I would define globalization as the freedom for my group to invest wherever it likes, for as long as it likes, to produce whatever it likes, buying and selling wherever it likes, and having to bear the fewest possible constraints as regards labor laws and social convention.

—Percy Barnevik, former CEO of ABB

An unidentified reporter then queried the Secretary as to whether this plan could fairly be translated as take down the trees, tear-up the earth, evacuate the urban poor, and let the people hang, generally speaking.

—June Jordan, “Poem Towards a Final Solution”

The main targets for neoliberal ire are the fragments of democracy and collective solidarity that exist within the state and whose existence the state guarantees. These fragments of democracy and collective solidarity stem from a mix of social gains secured through tremendous struggle by the oppressed and concessions made by the rulers to maintain social peace. We must protect these fragments of democracy and solidarity.

—Eric Toussaint,
Your Money or Your Life: The Tyranny of Global Finance
Living Room
Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World

NANCY WELCH
University of Vermont

Boynton/Cook Publishers
HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
Acknowledgments vii

Chapter 1: A Public World Is Possible 1
   Interlude: “Your Appeal Has Been Reviewed by the Medical Director” 20

Chapter 2: Ain’t Nobody’s Business? 28
   Interlude: Risking Rhetoric 48

Chapter 3: Taking Sides 55
   Interlude: The Hard Line 74

Chapter 4: Making Space 85
   Interlude: “This Is Not a Rally” 114

Chapter 5: So What Gives You the Authority? 121

Epilogue: Education Goes Public 145

Works Cited 163
I must start by thanking College Editor Charles Schuster for asking me, at the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication, if I had thoughts about a new book. The conference took place at the onset of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and his question helped me channel dismay into something I could work on. This book further owes its heart and a great deal of its substance to the women of my Spring 2003 senior women’s studies seminar at the University of Vermont, especially Danielle Belfiore, Cassie Gillespie, Lauren Jones, Jessica Ann Lugo, Katie Monticello, and Jayme VanNoordt, who gave generously of their time during and after our semester. In the chapters to come, I draw on students’ work with their permission and use their actual names at their request.

Living Room has been further nurtured by many enriching conversations with good friends and colleagues, including Mary Ann Cain, Lil Brannon, Beth Carroll, and Michelle Comstock, with whom I presented at conferences early versions of several chapters from this book. Shortly before his untimely death, University of Vermont philosophy professor Will Miller shared with me his archives—nearly forty years of anti-war and social justice activism. In Will, students and fellow activists found just the right combination of Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci’s “pessimism of the intellect” and “optimism of the will”: I must thank him and my comrades Helen Scott and Peter Spitzform for accompanying me as I unlearned the academic training that would have put me on the sidelines of progressive struggles. I can’t imagine, either, this book without the marvelous cover photograph by Muhaideem Batah.

Finally, abundant thanks and gratitude go to my husband, Didier Delmas. Some years ago when he said to me, “Postmodernism isn’t going to answer the questions you have. You need Marx,” he probably did not expect I would take his words so much to heart. I appreciate his willingness to live with the consequences—and with such good and loving humor.

Several of these chapters are revised and expanded from essays that appeared earlier: “Taking Sides” in Teaching Rhetorica, edited by Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Boynton/Cook 2006); “Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Post-Publicity Era” in College Composition and Communication 57 (National Council of Teachers of English 2005);
A Public World Is Possible

I need to speak about living room
where the land is not bullied and beaten into
a tombstone

—JUNE JORDAN, “MOVING TOWARDS HOME”

Between Shock and Awe

This book was conceived between two events that continue to frame my thinking about the challenges people face when they try to forge voices of significance. The first event was a Thursday evening rally in Times Square, protesting the start of the “Shock and Awe” bombing campaign that launched the second, and ongoing, U.S. war against Iraq. That day, with other attendees of the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, I’d ridden up and down hotel elevators, transfixed by tiny televisions tuned in to CNN: grainy infrared images of eerily empty Baghdad streets, headlights of a lone car rolling along, and then, in the distance, a streak, a flare, a sudden bright burst. Shortly before 5 P.M., joined by two others, I left the conference and headed in a downpour—the three of us sheltered beneath an inadequate umbrella—to the emergency protest in Times Square. There we entered a sea of black umbrellas filling two city blocks. The sea swelled as streams of bodies, more bobbing black umbrellas, flowed in from side streets. But beyond these two blocks we couldn’t expand. Columns of police guarding metal barricades hemmed us in.
One month earlier, when some half a million people converged on New York City to protest an invasion of Iraq, there had been plenty more of these cops, clubs, and barricades. But February 15, 2003, had been sunny if bone-bitingly cold; the crowds had been chanting, and the large group with whom I’d marched overran a barricade and sailed past the police, our cries of “One-two-three-four, we can stop the war!” turning to an exuberant “Whose streets? Our streets!” On this night, however, rain poured on a silent protest, the cops stood firm, and two things seemed depressingly clear: We had not stopped the war; these were not our streets. My two companions and I tunneled through the throng. I found several people with whom I’d marched on February 15. The swelling crowd lifted us up against the barricades. The police beat us back. This time I was in no position to slip through, and these cops were in no mood for explanations. After a minute more of this involuntary push and shove, I ducked out and made my way back to the hotel, arriving soaked, chilled, and just in time to take my place on an evening panel about how to get published in *College Composition and Communication*.

Had that awful evening been my only experience of the first response, the fullest response, of people in the United States to the launching of this war, I might have written a very different book or, more likely, I would not have written any book—not on the topic of teaching public writing. It would have been hard to shake the sobering image of so many dripping black umbrellas, the implacable police, their faces grim behind Plexiglas visors. It would have seemed sounder to conclude that we live in creeping (or full-blown) fascism, that protest has no register, that the sanest thing anyone can do is retreat within tiny shoals of relative safety (homes, classrooms, small affinity groups) where we shore up against a mostly “red state” and “security mom” nation whose people overwhelmingly suffer from what Harriet Malinowitz (2003) has called *stupidification*—that is, an inability to get, or even seek, a critical purchase on such explanatory sound bites as “They hate us for our freedoms” and “We need to fight the terrorists on their soil before they come to ours.” Or maybe I would have held firm in the belief that those who huddled beneath umbrellas in Times Square are, in fact, representative of a citizenry that is indeed suffering—but suffering from loss of democratic voice, not loss of brainpower. No matter. With or without our consent, I might have concluded, the war goes on. It has a mind of its own.

There was, however, another defining event for me that week, this one two days later. That Saturday, with twenty-five or thirty conference goers, I left the hotel just before noon for a march down Broadway to
Washington Square. The day was bright, the temperatures reaching into the sixties, and while, as the Village Voice put it, it wasn’t exactly glasnost (Ferguson 2003), police allowed demonstrators—whose column filled forty blocks—to proceed mostly unmolested. What a sea change from two nights before. As political writer Dave Lindorff (2003) observed in the next edition of Counterpunch:

It was an astonishing display. Even as the nation engaged in a ferocious assault on the nation of Iraq, and as the first reports of American casualties in that war were coming in, what was shaping up as one of the largest peace demonstrations in the history of New York was getting set to march through the heart of the very city where this new round of global violence had started. . . . That the march was happening at all was a remarkable testament to the power of protest.

The mood of the march, Lindorff observed, was “upbeat but determined.” True, the biggest peace marches the world had seen had not been sufficient to keep this war from starting—the president writing off an estimated 10 million demonstrators worldwide as a “focus group” he could simply ignore—but a distinction still begged to be made between the will of Washington and the will of the rest of us. And, for at least that afternoon, I had no doubt I was marching with the will of the people. Aproned restaurant workers stood in doorways and applauded as demonstrators passed. From brownstones draped bedsheets with messages of solidarity for the Iraqi people, calls to impeach George Bush, and the pointed question, “How did our oil get under their sand?” Only at one intersection did I see a small—just three or four people—group of counterdemonstrators. Otherwise I was buoyed along in an ocean of humanity whose intelligence and good sense surpassed that of Congress, including those from the Democratic Party who would later claim to have been fooled by falsified warrants for war. Here were thousands upon thousands of people who for months had been bombarded with a hard sell for “Operation Iraqi Freedom” (or even years, if we remember President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stumping for “regime change”). Despite all the means of persuasion at the disposal of the political and corporate powers, people had refused to buy it.

The helpless despair of that first night following Shock and Awe combines with the unrelenting hope of the Saturday march to inform my approach to the chapters in this book. A book about prospects for teaching public writing can’t ignore the regulation and repression used
to tamp down the ideas and aspirations of much of the population; nor should it ignore the persistent push back by ordinary people still seeking, and sometimes finding, ways to be heard. Together both perspectives on our present moment have guided my explorations into what we can do to teach writing in a way that supports access, voice, and impact while also acknowledging the formidable constraints that convince most people there’s very little they can do, very little that people have ever done, to affect the course of national and world events.

If Memory Serves

Most of my writing and teacherly concerns through the 1990s focused on how to cultivate individual practices of revision—of restless questioning and creative textual improvisations—against social and disciplinary constraint. In recent years, however, I’ve faced a pileup of rhetorical situations that test the power of individual acts of revision. For instance, the U.S. health care crisis (and the cost-containing managed care obstacles confronting my husband and me when he was diagnosed with kidney cancer) and the Rust Belt devolution of the U.S. middle class (leaving half my family unemployed for the better part of the last decade) aren’t problems that can be solved by individual will and creativity. Similarly, the teens with whom I’ve worked since 1998 at a local youth center have not been able—not through literacy alone—to write and revise their way to college access and livable wage jobs despite their considerable linguistic gifts. At rallies and demonstrations I’ve noted inventive slogans and ingenious street theater—A PROFIT told Bush to start this war; Thanks for the billions! (Sorry about the kids.) Signed Halliburton—that do impact public consciousness but can’t, through sheer kairos, stop two wars spurred on by private interests and global grabs for control of the Middle East’s resources and Central Asia’s trade routes. It is from the need to grapple with such limit situations—where oppositional writing practices cannot, at least not alone, alter larger social arrangements and yet where the urgency for intervention continues to mount—that I wrote the chapters gathered in Living Room.

In particular, I want this book to unite two key conversations among teachers of composition and rhetoric. The first concerns a revitalized interest in teaching public writing. More than just a topic du jour, the question of how ordinary people reach and persuade influential audiences has taken on intensified exigence as teachers find that the venues in which students’ (and our own) arguments might gain
a hearing have become noticeably policed and restricted. Participants in this conversation, guided by such theorists as Nancy Fraser, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Gilles Deleuze, are primarily interested in how to create “strong publics” or viable “counter-publics” within or apart from the social and economic policies that have privatized public space, decision making, and resources and that have also, via recent “homeland security” measures, raised the stakes for dissent. Into this context of restricted space for public voice and participation, I want to bring a second conversation among writing teachers arising from reinvigorated readings of rhetorical history. In answer to the appeals and examples of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams (1999), Jane Greer (1999), Anne Ruggles Gere (1994), and Susan Jarratt (1991a), among many others, scholars are locating rhetorical history not only in canonized figures and elite institutions but also among itinerant teachers, lecture-circuit reformers, African American abolitionist and civil rights leaders, and working-class college curricula. From Kathleen Welch’s (1990, 1994, 1999) calls, scholars have also broadened the study of delivery to include eighteenth-century pulpits and twenty-first-century blogs—predominantly middle-class forums spotlighting individual rhetors that nevertheless can be further expanded to include the working-class rhetorical arts of the soapbox, picket, sit-down, and strike.

In the chapters that follow, I hope to join our current interests in public writing and rhetorical history to argue that if we’re to teach effective, responsive rhetorical practices in an era of shopping malls and Clear Channel, of state-sanctioned ethnic profiling and militarized responses to public protest, of private economic interests colluding to shape public policy on everything from energy and interest rates to access to health care and the airwaves, we must explore the two neglected canons that Welch has flagged: delivery and memory. By recalling the creative responses of earlier generations to constraints on (or prohibitions against) public visibility and voice, we can learn how individuals and groups, especially those lacking official platforms, have effectively argued for wider participation and greater democratization. Those earlier struggles not only offer important contributions to our understanding of how efficacious arguments can be delivered in the most restrictive circumstances; they also upset, and profoundly enrich, the principles underwriting our classroom lessons in invention, arrangement, and style. After all, in the most consequential arguments of the United States in the twentieth century, we find not (or not only) podiums and pundits but workers shutting down production lines, women facing police
outside plant gates, students sitting resolute at segregated lunch counters, veterans marching on the Pentagon, and AIDS-HIV activists “dying-in” on Wall Street crosswalks.

Each of these earlier struggles was taken up by groups excluded from the middle- and ruling-class spheres that have been the focus of much academic theorizing. The issues each group fought to bring to public attention for public change had been heretofore deemed private, matters properly dealt with in the family or ruled by the workplace. Each of these struggles was waged to win the very public rights we now see under siege. If brought to bear on today’s public writing conditions and concerns, these vibrant models can help us and our students take stock of our own available means. At the very least, if we know how earlier generations effectively argued and agitated for public provision and rights, through what combinations of \textit{kairotic} appeal and embodied action, we’ll have a better sense of how to read, and what it might take to resist, the privatizing rhetoric and private interests intent on rolling back those rights today.

\textbf{The Social Turn in a Privatized World}

Through rhetorical memory, we can further recognize that today’s restricted opportunities for public voice and participation aren’t strictly a “post–September 11th” development. Indeed, current assaults on public programs, rights, and geographic space began well before the presidency of George W. Bush. Susan Wells (1996), for instance, opens “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” with a story of police brutality from the early 1990s, when quality-of-life zoning and tough-on-crime rhetoric combined to relegitimize racial profiling, segregation, and harassment in the name of private property protection and rights (see also Williams 1991). Upon learning that the written complaint of an African American Temple University student, picked up and beaten by police, had resulted in citywide shake-ups and reforms, Wells at first basks in this evidence of her writing program’s success: “Colbert had probably learned to write a strong narrative in our program. . . . And his text had been efficacious: it had turned around a whole police department” (1996, 325–26). Then she notes that this student’s complaint had been the twenty-third filed against these two officers and that it was likely the public’s outraged response to the L.A. police beating of Rodney King that had finally pushed this investigation ahead. Reassessing her initial feelings of triumph and validation, Wells points out that such a reaction reflects both the urgency of teachers’ desires for their students to make effective public arguments and the
diminishment of our expectations for what they can achieve by doing so. “I once had stronger hopes,” Wells writes, “than helping my students write good complaints if they were beaten by cops” (1996, 326).

What Wells’ frequently cited essay brings into view is the central problem that has accompanied composition’s social turn (Trimbur 1994) since the 1980s: Even as our field has increasingly focused on the public dimensions of students’ writing and writing pedagogy, the national turn has been in an opposite direction, toward increasing privatization. At odds with our interest in promoting public discourse is the diminished space for public decision-making voice we and our students actually live within. However, diminished space and expectations are neither the result of cultural postmodernism nor a challenge in public-sphere creation that all classes of people within a society have uniformly faced. Instead, I think we garner the most precise and useful insights when we examine current constraints as specific to our neoliberal moment and as impinging most heavily in the United States on groups whose economic and social gains from twentieth-century labor and social movements are neoliberalism’s prime targets.

Neoliberalism is, in part, a reassertion of classical economic liberalism’s central tenet that major political and social decisions are best decided by the market. What makes neoliberalism more than a return to pre-Keynesian, pre–New Deal arrangements, however, is that it powerfully combines “free market” ideology with the social Darwinist conservatism exemplified by the governments of Britain’s Margaret Thatcher and the United States’ Ronald Reagan (and also pursued by governments, Republican or Democrat, Conservative or Labour, that have since followed their course). Add to this the internationalization of global finance and deregulation of financial markets overseen by the world’s economic powers, especially through the carrots and sticks offered by quasi-public bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Paris Club. What we then have are corporate and state forces (including, as needed, police and military forces) colluding to privatize public resources and services, raise taxes on the poor, cut taxes on wealth and profit, and liberalize capital flows while holding increasingly impoverished and desperate populations in place with tightened immigration and border restrictions. Reagan’s trickle-down theory is still advanced as the major warrant to support what is also called globalization. A rising financial tide ostensibly lifts all boats. But the most comprehensive study to date, conducted by the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, suggests that much of the world’s population, including within the United States, are trying to stay afloat with, at best, dinghies and life rafts. As of 2000, only 1 percent of the world’s
population (two-thirds in the United States and Japan) owned 40 percent of
the global wealth; the wealthiest 10 percent controlled 85 percent of world
wealth (Davies et al. 2006, 26–27).

The growing wealth gap within as well as between nations is
explanation enough for growing insecurity. Yet neoliberalism has also
made use of the economic crises and recessions of the twentieth century’s
final decades to go after the political reforms and social provisions fought
for by working classes in Europe in the late nineteenth century, in the
United States through key decades of struggle in the twentieth century,
as well as in Latin America and other regions through post–World War II
liberation struggles. In other words, although neoliberalism was born in
the economic crisis (falling profit margins brought on by overproduction
and intensifying global competition) that ended the United States’ long
post–World War II boom, it has proceeded since the mid-1970s, with
accelerating speed, whether in moments of economic boom or bust, to
roll back a century’s worth of public programs and social rights. Under
neoliberalism, antipoverty and equal opportunity programs have marked
the leading edge of services to be defunded. This disinvestment has been
assisted by a reworking and reclassifying of racism, sexism, homophobia,
and other forms of discrimination as simply and rightly a private
employer’s or privatized community’s prerogative.

This is not to say that neoliberalism does not grant government a
role—it is not the primacy of private corporate interests over and above
that of nation states. Rather, we might understand government’s role in
this moment as increasingly that of the “watchtower” (Collins 2003), the
state serving to protect private property and private privilege from public
demands. Or if there is an “opportunity” role that neoliberal governments
play, it is opportunity for the wealthiest alone, as government officials and
agencies intervene (at times with brute military force) in production and
trade not to protect the public good but to ensure optimal conditions for
the “free market.”

With neoliberalism, there is indeed a critical—and, as Harriet
Malinowitz (2003) aptly identifies it, a critical literacy—problem facing
most people, including people in the United States. The problem we face,
however, isn’t stupidification. Of course, there is a great deal that comes
from the mouths and decisions of top policymakers that does assume or
wish for a brain-dead population. Remember Reagan’s attempt to rename
ketchup a school-lunch vegetable? And now, in today’s news, the Bush
agriculture department has dropped the word hunger from its assessments
of the food assistance needs of some 35 million Americans. Yet, as the
application for public assistance in my state mushrooms to more than a dozen fill-in-the-blank-and-attach-the-appropriate-documentation pages, critical literacy has become a matter of survival in a country that leads not only in wealth but also, among eighteen industrialized nations, in the percentage of people living in poverty (Toussaint 2005, 47). The problem we face is actually neoliberalism’s stupefying reach, its rhetorical-bureaucratic covers, its market-logic penetration into virtually every aspect of existence. For example, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, while denying that she sought a No Child Left Behind policy for higher education, recently argued that universities and colleges need to demonstrate the value added to students through four years of education (Norris 2006).

Although there have been crucial challenges to three decades of neoliberalism’s social insecurity measures—including the spring 2006 massive marches and strikes for U.S. immigrant rights, which I’ll return to at this chapter’s end—neoliberal privatization presents a rhetorical conundrum. It does so because among the public goods that have been sold or legislated away are the very rights to public visibility and voice we most need to safeguard all others. Within the urgency and constraints created by neoliberal policy, we face the fundamental tension: an abundant need for people, particularly those lacking official credentials, to engage in public argument; and a dearth of space, opportunity, and freedom for most people to do so.

The chapters to come in Living Room don’t provide a primer for neoliberal economics, nor do they provide guides to, or even arguments for, partnering public writing classrooms with specific social service and social justice organizations. Instead, my aims are more basic as I first work to draw out and examine the neoliberal logic that reprivatizes a host of vital public issues, placing them outside the realm of what is arguable or tucking them away in the gated domains of credentialed specialists. Next I turn to models, lessons, and questions of twentieth-century struggles for living room—historical case studies in rhetorical action against war, oppression, and exploitation—that not only pluralize but also call into question many of the standard (and mostly middle-class) principles about effective communication we tend to teach. Although composition studies has largely ignored the strategies and tactics of working-class and mass-movement rhetors, it’s these histories that have reinvigorated my reading of all five rhetorical canons; these lessons from the past bring an expanded sense of possibility, consequence, and risk to classroom discussions about what it means, and what it takes, for most people to try to go public
then and now. In the epilogue to this volume, I offer a final case study of students at my university engaged in consequential—and controversial—rhetorical action. Through this story I hope we can consider that history-making rhetors, working collectively to mitigate risk and amplify voice, put into practice both liberal and illiberal persuasive principles.

Underwriting Living Room is also my belief that a majority of our students—not only those who identify themselves as concerned with social justice—would benefit from examining the history of argumentation about reproductive and civil rights, public provision for retirement and unemployment, access to health care and education. Perhaps compositionists have reason to worry about critical or service-learning pedagogies that are too particularly “partisan” (Erwin 2006)—if partisan means advocating for Democratic candidates over Republican (both parties, it must be said, are parties of neoliberalism), castigating students for their consumerism (as tuition skyrockets and federal tuition grants are replaced with private loans, most students are looking at a minimum of $800 each month in loan repayments for their “purchase” of a college education), or placing students with liberal advocacy groups (which still restrict classroom study to middle-class public-sphere activity). On the other hand, I think it can be argued that our classrooms have been far too partisan by orienting only on middle-class and ruling-class spheres for rhetorical participation. Here we need to consider with Keith Gilyard (2003) that a third of our students can expect unemployment or underemployment following graduation. Even a degree from a nationally ranked, competitive-admissions university isn’t a guarantor of steady, livable wage work. The University of Vermont’s survey of the class of 2005 one year after graduation found that 34 percent of working alums overall held temporary (full-time or part-time) jobs, that 20 percent searched for seven or more months after graduation before finding a job, and that 35 percent of working Arts and Sciences degree holders earned less than $20,000 a year (University of Vermont 2006). Among recent graduates with whom I’ve stayed in touch, one English and sociology double major is now working one full-time job in human services and one part-time job in retail while also taking community college classes in graphic design in the hope that this skill might bring a better job. A political science major, three years past graduation, is back living with his parents, unable to pay rent on his $9-an-hour pay.

For those students who do find full employment, most—as teachers, nurses, social workers, technicians and engineers, service- and public-sector workers of all kinds—are not looking forward to middle-class
autonomy and individual control over the security of their jobs, their conditions of work, and the continuation of health care and retirement benefits. It could well be that, if we have been teaching composition as a “middle-class enterprise” (Bloom 1996), we’re out of touch with the conditions and needs of the majority of faculty teaching these classes and the majority of students enrolled in them. Here is an opportunity to rhetorize social class: to shift our definition of working class from a focus on cultural identity to a focus on one’s available means for exercising decision-making power within and against privatization’s strict limits on public rights and voice, including in the workplace.

By titling this book Living Room—in homage to the late June Jordan and her Reagan-era poetry volume (1985) of the same title—I also hope to situate the privatizing challenges we face within a time line reaching back toward the start of the neoliberal era. Undeniably, encroachments on public rights and visibility have intensified since 2001: the mass detentions and deportations of Arab and Muslim men immediately following September 11, 2001; the COINTELPRO-like surveillance of Quaker and Veterans for Peace meetings; witch hunts of prominent Left academics such as Ward Churchill; the long imprisonment of University of South Florida Professor Sami Al-Arian even after a jury refused to convict him on any of the government’s laundry list of charges; and the “disappearing” of people into Guantanamo as well as through Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids on factories and farms. This is the period, between 2001 and 2007, in which I drafted this book, a period in which I was keenly concerned about the impact of these events on my students’ expectations for public writing and participation. We need a longer time line, however, to understand how these events stand in relation to the preceding two decades of expanding executive and police power, shrinking First and Fourth Amendment rights, increasingly confident assertions of U.S. first-strike and regime-change military prerogatives, not to mention the repeal of welfare, dramatic expansion of the U.S. prison system, and privatization of public resources, institutions, even sidewalks and streets. Without the longer view, we can’t take in the full scope of the challenge to civic life that most people face.

Natural Order Is Being Restored?

Although June Jordan’s Living Room (1985) appeared midway through the Reagan and Thatcher regimes, her poems chronicling their aggressive pursuit of a stripped-down economic and hyper-militarized world order,
few of these have lost their currency. “Moving Towards Home” might have been penned after Israel’s 2002 razing of the Jenin refugee camp or amid the summer 2006 pounding, with U.S.-shipped bombs, of Beirut: “I do not wish to speak about the bulldozer and the/red dirt/not quite covering all of the arms and the legs.” Other poems are chillingly prescient about the consequences of shredding social safety nets. When, in “Poem Towards a Final Solution,” a fictive reporter suggests that by defunding public programs, the White House is pursuing a policy of “let the people hang,” her statement is dismissed as “misleading and alarmist,” hampering “the economic recovery of the nation.” Reading this poem twenty years later, we can see where Reagan’s “economic recovery,” Clinton’s “personal responsibility,” and Bush’s “national security” agendas have led: In post-Katrina New Orleans, we did indeed see “the people hang.”

Yet Jordan does not assume a complacent and consumerist American public privileged by rampant racism and sexist, homophobic scapegoating. With the opening poem, “From Sea to Shining Sea”—which begins with the solemn incantation, “Natural order is being restored”—she sets a critical stage for distinguishing between the Orwellian rhetoric of press-conference officials and those suffering, from Queens to Grand Forks, the cost of this new social and economic order. Jordan’s work in this poem is to draw together diverse groups of people through both their shared immiseration and their shared potential to disrupt the decidedly unnatural order that has been imposed upon them.

At the same time, then, that Jordan’s Living Room records some of neoliberalism’s earliest devastating assaults and stupefying ideological covers, the poems point to an alternative future winnable through the spirit, and logic, of solidarity exemplified in her opening poem’s insistence that “This is the best time./This is the only time to come together.” In this other possible world, “the land is not bullied and beaten into/a tombstone,” “the talk will take place in my language,” and “the men/of my family between the ages of six and sixty-five/are not/marched into a roundup that leads to the grave” (“Moving Towards Home”). In the United States between 1980 and 1985, however, signs of such another possible world were tough to find, and Living Room’s closing call, “It is time to make our way home,” may thus seem like nothing more than a rote benediction by a lone poet who lacks the ethos, the public office or private power, to affect history’s course. Solidarity, we might conclude, has an old-fashioned charm but fails in get-real political appeal.

Certainly it’s true that in the opening years of the 1980s, Jordan and other U.S. activists received few answers to their calls for solidarity
and mass action. In fact, the Reagan and Thatcher eras began with what turned out to be very nearly mortal blows to labor solidarity: As Reagan fired PATCO’s striking air traffic controllers and Thatcher turned out the military against Britain’s miners, the rest of labor ducked for cover. Plaintive calls from workers on the frontlines—most notably from Austin, Minnesota’s meatpacking workers whose desperate strike against Hormel is the subject of the Oscar-winning American Dream (Koppel 1993)—were heard as calls to mourning rather than calls to action. Immersed in the belt-tightening rhetoric of the Reagan and subsequent administrations, most of the U.S. public, and certainly union officials, overlooked that the same year Hormel demanded a double-digit wage cut from Austin workers, it posted $30 million in net profit. Similarly, under the thrall of today’s headlines—concessions demanded amid bankruptcy filings by leading airlines and automakers—and anxiety over stagnant wages and growing family debt, it’s easy to miss a headline like this: “US Set for Record Run of Profits” (Guerrera and Wighton 2006, 15).

An injury to one is an injury to all: That was the slogan raised in the early years of the twentieth century by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which battled police, military, and vigilante lynch mobs as it sought to organize the unskilled, immigrant workers shunned by the exclusive and nativist AFL craft unions. Since the Reagan-Thatcher 1980s, as conditions for unskilled, immigrant, and service-economy workers worsen once more, the IWW’s slogan has been nearly undone: An injury to one is simply an injury to one.

Yet consider what also accompanied the 1985 publication of Living Room: the escalating agitation that brought down South Africa’s apartheid regime accompanied by the sanctuary movement for refugees from the U.S. proxy wars against progressive governments and movements in Central America, demonstrations on U.S. campuses to kick out CIA recruiters, plus urgent public actions by ACT UP to force Washington to provide long-delayed acknowledgment of and relief for the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Here we need to extend the time line forward: from 1985 onward as economic, political, and military globalization has continued its destructive march and also as globalization has created voices of audible, international discontent. If we look forward from the mid-1980s, we cannot miss accumulating instances of confrontation and even, with the collapse of apartheid and the implosion of Soviet state capitalism, foundational change. Add to this the 1989 abortion rights demonstration in Washington DC, the protests against the first Gulf War, and the mass uprising of the Los Angeles Rebellion in the wake of the Rodney
King verdict. The end of the 1990s brought another explosion with the global economic justice movement and its anti-corporate-globalization insistence that “The world is not for sale.” In the same city in which the IWW had first fought for the right to public speech and assembly, students, environmentalists, workers, and farmers from Latin America and North America united to oppose neoliberalism’s biggest offensive, the North American Trade Agreement, against a century’s worth of labor, environmental, and social security gains.

None of these movements has proceeded without interruption and setback. Reagan-Bush-era expressions of dissent receded, for instance, with the election of President Bill Clinton and the hope that the new administration would defend abortion rights, stand up for lesbians and gays, deliver universal health care and a peace dividend too—even if Clinton did run for office on the “tough-on-crime” execution of a mentally handicapped black man and promoted the New Democrats’ promise to “end welfare as we know it.” (Clinton’s 1992 Democratic National Convention speech makes for a rich if disturbing lesson in how a rhetor can construct trust-winning appeal that runs from left to right on the political spectrum.) Cowboy capitalists joined by U.S. and European investors were quick to move into the former Eastern Bloc, and any notion of a peace dividend was set aside as old and new players jockeyed for control in the Balkans and the resource-rich, strategically located former Soviet republics. More recently in the United States, economic justice organizations and national antiwar committees have been ambivalent about responding to the war on Afghanistan and silent on the targeting of Arabs and Muslims.

Looking just at these moments of stand-down and retreat, I might conclude—as I might have concluded on the first night after Shock and Awe—that contemporary global capitalism is too powerful, people too duped by Top Gun media stunts or divided by demonizing stereotypes. I might form such a conclusion except that evidence of refusal and resistance still abounds. Jordan’s call to collective action against neoliberal rollback in Living Room’s (1985) opening poem, along with her radical claim to identification with oppressed groups worldwide in the collection’s final poem—“I was born a Black woman/and now/I am become a Palestinian”—has found multiple echoes. Here are some examples: in the 1997 UPS strike as full-time and part-time workers banded together to insist “Part-time America doesn’t work!”; in 2002 when tens of thousands of protestors gathered simultaneously in Porto Alegre and New York City to hoist banners proclaiming “They are all Enron and we are all
Argentina!”; in 2006 as French and North African students and workers defeated the Villepin government’s divide-and-conquer job security rollbacks with the slogan *Workers, students, unemployed, undocumented—let’s fight insecurity with solidarity!* Even as by every measure globalization has increased human misery and environmental degradation something else has increased too: the motivation for mass resistance by people who are bound together in, and potentially against, the same “race to the bottom.” Solidarity rhetoric has in these moments a material, not only a moral, basis.

Moreover, these are examples of winning solidarity that academics ought to embrace to address our own deteriorating conditions of work. Neoliberal “flexibility” has created in the United States neoliberalized universities with 65 percent of faculty working without the tenure track’s (increasingly shaky) job security and academic freedom and with 46 percent of faculty working part time (American Association of University Professors 2006). “Money for the classroom, not the boardroom!” was the slogan of my faculty union’s first contract drive, fueled by popular outrage at the World Com and Enron debacles and by frustration with a university administration that had added eighteen new vice presidents while downsizing faculty and staff. Today, however, despite one union covering us all, adjunct and tenure-line faculty at my university are increasingly divided by varying degrees of “privilege” that are in fact varying degrees of vulnerability. Here it might help us to take a chapter from the 1997 UPS strike and its worker-uniting arguments (Kumar 2006). We need the slogan “Part-time higher ed doesn’t work” both to connect with other faculty against corporatized administrations and to connect with students, the majority of whom will not be richly rewarded in the new economy and so likewise need strategies for solidarity and resistance (Gilyard 2003, 229).

Though we can’t call a strike or launch a social movement from a classroom, we can teach and learn the attitudes, relationships, and practices that are the preconditions for imagining oneself and others as participants in social policy making and agents of social change. Try even just bringing a makeshift soapbox into the classroom—an exercise I’ll return to in this book and that Erwin (2006) also describes. Ask your students to step up on it and, for a minute or two, talk—on any topic and in any tone—about what is on their minds. “Don’t Be Afraid of That Soapbox Day!” is the single event in all of my classes that students point to, in final papers and course evaluations, as teaching, and even changing, them the most: not because most are likely to
engage in soapboxing again but because for a moment they felt visible, not just in a classroom but with their classmates in shared difficulties and shared potential.

A Public World Is Possible

For much of the time that I worked on this book, I have been unable to say that all we must do is look outside our department meetings and beyond conference hotels to see what our mission and relevance—what a future for public writing—could be. What appeared to be the rising tide of the global economic justice movement rapidly receded with the September 11, 2001, attacks; the intermittent struggles against war and for abortion rights and gay marriage were absorbed into election campaigns by candidates who would openly support none of these causes. Following the November 2004 reelection of George W. Bush, *The Nation* even amputated the famous assertion of Joe Hill, IWW organizer and working-class free-speech defender, who went to his death proclaiming “Don’t mourn—organize!” After the election, *The Nation* advised simply, and self-indulgently, “Mourn.”

A handful of weeks in the spring of 2006, however, have brought once again into view what massive public contestation against neoliberalism’s scapegoating and exploitation can look like. Declaring “We produce, we demand!” Latino workers, with and without papers, led the first mass strikes—shutting down the country’s biggest airports and ports—the United States has seen since the 1930s, also joining labor and civil rights solidly together for the first time in U.S. history. The *New York Times* certainly grasped the full potential for order-shaking upset. In a weekend editorial preceding the mass May Day demonstration, it worried that come Monday “The nation will rattle with the emptiness of millions of immigrants not working, not shopping and not going to school,” and the editorial ended with this warning: “Sleeping giants can, and should, get moving. But they should tread carefully” (“The Sleeping Giant” 2006).

Never mind this absence of official sanction, May Day’s *El Gran Paro*, or Great American Boycott, surged forward, and although—as has been true of all prior significant challenges to corporate globalization and U.S. policy—this surge did not issue from the halls of academe, it had a measurable impact on the available ideas and lifting aspirations on my college campus. In fact, awakened on the University of Vermont (UVM) campus were the first sizable mobilizations in almost twenty years. With the city’s newly formed immigrant rights coalition, several
lecturers from UVM’s College of Education (who had just received pink slips after ten, fifteen, and even twenty years of service) stood with education students behind the banner “No one is illegal—or disposable.” Other students, organizing with staff and custodial workers, launched a “tent city” for livable wages. By pitching pup tents in the shadow of the $61-million, 186,000-square-foot student center under construction, they created a visual image of the great gulf between the center’s lavish amenities and the poverty wages to be paid to those who would staff its retail mall and restaurants.

In the absence of official endorsement and moneyed sponsors, these from-below movements are genuinely grassroots. They are also remarkably, and necessarily, inventive as individuals and groups come together not only to raise good slogans but also to figure out how, through mainstream and alternative channels, to make their slogans heard while facing multiple foils. The students at UVM who pitched Tent City, for instance, had originally planned a takeover of the administration building wing that houses offices for the president and twenty-one vice presidents. When they were turned away by a locked door and an armed guard (for the rest of that spring the university kept its administrative wing under lock and guard), they improvised on the space available, the university’s green. Here we have a re-presentation of Marx’s aphorism: Though not in conditions of their own choosing, these men and women strove to make history.

It is not in conditions of their own choosing either that dissenting soldiers are organizing today with remarkable inventiveness. While *The Nation* cried “Mourn” following the 2004 elections, Navy petty officer Pablo Paredes called a press conference. Wearing his message on a T-shirt—“Like a [Bush] Cabinet Member, I Resign”—Paredes stood in view of his San Diego-based, Iraq-bound ship and explained to reporters why he would face court-martial rather than board. Paredes wasn’t acting as a lone rhetor. He organized the press conference with San Diego military counseling, peace and justice, and antiwar veterans groups and through the inspiration of the Iraq War’s first soldier to publicly refuse (re)deployment, Camilo Mejía. Inspiration—this time of Vietnam-era GI coffeehouses—also moved Citizen Soldier, a soldiers’ and war resisters’ advocacy group, to open the Different Drummer Café outside the gates of Fort Drum in Watertown, New York. Because new homeland security measures deter today’s war resistance counselors from walking onto a base and talking with soldiers in the commissary, creativity beyond the GI coffeehouses is also coming into
play. Vermonter Liam Madden, cofounder of the Appeal for Redress campaign, for instance, has organized with other servicewomen and men to use their active-duty status to deliver “care packages” on half a dozen U.S. bases from Virginia to California (Totten 2006). What’s inside these care packages? Baked goods, of course; also Sir! No Sir! (a powerful documentary about the Vietnam soldiers’ revolt), The Ground Truth (featuring members of Iraq Veterans Against the War), plus information on soldiers’ rights to dissent.

Academics concerned about our own freedoms for teaching and research should take heart and courage from these members of a wider public standing up despite considerable restriction and threat of reprisal. Particularly for teachers concerned with how people lacking public office and private means find or create an audience, there’s much to learn here too. Paredes used a forum, the press conference, that is usually not viewed as among the available means of uncredentialed citizens and noncommissioned officers. Madden “repurposed” the apolitical care package as a means to deliver the ideas, information, and tools soldiers need to organize together against war. Of course, they, like participants in the immigrant rights movement and campus campaigns for livable wages, use new information technologies that many compositionists see as central to our field’s future. We should also note how in these key recent movements new information technologies support, but don’t supplant, low-tech and traditional means of delivery. From an overpass in Los Angeles on May Day hung a bedsheet banner: “After I grewed your food and built your home, why do you treat me like a criminal?” In the middle of Manhattan, uniformed “soldiers” order “civilians” down on the pavement and up against walls—a fully embodied, frighteningly real piece of street theater called “Operation First Casualty” written and performed by Iraq Veterans Against the War to bring home (as participants explain) the truth—war’s first casualty—about the occupation of Iraq (Iraq Veterans 2007). Against one of Tent City’s pup tents is a piece of plywood spray painted with the words UVM Can Do Better. Within the circle of pup tents, someone sets up a plastic milk-carton soapbox. A sympathetic staff member in the university’s facilities office supplies a sound system so that what is spoken from the soapbox—music, speeches, poetry, letters of support—can be heard across the green and through the administration building’s open windows. In a seminar discussion of these campus arguments and rhetorical means, a senior art student notes that in addition to ignoring the question of livable wages, university expansion plans also omit new facilities and faculty for the overenrolled, space-cramped studio
art program. For her final project in a seminar on women’s rhetoric, the student organizes a petition drive among art students and faculty and a meeting with the university’s president, preceded by a public “paint-in” to show, visually, how limited space pushes students into setting up easels in hallways and stairwells.

What I am describing here is how, for a few weeks, many of us witnessed an expansion, not diminishment, of people’s hopes for what public rhetorical practice can achieve. Each is also an incredible demonstration of Wells’ (1996) observation that effective public writing in a privatized age—“After I grewed your food . . .”; “They’re our brothers/they’re our sisters/We support war resisters”—is not going to sound (and indeed in any age has never sounded) like E. B. White. I don’t want to overstate the reach of each of these going-public attempts. Dissenting soldiers have yet to receive the wide broadcast that would be possible if they were supported by a national antiwar movement, and they struggle against severe reprisal including courts-martial, prison sentences, and dishonorable discharges that would strip them of education and health care benefits. The Department of Homeland Security answered the spring 2006 mass demonstrations for immigrant rights with “Operation Return to Sender,” particularly cracking down on Latino workers in workplaces, such as meatpacking plants in the Midwest and South, with rejuvenated labor unions. At the University of Vermont, even as education lecturers and students publicly rallied against contract-violating layoffs, union staffers negotiated behind-the-scenes settlements for each, extinguishing their hopes for continued full employment and undermining job security for hundreds of campus lecturers. In these ways and more, the war goes on. That’s a perspective we can’t avoid if we’re to teach public writing in touch with the difficult conditions at hand. But here, in the examples of antiwar care packages and paint-ins for art, and in the pages to come, I hope to offer a much fuller perspective from which we can teach: Yes, the war goes on, but people have—and frequently find ways to assert—minds of their own.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.