes toward literacy; promote a powerful variant of the literacy myth that equates some literacy practices with intellectualism and others with non- or anti-intellectualism; and perpetuate problematic educational hierarchies that categorize some of our students, some of our research and teaching practices, and at times even our discipline as intellectually inferior" (4). In short, Bradbury diagnoses the anti-intellectual enthymeme as a powerful impediment to the kinds of literacy work that rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars would like to see happen in colleges and universities, but also as an impediment to what counts as valuable literacy work beyond the academy's walls.

In her introduction, Bradbury sets out the definitional parameters she hopes to change, and she proposes a more capacious definition of intellectualism as "an interest in, appreciation for, and engagement with learning, deliberation, critical thinking, and inquiry" (5). This more "inclusive and egalitarian" (5) definition anchors the remainder of the book. In Chapter 1, after the introduction, she provides a brief genealogy of popular notions of intellectualism, and just as importantly, of anti-intellectualism, in American history. She documents the gradual separation of popular and academic cultural spheres over the course of approximately a century and analyzes how the separation contributed to the contemporary idea of what intellectualism is and isn't. Bradbury works specifically through three landmark diagnoses of literacy crisis and decline from the past 60 years—Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation*—to trace the topoi of anti-intellectualism and their concurrence with receding public intellectualism among academics. She notes the "cultural tendency for dichotomous thinking about education and intellectualism" that "severely limits what knowledge, activities, educational institutions, and people fall under the rubric of intellectual" (25). By establishing this history as a framework, Bradbury ably sets up the terms by which she carries out her subsequent investigation.

In Chapters 2-4, Bradbury uses three case studies of adult public education to challenge the idea that intellectualism is, or ever has been, strictly a highbrow, elite pursuit. In Chapter 2, drawing on archival research and previous scholarship, she studies nineteenth-century American lyceums—essentially local community associations that hosted public lectures about useful scientific and practical topics. Although often dismissed as non-intellectual because of their focus on “practical” issues, Bradbury argues that lyceums made specialized knowledge widely accessible and actually helped to cultivate citizens’ moral and intellectual engagement, knowledge acquisition, and literate development.

In Chapter 3, Bradbury turns her attention to twentieth-century, American labor colleges. Again drawing on archival research, Bradbury focuses particularly on Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York. She argues that labor colleges have often been written off as *non*-intellectual because they (a) primarily served the working class and (b) emphasized practical education. And they’ve been dismissed as *anti*-intellectual for promoting “doctrinaire thinking about issues relevant to the labor movement” in the early twentieth century (53). As with her study of lyceums, Bradbury argues to the contrary, that labor colleges fostered critical and analytical thinking, prioritized active learning practices, and motivated students to translate the lessons they learned in the labor colleges into lessons they could teach other people in the labor movement. In short, despite their particular activist perspective, the labor colleges were sponsors of intellectualism both in students who attended them and, presumably, beyond.

In Chapter 4, Bradbury brings her study into the present century by studying twenty-first century GED writing workshops at the pseudonymous Lindberg Center, a neighborhood non-profit organization in the Midwest that offered literacy workshops for community members who wanted to earn their GEDs. To my mind, this was Bradbury’s most engaging chapter for a number of reasons, which I discuss below. But first and foremost, I was intrigued because this chapter changes methodologically to include interviews and reflections she conducted with attendees about their goals, practices, and beliefs. She conducted surveys and interviews of multiple workshop students over the course of several workshops. Like the lyceums and labor colleges before them, Bradbury asserts that the GED workshops provide access to education for adults that are not traditionally considered within the definition of “intellectual.” Likewise, the activities that students engage in during the workshops—analyzing poems using personal reactions, producing five-paragraph essays, and a host of basic literacy activities—are commonly excluded from even the most liberal definitions of intellectualism. Nevertheless, Bradbury argues that these activities fit squarely within her definition of intellectualism as “an interest in, appreciation for, and engagement with learning, knowledge, deliberation, critical thinking, and inquiry” (110). Students had varying motivations for taking the courses and for wanting to pass the GED, but as Bradbury points out, they each had some level of interest, appreciation, and/or engagement with learning. For her, despite whatever feelings they may have expressed to the contrary, the GED students were actively involved in practices of intellectualism.

Chapter 4 resonated with me because of Bradbury’s inclusion of student voices, but also because she makes what I think is her most provocative claim: that literacy and literacy practices, like the GED workshops, have the effect of reinforcing students’ beliefs in progress myths, especially the notion that higher levels of literacy will necessarily lead to economic, social, and cognitive advancement. In fact, the strength of this argument in Chapter 4, perhaps ironically, raised questions for me about the strength of the previous chapters. I should say here that the previous chapters are smart, well written, and thoroughly researched. That’s not my concern. But I doubt Bradbury would find much resistance among rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies scholars to her assertion that we should challenge narrow definitions of “intellectualism” in such a way as to promote access and validate non-traditional students. She is, in her first few chapters, preaching to the choir.

But Chapter 4 implicates rhetoric, composition, and literacy specialists in ways that the first chapters don’t, and in ways that I think are important and productive. Although Bradbury never comes out and says it directly, her analysis in Chapter 4 suggests that her project of reimagining intellectualism requires significant self-reflection on the part of reading, writing, and literacy teachers. Composition and rhetoric specialists, in particular, have spent decades fighting with their university colleagues for what might be thought of as the prestige of intellectualism. The Council of Writing Program Administrators’ statement, “[Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration](#),” is just one obvious example. We routinely defend our value on intellectual grounds.

If we take Bradbury’s research seriously, however, and I think we should, we cannot neglect the consequences of those battles, which have been waged at least in part to valorize the exclusionary definition of intellectualism that she wants to reimagine. In other words, we must consider the degree to which we have reinforced systems of exclusion by the very acts of defending our intellectualism. To what degree does our trenchant commitment to traditional notions of intellectualism cause us to unconsciously adhere to literacy myths, bootstraps myths, and progress myths that we otherwise disavow? To what degree have rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies specialists contributed to limiting students’ and citizens’ access to meaningful intellectual development in our efforts to expand intellectualism to include us (and thereby exclude them)? These aren’t easy questions to ask or answer, but they’re critical.

In fact, if I have one complaint about *Reimagining Popular Notions of American Intellectualism: Literacy, Education, Class*, it is that these questions, which seem so evident in Bradbury's analyses of GED students, never quite rise to the surface of her discussion. Instead, in Chapter 5, she reasserts rhetoric, composition, and literacy specialists' responsibility for "join[ing] the conversation and aid[ing] in reimagining intellectualism in the twenty-first century" (110). This call to action seems to me to sidestep the thrust of her earlier critique and lets the subjects of that critique—specifically rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars—off the proverbial hook. In her concluding chapter (Chapter 6), she develops a pedagogical plan for inviting students into intellectualism. But she also reiterates a claim from earlier in the book that reimagining intellectualism will help us and our students refute broader public discourses about anti-intellectualism that influence education reform, public policy, and public ideas about literacy and learning. The pedagogy is interesting and thoughtful, but frankly, I disagree with her underlying assumption that reimagining intellectualism in the classroom is likely to shift the discourse, in part because of the strength of her earlier arguments—as she shows, many of the students she would include by dint of her expanded definition of intellectualism want nothing to do with it. They're content to be "intelligent" without feeling any especial call to be "intellectual." And I fail to see any urgency for us to release hold of our grip on a label that they neither need nor want. I have a very hard time imagining students choosing intellectualism as the cultural hill they are willing to die on. As a result, I think Bradbury's belief that reimagining intellectualism as something scholars can and should do to expand access to it is unrealistic, or at least, undertheorized.

Nevertheless, as I noted above, the questions I wanted as a reader for Bradbury to ask are not her questions. And the book cannot be dismissed out of hand because she did not ask my questions. In fact, it should not be dismissed at all. Bradbury's argument in this book is ambitious, and it joins a strong tradition of research that expands our notions of literacy education, including groundbreaking work by luminaries such as Jacqueline Jones Royster, Anne Gere, Mike Rose, and others. Moreover, I think the implications of Bradbury's book do serve as a powerful call to action to the field to reimagine not what we can do to get more people into the vaunted realms of intellectualism that we've fought so hard to enter, but rather to get us to consider more carefully the roles and importance of intellectualism in the world around us—especially in places we don't control, in places we can't access, and in places we can access but generally don't. If we begin to rethink the ways we police the boundaries of intellectualism, perhaps we'll find ways to reimagine ourselves in ways that make us less threatening and elitist, and maybe even a little more intellectually aware.

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