

Introduction

Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community.

—JUDITH BUTLER

In 2017, the for-profit University of Phoenix released a commercial entitled “We Can Do IT.” Reminiscent of a short Pixar film, the computer-animated ad gives viewers a series of glimpses into the life of an unnamed woman.

She is at home, using a stuffed bunny to cheer up her son after he has a small fall in the kitchen. Her daughter watches from the table. She appears to be a single mother.

She is at work, doing her job on a factory floor. In the background, a group of men observes a robot doing the same job. Time accelerates and the surrounding human-staffed workstations are replaced by similar robots until our heroine is the last person standing—but soon a faceless suit looms behind her. She and the viewer both know what’s coming.

She sits alone in her darkened kitchen, all of her possessions from work gathered in a box on the table. Among those possessions is a poster emblazoned with the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter and the line “We Can Do It!” Her son runs up to her with his stuffed bunny, attempting to lift her spirits as she once lifted his. Mom can barely muster a smile, but she pulls her son close and glances at Rosie. So far, the commercial has lasted about forty seconds.

Now she is looking at a University of Phoenix web page promoting a degree in information technology. She clicks a button at the bottom of the page: “Get Started.” In a montage laden with multitasking, she works on her degree while cooking dinner, sitting alone in the kitchen late at night, lying in bed while her children sleep beside her. Approximately seven seconds after we see her enroll, we see that she’s graduated. Standing in the kitchen wearing a graduation gown, she celebrates with the kids.

Finally, we see her at a new IT job. The Rosie poster now hangs in her cubicle, and she uses a marker to turn “We Can Do It!” into “We Can Do IT!” As she examines a bank of computer servers, the University of Phoenix’s tagline fades in: “We rise.”

Call me sentimental, but the first time I saw that commercial, I had a hard time not getting pulled in by the promises of its narrative. Despite the fact that I am a staunch supporter of public universities, know the University of Phoenix’s history of settlements related to questionable admissions practices and its students’ inordinate loan debt,¹ and have a PhD in rhetoric and writing that you think would have prepared me to resist the ad’s persuasive tactics, I wanted to root for its protagonist. But why? Part of it is probably my idealistic desire for higher education to be accessible to a wide range of people—including working-class single mothers—and for it to be a means of class mobility. I know the predatory practices of many for-profit universities have warped and exploited such ideals, and I know the improbability of the ad’s fantastical story given a host of real-world factors. But what am I supposed to do? Hope that the woman fails? I want to see her exercise agency and end up with something to show for it.

In the weeks after I first saw the commercial, I saw it again. And again. And again. A streaming service I used decided I was among the target audience for “We Can Do IT” and started playing it ad nauseam. The sheer number of times I was exposed to it wrecked the commercial’s initial appeal, but my inclination to make sense of that appeal meant that even after copious viewings, I was still paying attention.

I became pretty familiar with everything in the ad—the characters, the soundtrack, the narrative beats—before I started to notice everything that wasn’t. One notable omission in what is ostensibly an advertisement for higher education: educators. At no point in the commercial do we see any indication of interaction with a teacher (or another student, for that matter). It’s not just that we don’t see any sign of a teacher’s physical presence; the

teachers are also digitally absent. We see no emails exchanged, no assignment prompts, no comments on homework or a test. The seven-second sequence during which the woman successfully begins, pursues, and receives her degree suggests her diligence and exhaustion, but she's the only actor involved. The University of Phoenix seems no more dependent on human employees or interactions than the ad's automated factory. Thank goodness our protagonist majored in IT and not education.

As someone who makes a living teaching at a public university, my subsequent realizations about the commercial's omissions evoked a lot of professional anxieties. Over the last few decades, much has been made of new digital technologies that could potentially disrupt, take over, or redistribute work traditionally done by teachers. At the same time, the humans who continue to teach in higher education have become more disposable as states have axed funding and institutions have become increasingly reliant on undercompensated contingent faculty.² In this environment, what role remains for the teacher? And at what point do an educator's working conditions render such a question moot? That is, even if a human teacher can do things that the inventions of innovators and investors in the educational technology sector can't, are those things worth the effort for a few thousand dollars per class with no benefits?

This book explores the relentlessly precarious figure of the teacher in relation to students as well as a wide range of educational technologies, social structures, classroom materials, and rhetorical devices that have helped define that figure. I spend time on the aforementioned factors shaping teachers' roles in twenty-first-century college classrooms but also argue that these factors echo back through much of the history of education, particularly the history of rhetorical education.

For readers unfamiliar with the broad contours of rhetoric and rhetorical education, a brief overview: Rhetoric's roots are often traced back to ancient Athens, where people like Aspasia, Isocrates, Gorgias, and Aristotle instructed students in the theory and practice of effective communication and argumentation. Those figures were *rhetoricians*: theorists and teachers of the art of rhetoric. They were not necessarily *rhetors*, a term more nearly synonymous with "orator," though many rhetoricians were also known for their oratorical prowess. That's a reductive version of the story, of course. Rhetorical activity was happening far beyond the bounds of one Greek city.³ Even within Athens, there were all kinds of internecine squabbles over the

merits and meanings of rhetoric and rhetorical education, which I address in chapter 1. I offer a simplified story here not only to provide those without backgrounds in rhetoric with a sense of what I mean when I refer to “rhetoric” and “rhetoricians” but also to foreground rhetoric’s unique influence on the shape of Western education. For example, in addition to creating one of the earliest recorded schools of rhetoric, Isocrates arguably established the concept of liberal arts education. Moreover, in ancient Greek and Roman education, rhetoric was often not just part of a student’s education but its culmination, and it remained a core component of Western education for centuries afterward (for example, as one of the three parts of the medieval trivium).⁴ While rhetorical education’s fortunes have waxed and waned dramatically over the past millennium, rhetorically inclined courses in speech and writing remain curricular staples at colleges and universities across the United States, and many facets of Western higher education would not be what they are without rhetoric’s pedagogical and theoretical legacies.

Thus, while the cases and illustrations in this book are often drawn specifically from the history of rhetoric, I present the figure of the rhetorician as a meaningful metonymic stand-in for the figure of the teacher. My scholarly training and teaching experience are in rhetoric and writing studies, a field that developed in tandem with the modern first-year composition course. This book was inspired by what I see as key challenges for those committed to making the case for rhetoric as a scholarly pursuit and educational endeavor—challenges I’ve experienced in the course of teaching first-year composition and other rhetoric and writing courses at an array of institutions. Increasingly, I have come to see those challenges as inseparable from how we conceptualize the role of the teacher and as a microcosmic version of the complexities involved in making the case for public education more generally. In short, this book is about rhetorical education, but its arguments unfold in ways that I hope will be relevant to educators who don’t think of themselves as rhetoricians.⁵

Specifically, I argue that we need to find alternatives to the concept of agency—often positioned as the *sine qua non* of educational theory and practice—in which to ground our approaches to and cases for higher education. Scholars within and beyond rhetoric have critiqued, extended, and enriched that concept in diverse and compelling ways, taking it far beyond simplistic notions of unqualified individual autonomy. To offer just one

example, rhetoric and writing scholar Marilyn M. Cooper has defined agency as “the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions.”⁶ Yoking agency to responsibility, Cooper argues that “rhetorical agency is a big responsibility. It means being responsible for oneself, for others, and for the common world we construct together.”⁷ However, even the most thoroughgoing critiques of traditional conceptions of agency tend to end by presenting new conceptions of agency. In these contexts, agency can take on an inviolable power all its own, an essential foundation for human action and rhetorical education’s efficacy that must be maintained at all costs. While I’m not interested in dismissing agency from the scene, I aim to reframe the work of teaching in terms of a conception of responsibility that is not grounded in agency. I do so for two intertwined reasons.

The first is what you might call a theoretical concern. Drawing on scholarship at the intersection of rhetoric and ethics, I argue that anything we might call agency is the product of responsibility. Instead of agency allowing a person to take responsibility for others and for their own actions, I argue that agency is premised on our inescapable exposure to others, the fact that we cannot help *responding* to others. In making this argument, I hope to show that, despite what many scholars have claimed, questioning agency does not necessarily undermine the case for education. Instead, I present responsibility as a key term that allows us to rethink the ethics of student-teacher relationships and the theoretical significance of teachers’ work.

The second is what you might call a practical concern. The complex ways in which most scholars theorize agency are far from the common senses in which agency gets thrown around in everyday usage. For these scholars, agency means anything but the simplistic notion that individuals can, like the woman in the University of Phoenix commercial, pull themselves up by their bootstraps, exerting uninhibited control over themselves and their circumstances regardless of external influences. However, given the ongoing prominence of individualistic conceptions of agency and responsibility in American culture, it’s all too easy for even the most nuanced account of agency to be reduced to or heard as basic bootstrap logic. As I’ll argue, even folks who should know better often equate human agency with something like a student’s self-guided seven-second journey from unemployment to an IT gig, as if it’s only a matter of giving an agentive

individual the right educational tools and opportunities to succeed, never mind all manner of social, economic, political, material, and professional inequities and barriers. From a practical perspective, I argue that agency's rhetorical power is constrained by this ready-made recuperation into the fantastical all-American dream that "I" (not "we," not really) "can do it." While scholars have done significant work conceptualizing agency as a powerful force for social action—a force that is rarely if ever exercised by a single person, even as its consequences and benefits often accrue to individuals—*agency* is easily gobbled up by dubious discourses of *mastery* over self, skills, and content knowledge. Describing the work of education in terms of responsibility lets us make a significantly different case for what's lost when entities like the University of Phoenix eliminate the teacher from the equation.

To return to the advertisement with which I began, this is a book about how and to what extent teachers are or should be included in the "we" of higher ed's "We Can Do It." If so, what is our role in this "we," and does it involve creating something better for students and teachers than the isolated vision of education forwarded by the University of Phoenix, and even the somewhat less chimerical visions that have shaped the United States' public higher education system as we know it? What does it mean to be a teacher in relation to students? Are teachers authoritative masters of certain skills necessary to private, professional, or public life? Are we adjuncts who are ideally left behind once our students master such skills? Do we lead students along paths of knowledge or trail behind them? Are we curators? Scholars? Theorists? Instructors? Collaborators? Grading machines? Humanists? Essential workers? Disposable adjuncts? I begin with no certain answers to these questions. In many ways, I end having only managed to proliferate some more questions. But the asking of them and the attempt to respond is, I'd wager, part and parcel of the rhetorical, ethical, relational work of teaching.

In the rest of this introduction, I offer an initial historical and theoretical overview of and justification for this book's key terms: authority, agency, and responsibility. Specifically, I set up how teachers' authority and students' agency, despite supplying two very different rationales for education, share a similar reliance on the logic of individual mastery. I then take my first steps toward a theory of pedagogical responsibility that seeks to unsettle that logic, which I continue pursuing throughout the rest of this book.

WHAT IS PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY?

Through radical shifts in economic and political systems, material conditions, and family ties, the student-teacher relationship has remained a remarkably stable characterization of a particular kind of connection between people, especially between the young and the old, between adults and those who are for one reason or another seen as not yet fully formed. In the present, the work of the teacher is often described as empowering students, granting them agency so that they can act more effectively and efficiently in their future lives. But for much of educational history, the emphasis was on the power and authority of the teacher. This emphasis has waned significantly over the past century, though defenses of teacherly authority are by no means a thing of the past. As Raffaella Cribiore notes, “After the attacks on teachers’ rule in post-1960s educational politics, today there are attempts to revive a traditional image of the Teacher and to restore pedagogical authority, together with a heightened emphasis on teacher accountability and control of teachers’ work.”⁸ While I am not an advocate of reinstating traditional notions of teacherly authority, that authority has been a distinctly influential force in the history of student-teacher relationships and thus provides an important backdrop for matters of pedagogical agency and responsibility. Over the next few pages, I dig into the history of teacherly authority, including cases in which it was far from the stable force its present-day defenders often make it out to be.

Speaking historically, the student-teacher relationship has frequently been positioned as bridging the gap between, on one side, parent-child relationships and, on the other, relations between citizens and the various political, social, and professional authorities to and for which they are responsible. This is the view taken by political theorist Hannah Arendt, one of the twentieth century’s most influential thinkers on authority. In “The Crisis in Education” (1958), Arendt writes, “Now school is by no means the world and must not pretend to be; it is rather the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all. . . . [S]chool in a sense represents the world, although it is not yet actually the world.”⁹

Within this “institution,” Arendt argues, teachers’ authority over students should be a given.¹⁰ But, she claims, “modern society” has made a hash

of the proper authority relationship between teachers and students. She describes this society—the United States in particular—as undergoing a “process of emancipation” that has rightly liberated groups such as “workers and women” by shifting the value of their members’ lives from a private to a public concern.¹¹ But when it is extended to schoolchildren, this process goes off the rails: “Children cannot throw off educational authority as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority—though even this absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need of liberation has actually been tried out in modern educational practice. Authority has been discarded by the adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children.”¹²

Arendt presents this crisis of educational authority, which is also a crisis of educational responsibility, as part of a broader authority crisis. As she puts it in another essay, “It is my contention that . . . authority has vanished from the modern world.”¹³ She continues, “The most significant symptom of this crisis . . . is that it has spread to such prepolitical areas as . . . education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity. . . . [T]he fact that even this prepolitical authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really is.”¹⁴

At the political level, Arendt takes authority’s newfound insecurity as a reason to think rather than a reason to panic—a crisis that leaves us “confronted anew . . . by the elementary problems of human living-together.”¹⁵ But she posits a disconnect between the realms of politics and education that explains her consternation about this crisis’s consequences for schools and their wards. For Arendt, “nothing is more questionable than the political relevance of examples drawn from the field of education” and vice versa,¹⁶ so, unlike the relation between a political leader and citizens, a teacher’s authority over students is distinctly *unquestionable*, an indispensable check on “the tyranny of the majority” that would otherwise take hold among students.¹⁷ In other words, in being “emancipated” from the authority of adults in general and teachers in particular, “the child has not been freed but has been subjected to a much more terrifying and truly tyrannical authority.”¹⁸

But however much Arendt's dire descriptions make the modern classroom sound like *Lord of the Flies*, examining the history of Western education makes one question how much better things actually were under the watch of teachers whose authority was, at least at first glance, more established.

Consider the violent practices that went hand in hand with medieval rhetoric pedagogy. According to Jody Enders, the memory techniques taught and theorized about by medieval rhetoricians are particularly emblematic of such practices.¹⁹ From a mnemonic device for the zodiac that involves a ram kicking a bull in the testicles to the whip marks teachers inscribed on student bodies—which were meant to teach students a different kind of commemorative lesson—Enders traces a grisly genealogy born of rhetoric, pedagogy, and memory. Countering those who claim rhetoric and rhetorical education offer alternatives to violence, Enders argues, “Inasmuch as the ostensibly mediatory powers of a rhetoric grounded in the memory must originate in violence, rhetoric itself must remain at odds with itself and civilization must be paired with cruelty.”²⁰ Venturing beyond the Middle Ages, she further warns against assuming a clean break between the violence of medieval rhetoric pedagogy and “the myth of a non-violent [modern] pedagogy.”²¹

In Enders's examples, the pedagogical scene's predominant violence is enacted on students. From “unjust floggings” to the epistemic discipline that bent students' linguistic and rhetorical habits to match those of the schoolmaster, Enders makes readers feel for medieval students.²² But her argument is literally wrapped in a different story. The book jacket for the collection in which Enders's essay appears depicts the death of Cassian of Imola, a schoolteacher and canonized Catholic martyr. As his story has been handed down, Cassian was fatally attacked by his students, who broke their writing tablets over his body, gouged him with their styluses, and scrawled their assigned grammar lessons on his corpse.²³ The tale of Cassian's death underscores the varied forces that haunt the relationship between teachers and students, a relationship that is historically entangled with various forms of corporeal, religious, sexual, political, and rhetorical authority.

Moreover, it underscores that, contra Enders, these forms of authority were (and are) not just imposed by teachers on students. And contra Arendt, it suggests that the authority of Western teachers has been

decidedly unstable for a long time. It's worth remembering that in ancient Greece and Rome, many of those charged with tutoring students at home and leading them to school were enslaved. In fact, the very word "pedagogy" has etymological ties to slavery.²⁴ From enslaved pedagogues to the precariously positioned rhetoricians of the Roman Empire, from the dead lettered of the Middle Ages to the contingent and adjunct instructors who teach first-year writing and speech courses in contemporary universities, those who teach rhetoric have frequently occupied marginal positions in the very structures of authority that they've helped—willingly or unwillingly—to perpetuate and challenge. While rhetoricians often received a slightly greater degree of social and cultural prestige than other teachers, their professional and political lives were nevertheless unsteady.²⁵

To put it bluntly, students are not the only ones punished by educational systems. Again, I don't say this to insist teachers' authority must be shored up. I'm not interested in simply inverting the matter and arguing that teachers need to be protected from students—an argumentative tack taken by an array of professors and commentators flipping out over alarmist conceptions of trigger warnings, "cancel culture," and the threat to free speech purportedly posed by student activists protesting the conditions faced by marginalized students—for example, activists pursuing racial justice on the campuses of US colleges and universities.²⁶

Which brings me back to Hannah Arendt, whose own writings on race and education met with serious, justifiable resistance. While Arendt's claims about the waning authority of teachers might overstate that authority's historical clout, her defense of educational authority possesses a certain appeal. After all, how many teachers—myself included—sometimes assert a sort of pedagogical authority in the pursuit of more equitable pedagogical spaces? Even in higher education, where teachers are no longer simply adults instructing children, and even in college-level rhetoric and writing courses, whose practitioners and proponents have spent decades advocating for student-centered pedagogies, how many teachers exercise authority in order to, say, prevent a small handful of students from monopolizing class discussions or keep the rhetorical preconceptions of the most self-assured students from going unchallenged? How many of us assert our pedagogical authority as a way of resisting "the tyranny of the majority"?²⁷

But to see the limits of Arendt's ideas about educational authority, one need only turn to Little Rock, Arkansas, which, in 1957, became a flashpoint

in the civil rights movement and the struggle for racial justice in the United States. In the fall of that year, three years after the US Supreme Court declared all laws establishing segregated schools unconstitutional, nine Black students enrolled in the newly desegregated Little Rock Central High School. Two years after that, Arendt published an infamous essay entitled “Reflections on Little Rock.”²⁸ She argued that, in the case of school desegregation, adults were abdicating their proper authority by putting children on the front lines of political upheaval. She writes, “I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, showing a . . . girl [Elizabeth Eckford], accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted . . . by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters.”²⁹ Arendt goes on to argue, “The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero . . . something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be. . . . The picture looked to me like a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it. Have we now come to the point where . . . we intend to have our political battles fought out in the school yards?”³⁰

In the ensuing decades, critics disputed and defended various parts of Arendt’s argument. I want to focus briefly on the response of novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison. In short, Ellison didn’t think Arendt understood the particular situation faced by Black people, including Black students, in the South. He describes that situation as “the basic, implicit heroism of people who must live in a society without recognition. . . . Such a position raises a people above a simple position of social and political inferiority and it imposes upon them the necessity of understanding” others and “themselves too . . . in relationship to other Americans. Men in our situation simply cannot afford to ignore the nuances of human relationships.”³¹ For Ellison,

one of the important clues to the meaning of that experience lies in the idea, the *ideal* of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt’s failure to grasp the importance of this ideal . . . caused her to fly way off into left field in her “Reflections on Little Rock.” . . . [S]he has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. . . . [I]n the

outlook of many of these parents (who wish that the problem didn't exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger *precisely* because he is a Negro American.³²

Ellison positions the social situation faced by Black schoolchildren and their parents as radically contingent, with their lives unfolding in a network of hostility and terror that requires relentless attunement to relationships, racial inequalities, and social and political structures. As he puts it, "There are no abstract rules. . . . Each group must play the cards as history deals them."³³ Ellison's points are elaborated by political theorist Danielle Allen, who notes that white Southerners' history of "maintaining key public spaces as their exclusive possession" forced Black Southerners to become "accustomed to acquiescing to such norms and to the acts of violence that enforced them."³⁴ The desegregation of Little Rock Central thus played out in the context of "two etiquettes of citizenship—the one of dominance, the other of acquiescence"—rooted in historical, political, and racial dealings "meant to police the boundaries of the public sphere," including public schools attended by white students, "as a 'whites-only' space."³⁵ Arendt minimizes this context insofar as she explicitly generalizes her concern with the cause of Black people in the South by aligning it with the struggles of "all oppressed or under-privileged peoples."³⁶

I highlight Ellison's response to Arendt not to suggest that her thoughts on educational authority are entirely bankrupt. Even in "Reflections on Little Rock," one can see flashes of good intention, even if they are quickly snuffed out by Arendt's jab at Eckford's "absent father" or her lack of attention to the everyday circumstances faced by Black parents, children, and students.³⁷ Rather, I do so to point out the ways in which a theory of educational authority collapses when it does not or cannot account for and *respond* to the particular situations inhabited by those populating the classrooms and sidewalks on which that theory is brought to bear. As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin points out, Arendt herself was frequently troubled by the relationship between abstraction and particularity.³⁸ At times, Arendt would swear off "dangerous abstraction," aware that "no general category can fully capture or do justice to who a particular individual is."³⁹ And yet in many of her works, Arendt nevertheless abstracts from particulars.⁴⁰ Arendt was far from unaware of the risks involved in applying theoretical generalities to specific situations,

even as “Reflections on Little Rock” dramatically disregards the specifics highlighted by Ellison and Allen.

In fact, in some ways I’d suggest Arendt’s writings on educational authority have more to offer the situations of the present moment than they did those of 1959. In the early twenty-first century, we have faced a different set of political tensions when it comes to the relation between race and educational institutions, especially institutions of higher education. While Arendt was concerned that Black students were being granted insufficient safety and protection in what she thought should be the relatively authoritarian confines of schools, many recent observers are concerned that marginalized college students are demanding an *excess* of safety. Writing about students who, in 2015, spoke out against the conditions faced by Black students at the University of Missouri and at Yale University, *Atlantic* columnist Conor Friedersdorf claimed, “It is as if they’ve weaponized the concept of ‘safe spaces.’”⁴¹ Friedersdorf’s argument reflects a broader trend in discourse around college students, especially feminist students, queer students, and students of color: that they’ve become too protected, too desirous of safety, too “coddled.”⁴² The notion that college students have grown dangerously sensitive has become a powerful and abstract commonplace, in many ways laying the groundwork for more recent conservative moral panics over “cancel culture.” Given its power in contemporary political discourse and relevance to some of this book’s key terms, it’s worth dwelling on this notion at length.

By way of illustration, consider Friedersdorf’s account of a series of events that took place at Yale University in late 2015.⁴³ He begins by quickly noting that, in advance of Halloween, “Yale administrators” sent an email containing “heavy-handed advice” about costumes students should avoid. (The email, which was sent by the university’s Intercultural Affairs Committee and about which Friedersdorf provides minimal detail, strikes me as a rather benign bit of institutional boilerplate. It notes past cases of Yale students wearing Halloween costumes involving blackface and redface, and the writers state that while students “definitely have a right to express themselves, we would hope” they avoid costumes that disrespect “segments of our population.” It goes on to “encourage” students to consider such questions as “Does this costume reduce cultural differences to jokes or stereotypes?”⁴⁴) Friedersdorf then jumps to a subsequent email critiquing that advice, which he treats in much more detail. The critique was written

by Erika Christakis, a lecturer at Yale and wife of Nicholas Christakis, a professor who at the time served as residential “master” of Yale’s Silliman College. In her email, Christakis worries about “the consequences of an institutional (bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students.”⁴⁵ After citing her background as an “educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood” and “a former preschool teacher,” she ventures several hypotheticals, including the statute of limitations “on dreaming of dressing as [Disney character] Tiana the Frog Princess if you aren’t a black girl from New Orleans.”⁴⁶ Friedersdorf lauds Christakis’s email, which was sent to all Silliman students, as “a model of relevant, thoughtful, civil engagement.”⁴⁷ (In Friedersdorf’s telling, the immaculately civil Christakises sound not so distant from the martyred Cassian of Imola.) However, the letter prompted “a faction of students” to launch what Friedersdorf calls “a campaign of public shaming” against Christakis and her husband, which included calling for the couple to be “removed from their residential positions.” After characterizing Nicholas Christakis’s engagement with members of this student “faction” as “restrained,” “civil,” and magnanimous, Friedersdorf criticizes the students’ claims from a number of angles. I want to highlight just one of his critiques—one that draws inspiration from Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s “The Coddling of the American Mind,” a 2015 *Atlantic* piece subsequently expanded into a book of the same name. Lukianoff and Haidt’s arguments about “coddling” have frequently been cited by pundits and writers concerned that student activists’ sensitivity and overzealousness for social justice makes them a threat to free speech and to themselves.

Borrowing the language of cognitive behavioral therapy, Friedersdorf paraphrases Lukianoff and Haidt’s claim that “too many college students engage in ‘catastrophizing,’ which is to say, turning common events into nightmarish trials.” He goes on to quote an open letter responding to Christakis’s email signed by hundreds of “Concerned Yale Students, Alumni, Family, Friends, and Staff.” While the letter explicitly states that the writers “are not asking to be coddled,”⁴⁸ Friedersdorf makes it pretty clear he thinks they are. But as he sees it, to ask to be coddled is a self-defeating proposition. That’s because in claiming to be victims, the students are in fact victimizing themselves: “These students . . . need someone to teach them how empowered they are by virtue of their mere enrollment [at Yale]; . . . that their worth is inherent, not contingent; . . . that they are capable of

tremendous resilience; and that most possess it now despite the disempowering ideology foisted on them by well-intentioned, wrongheaded ideologues encouraging them to imagine that they are not privileged.”⁴⁹

Note here that Friedersdorf falls into a bit of abstraction akin to Arendt’s: specifically, he emphasizes that students’ worth “is inherent, not contingent.” When it comes to moral values and democratic ideals, I—and I would bet many of the students he criticizes—share his conviction. However, even though his objections to *how* some of the student activists argued and behaved may merit consideration, his rejection of the contingency of students’ empowerment and worth falls into the same trap as Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock”: he writes from an idealized, abstracted position that cannot or will not account for the particulars that have made students of color at Yale feel the tenuousness of their own position, including the fact of white Yale students wearing blackface as recently as 2007.⁵⁰ In other words, by displacing arguments about institutional politics and patterns of behavior toward students of color into the realm of abstract moral arguments about the inherent worth of individuals, Friedersdorf loses the trees for the forest.

A few years later, a variation of Friedersdorf’s argument was forwarded by powerful ideological companions. In 2020, the Trump administration issued a directive that federal agencies should identify and divert funds away from any training programs on “‘critical race theory,’ ‘white privilege,’ or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.”⁵¹ Following Trump’s loss in the 2020 presidential election, a number of conservative state governments pursued legislation that echoed that directive.⁵² For example, the Tennessee state legislature passed a bill preventing “teachers or other employees” of local education agencies from using “supplemental instructional materials that include or promote the following concepts: (1) One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; (2) Any individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously.”⁵³ Many of these bills make an abstraction similar to Friedersdorf’s: whether in response to such publications as *The 1619 Project*, actions by the Biden administration, or critical race theory, they displace arguments about historical contingencies and present realities into the realm of moral and political abstractions about the *inherent*

equality of individuals.⁵⁴ In these cases, critical race theory—a legal and academic framework whose practitioners have carefully traced the diverse, particular historical and current inequities faced by people of color in the United States—is misconstrued as claiming just the opposite: that racial inequities are inherent rather than contingent.⁵⁵ Ironically, then, critical race theorists would likely concur with many of the abstract principles these bills advocate (i.e., that no race is inherently superior to or worthier than another) even as the bills themselves make it less likely that the particular injustices that have granted white Americans an aggregate position of material, political, and social superiority will be addressed in US classrooms.

I dwell on Friedersdorf’s argument to demonstrate how it inverts Arendt’s abstractions in “Reflections on Little Rock,” leveraging abstraction to position US students as too protected, too sensitive, too coddled rather than insufficiently protected. This case is often made by extracting marginalized students from their particular context and the patterns of aggression and dismissal that they face, expecting them to behave as transcendently rational and moral beings in the face of peers’ immanently offensive behaviors—the kinds of “regressive, or even transgressive” behaviors for which Erika Christakis and Friedersdorf seem to think college campuses *should* provide a safe space.⁵⁶ Cussing out cool and collected authority figures, on the other hand, would seem to be a bridge too far, marking an excess of sensitivity that, unlike the historically acceptable offenses and transgressions of white students, cannot be tolerated.

However, scholars have offered compelling rejoinders to the alleged crisis of campus sensitivity. For example, Sara Ahmed writes, “We need to be too sensitive if we are to challenge what is not being addressed”: “issues of racism, power, and sexism on campus.”⁵⁷ Drawing on Ahmed, Kendall Gerdes argues, “Understanding that the safe house is a precondition for the contact zone—and that sensitivity is the precondition for rhetorical affection—should change the way we think and argue about trigger warnings and other issues of academic freedom and free speech on campus where figures of ‘sensitive students’ are likely to appear.”⁵⁸

In summation, I trace the contours of Arendt’s response to Little Rock and Friedersdorf’s critique of students at Yale with an eye toward responsibility. In both pieces, the writers’ abstractions serve to shore up conventional notions of authority. While that is less obvious in Friedersdorf’s case, note that he almost always presents individual campus authority

figures (though not the faceless “Yale administrators” he barely defines) as rational, civil actors holding the coddled mob at bay. And yet he also holds up an abstract notion of agency of which I am highly skeptical: the individual student who, despite the repeated offensive behaviors of those in more secure positions, should remain ever the rational, self-controlled, idealized citizen-in-training. My case for responsibility as an alternate relational trope to authority and agency resonates with Gerdes’s reframing of dismissive claims about “sensitive students.” The kind of responsibility I’m calling attention to is, like sensitivity, a “precondition for rhetorical affection,” an exposure to others that may pave the way to authoritative or agentic action but is itself a key ethical component of pedagogical relations that cannot be contained within the abstracted parameters of authority and/or agency. In short, responsibility is a sensitive thing, and how I’m using the term merits careful explication.

RESPONSIBILITY AND AGENCY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Recent scholarship in rhetorical theory has called fresh attention to the intersections of rhetoric and ethics.⁵⁹ A well-established area of rhetorical studies, rhetorical theory is generally concerned with how symbols structure and mediate relations between beings. The scope and definition of rhetorical theory is subject to much debate,⁶⁰ but Ira Allen provides a helpful gloss: “*the self-consciously ethical study of how symbolic animals negotiate constraint.*”⁶¹ In other words, rhetorical theory entails the study of the symbols (sometimes linguistic, sometimes not) that shape and are shaped by beings (sometimes humans, sometimes others) as well as the use of those symbols to articulate new theories and practices of symbolic engagement with and between others. Scholars have framed rhetorical theory as an “ethical study” to the significant, and arguably inherent, extent that ethics and rhetoric are intertwined because of the symbolic dimensions of how we emerge and exist with others.

While rhetorical theorists have drawn on and sketched out a variety of ethical frameworks, the writings of Emmanuel Levinas have provided a key source of inspiration, with Levinas’s conception of responsibility attracting particular attention. Ethics, in the Levinasian sense, is not a matter of building categorical or conditional systems of moral precepts to guide human behavior and relations. Instead, it is about considering the conditions that make such relations possible. In this context, responsibility is not

something an agentive individual simply possesses or intentionally enacts but a condition that precedes agency and is bound up with our inherent exposedness—one might also say “sensitivity”—to others. Rhetorical theorists have demonstrated how Levinasian ethics and responsibility can illuminate the conditions that make rhetorical activity possible.⁶² In short, both Levinas and rhetorical theorists emphasize the ethical complexities at work in the ways relations between beings unfold through, in, and beyond language. However, most rhetorical work on Levinas focuses on extracurricular activities, addressing pedagogical matters implicitly or incidentally. One of this book’s primary arguments is that the ethical questions raised by Levinas-inspired rhetorical theory have important implications for teaching and vice versa. That said, Levinasian ethics is difficult to gloss, and I save my primary explication for chapter 4. Here, I take just a few pages to distinguish Levinasian responsibility from rhetorical theories and everyday notions that ground responsibility in agency. I then suggest important ways in which it allows us to reframe the significance of teacher-student relationships.

To frame this introductory account, let’s revisit Jody Enders’s characterization of such relationships, which is explicitly indebted to an account of subject formation laid out by Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche’s account, human subjectivity emerges in response to aggressive punishment, which, as Judith Butler glosses it, “compels an originally aggressive human to turn that aggression ‘inward,’ to craft an inner world composed of a guilty conscience and to vent that aggression against oneself in the name of morality.”⁶³ In other words, a subject becomes self-conscious because someone else finds that subject wanting, issuing a punishment or judgment that causes the subject to internalize the other’s aggression. For Enders, the medieval rhetoric teacher serves as an emblematic dispenser of punishment and fabricator of self-loathing student-subjects.

But, drawing on Levinas, Butler argues Nietzsche’s account “does not fully take into account the scene of address through which *responsibility* is queried and then either accepted or denied.”⁶⁴ Butler positions the scene of address as “the rhetorical condition for responsibility,” a condition upon which Nietzsche’s “scene of punishment” depends, and describes responsibility as “an unwilling susceptibility” rather than something a person consciously cultivates.⁶⁵ Butler thus suggests that “to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these

limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community.”⁶⁶ Responding to theorists who assert that responsibility requires a decisively self-aware agent who is in control of and can be held accountable for their actions, Butler suggests that responsibility establishes and is established by the *limits* of “self-understanding.”

For the sake of my argument, Butler’s Levinasian scene of address opens the possibility for a scene of *pedagogical* address that stands as an indispensable supplement to Enders’s Nietzschean scene of pedagogical punishment. But while the kinds of “limits” Butler describes are not ignored in the field of rhetoric, they are often positioned as at odds with or ancillary to the field’s pedagogical and practical pursuits. Responsibility, whether seen as an unwilling susceptibility or a capacity taken on by a willful subject, tends to play second fiddle to agency.⁶⁷ As one quick example, the 2011 *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* includes responsibility as one of the “eight habits of mind essential for success in college writing” but defines it as “the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.”⁶⁸ Even though responsibility gets a nod, it is positioned as the agential ability of a self-aware individual rather than a susceptibility or vulnerability to others. In other words, responsibility becomes a way of exercising agency rather than a condition for agency. I argue that careful thinking about responsibility can enrich—and, yes, limit—the ways we write about and take up agency. In doing so, I seek to offer an alternative to the argument that theorists “can pursue an unrestrained deconstruction of the agency of speakers and writers only at the risk of theorizing themselves out of their jobs,” and to suggest that the unrestrained valorization of agency comes with its own professional risks.⁶⁹

As a more extensive illustration of the relative positions of agency and responsibility in rhetorical scholarship, consider Arabella Lyon’s engagement with Butler’s work. In *Deliberative Acts*, Lyon draws on Butler to develop “a theory of performative deliberation, where deliberation is an action or a practice.”⁷⁰ As a part of her theory, Lyon conceptualizes agency as shared and intersubjective, intertwined with matters of “recognition, responsibility, and reciprocity.”⁷¹ However, Lyon defines those terms quite differently than Butler. “Recognition,” for instance, is “a self-willed engagement with another,” a far cry from unwilling susceptibility.⁷² Ultimately, Lyon concludes, “Theorizing recognition is difficult in the best of times,

but Butler's site of accusation and accounting seems more fraught with desire, distrust, and disengagement, more difficult and demanding than recognition theorized through a pragmatics of sanction and narratable lives. To account for oneself and one's acts toward another, I argue, one must go beyond performative and constative acts of basic recognition. . . . Butler will not help us here. . . . Butler's sense of accounting escapes . . . [the] operational difficulties of difference and the other through its solipsism."⁷³

There are potential challenges to Lyon's reading of Butler.⁷⁴ But setting those aside, Lyon makes a persuasive case that Butler's theory of recognition is a bad fit for her theory of performative deliberation. Lyon engages Butler's work in a chapter focused on Libyan lawyer Eman al-Obeidi, who drew international media attention in 2011 when she reported her captivity and assault by a group of Muammar Gaddafi's soldiers. Lyon analyzes the strategies by which al-Obeidi "redefined the normative discourse for her own story" and "succeeded in . . . making her narratable self no longer the sexualized woman but the hurt citizen."⁷⁵ For Lyon, one of the many factors that makes al-Obeidi's story noteworthy is "the force of her agency in extending rights norms to all Libyans."⁷⁶ Despite the intractability of Western media frameworks, al-Obeidi was able to "claim and manipulate human rights discourse and norms in the service of performative deliberation."⁷⁷ This is a case where it is completely understandable to emphasize and respect al-Obeidi's agency—intersubjective and constrained by norms though it may be—over her unwilling susceptibility.

I would extend this point to many projects in rhetoric. Rhetoricians have published a wide array of articles and books focused on the laudable, remarkable practices of marginalized rhetors. It will come as no surprise to those familiar with such scholarship that these rhetors were vulnerable to material, political, and discursive powers beyond their immediate control. What is striking is their ability to exert agency in the context of such constraining power structures, and downplaying that agency can be, to say the very least, profoundly disrespectful. For that reason and others, while this book advocates for and draws on theories that decenter agency, I want to proceed cautiously and carefully. To argue for more attention to responsibility in the context of rhetorical education is, again, not to dismiss agency, nor to argue for responsibility as the new preeminent term for all rhetorical projects. After all, no theory is a fit for every situation.

Rather, theorizing teacher-student relationships requires constant attendance to the rhetorical, cultural, and contextual variables that shape those relationships in any given situation. For example, to the extent that contemporary universities are seen as transitional sites that mediate between private and public life, the teachers they employ do not fit neatly into culturally constructed gender binaries that such thinkers as Arendt often, even if unintentionally, rely on to analyze different types of authority.⁷⁸ That is, because such institutions are “protopublic” rather than simply private *or* public,⁷⁹ populated by students who might range in age from seventeen to seventy and beyond, higher educators do not necessarily possess either the authority over public matters conventionally (and problematically) associated with masculinity or the authority over children’s private upbringing conventionally (and problematically) associated with femininity. A rhetorical theory must respond to such situational complexities. In the case of rhetoricians, matters are further complicated by such factors as the precarious employment situations of most of those who teach rhetoric and writing at the college level as well as the feminization of rhetoric in Western intellectual traditions.⁸⁰ So while I am interested in asking when teachers and students alike might embrace, or at least acknowledge, responsibility as an alternative to agency, readers and I should bear in mind that who is imbued with more or less agency, granted the authority of abstraction, or situated as vulnerable or responsible is a moving target. As a significant body of intersectional scholarship has pointed out, critiquing power dynamics is not a simple matter of identifying the empowered and disempowered parties in simplistic, isolated, exclusionary binaries (e.g., teacher/student, male/female).⁸¹ Even in the relatively delimited context of first-year composition courses, everything from gender to race to employment situation to age to professional title can affect the delicate dynamics of teacher-student relationships.⁸² And even in relationships *between* students, “claims to authority” are “interactionally contingent,” which raises further complications for teachers attempting to navigate questions of relative authority, agency, and responsibility.⁸³

In the end, it is because neither teachers nor students are absolutely marginalized figures that I resist dismissing alternatives or challenges to agency from the pedagogical scene. I put the radically responsible subject described by Levinas-inspired work in rhetorical theory in conversation

with pedagogy because pedagogical practices involve teachers *and* students interrupting and being interrupted. They involve, in a word, responding. My approach emphasizes the ways in which teachers and students are unwillingly susceptible to each other, never wholly sealed off by either authority or agency. I do not deny that teacherly authority and student agency exist, but I position them as contingent states, relentlessly fragile rather than steadily accumulated and strengthened over time. Ethics, as articulated by Levinas, lets us dwell in the moments in which these contingent states crystallize or shatter, calling attention to the responsibility on which they are premised. It thus offers a way to counteract the seemingly diminishing profile of the teacher-student relationship by refusing to frame it purely or primarily in service of other authoritative or agentic ends. As advocates of critical pedagogy have long challenged the notion that education is the process of teachers depositing information in students, my engagement with Levinasian ethics challenges the notion that education is primarily or solely the process of teachers fomenting agency in students. It highlights the unwilling responsibilities of teachers and students, not just their mutual capacities, as an indispensable (though not always laudatory) part of pedagogical relationships. And in doing so, it can call attention to what is lost when those relationships dissipate, replaced by presumably authoritative educational technologies or fantastically agentic students who can do it themselves, no teachers required.

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

Over the course of this book, I move back and forth between theoretical matters and pedagogical ones. For readers used to books that start with the elaboration of a theory and then offer a pedagogical or practical application of that theory, this may seem surprising or idiosyncratic. The same goes for readers who have grown accustomed to clean distinctions between theoretical work and scholarship of teaching and learning. But as I have tried to demonstrate in this introduction, it is my conviction that the theoretical and pedagogical matters at stake are inextricable from one another. To my mind, it is more productive to let theory and pedagogy respond to one another than to grant one priority over the other.

In pursuing this goal, I again echo Levinas: in the preface to his book *Totality and Infinity*, he points out that he runs the risk of “appearing to

confuse theory and practice.”⁸⁴ As he argues, “Hitherto the relation between theory and practice was not conceivable other than as a solidarity or a hierarchy: activity rests on cognitions that illuminate it.” In other words, practical activity rests on theoretical knowledge. Levinas, however, resists the hierarchical notion that “knowledge requires from acts the mastery of matter, minds, and societies”; thus the “apparent confusion [of theory and practice] . . . constitutes one of the theses of” his book.⁸⁵ The same goes here.⁸⁶

Similarly, I do not focus on a single historical era or move through the history of education in strictly chronological fashion. Instead, I adopt something akin to what rhetoricians Debra Hawhee and Christa J. Olson call “pan-historiography,” approaching “documents and materials, however incongruous, with an eye toward making those materials move, reanimating them in a way that renders visible, audible, and lively a variety of historical figures, voices, and viewpoints.”⁸⁷ Just as I argue that seemingly disparate corners of theory and pedagogy have significant things to say to one another, I argue that different moments in the history of education—modern, medieval, ancient, today, last year, tomorrow—can speak to, without subsuming, one another. In doing so, I make the implicit and explicit argument that we can better understand the place of authority, agency, and responsibility in the past, present, and future of education by looking at a variety of historical and rhetorical contexts without assuming that history moves in a teleological manner. Like theory and practice, history can be an interruptive force, and its interruptions tell us something.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

As I’ve attempted to demonstrate, teacher-student relationships and the ways we theorize and enact them do not occur in a vacuum. They are mediated, constrained, and supported by a range of material, political, economic, social, cultural, and technological systems and assumptions. And in turn, how those relationships unfold affects those systems and assumptions. For that reason, while teachers and students are central to this book, its chapters focus on key rhetorical structures that have mediated and continue to mediate relationships between them. By “structures,” I mean everything from ancient tropes to digital platforms—the multifarious devices and technologies that have helped set the parameters within and beyond which

rhetorical education has unfolded. While these structures span the history of Western education, I argue that they meaningfully illustrate diverse attempts to define education in terms of teacherly authority and/or student agency; juxtaposing them with one another thus allows us to see the particularity and persistence of authority and agency within and across eras. Moreover, I argue that reframing these structures in terms of responsibility—which is already lurking around their edges, waiting to be recognized—allows us to sketch out a different rhetorical and ethical paradigm for higher education. En route to responsibility, I begin with a pair of chapters on teacherly authority, examining and challenging the ways it has served as a primary conceptual justification and framework for teacher-student relationships at certain moments in the history of education. I then turn to more contemporary contexts in which student agency has taken over much of the conceptual terrain once held by teacherly authority. Despite the apparent shift in emphasis from teacherly authority to student agency, I argue that both depend on a logic of individual mastery that can and should be called into question by pedagogies premised on responsibility.

In chapter 1, I focus on Socratic irony. One of the most tenacious ways of conceptualizing the teacher-student relation, Socratic irony is often figured as a way for a canny, masterful teacher to demonstrate and propagate intellectual authority. I reposition such irony as an uncontrollable force that can humble and humiliate teacher and student alike. Focusing on Plato's *Gorgias* and Aristophanes's *Clouds*, I demonstrate how rethinking Socratic irony might unsettle the teacher's position of authoritative mastery with regard to both students and systematized bodies of knowledge. I end by connecting this line of argument to the ways in which pedagogy's infrastructural contexts have influenced student-teacher relationships in the wake of ancient Athens's rhetorical upheavals.

Extending chapter 1's critique of teacherly authority, chapter 2 turns to *prosopopoeiae*, imitation exercises that have been a pedagogical staple throughout much of the history of rhetorical education. These exercises, which asked students to write and deliver speeches in the voices of well-known literary and historical figures, were often seen as a way of instilling the rhetorical authority of the schoolmaster in the students, turning them into rhetorical masters in training. I begin by presenting a reworked version of one such exercise from a contemporary classroom—a version that attempts to move away from tropes of mastery and authority. However, I

then call attention to the limitations of that exercise, showing how even the most presumably nonauthoritative pedagogical practices carry the residue of mastery. In all, I use the history of imitation exercises to demonstrate how attempts to move from teacherly authority to student agency can reinscribe notions of mastery and how attention to responsibility might help us recognize and question that process of reinscription.

In the second half of the book, I shift the emphasis to more recent pedagogical contexts and notions of student agency. In chapters 3 and 4, I analyze and present alternatives to commonplace arguments around online education. My goal is not to dismiss online education as a whole but to critique the overblown utopianism that often accompanies new educational technologies and that, through appeals to student agency, can serve as an excuse for slashing public investment in education. In chapter 3, I focus specifically on the ways for-profit massive open online courses, or xMOOCs, purported to refigure the relationship between teachers and students, arguing that xMOOC advocates in fact relied on hypertrophied and questionable notions of student agency that educators have long deployed. I offer a history of the arguments for and against xMOOCs, emphasizing the ways in which those arguments diverge from and reiterate the clichés of historical and ongoing debates about education's ability to empower students and the potential of new technologies to democratize access to education. While some may see xMOOCs as a relic of the 2010s, I demonstrate that the tropes and clichés on which their advocates relied have been a staple of alleged innovations throughout the history of educational technology and are all but certain to keep recurring in education's not-so-distant future. Understanding and being prepared to rebut such commonplace arguments are far from bygone concerns.

In chapter 4, I challenge xMOOC advocates' agency-based assumptions about how students learn by explicating Levinas's concept of responsibility. Expanding on this introduction's engagement with that concept, I argue that Levinasian responsibility offers a significant alternative to theories of education grounded in agency-centered notions of freedom and autonomy. Challenging xMOOCs' valorization of individual student agency, I forward what I call pedagogies of responsibility. I then compare and contrast two different agency-based visions of peer engagement: (1) the way xMOOC advocates describe the role of such courses' "peer networks" and (2) the forms of peer response that have long been a staple of rhetoric and writing

classrooms. After examining points of similarity and difference between these two approaches to peer engagement, I present an alternative conception of peer response grounded in responsibility.

Finally, in chapter 5, I offer an open-ended illustration of the possibilities of responsibility and the limitations of authoritative, agentic mastery by questioning the power of the thesis statement. One of contemporary rhetoric and writing instruction's most ubiquitous devices, the thesis statement is a rhetorical move that places students in a position of progressive mastery relative to the act of writing and the topics they research. Linking confident, unqualified thesis statements with a lack of nuance in contemporary public argument, I argue for a greater emphasis on uncertainty, hypothesizing, and hesitation in both writing pedagogy and rhetorical theory. I use the conceit of a hedge maze to structure the chapter, with its arguments recursively returning and responding to each other rather than moving in a straight line toward increasingly masterful conclusions. In so doing, I aim to perform the antithetical approach to educational theory and practice for which my final chapter—if not the entirety of this book—argues.

In all, what follows constitutes a series of attempts to work humbly and haltingly toward new models of teacher-student relationships. In making those attempts, I am responsible to teachers, students, and systems past and present as I posit that rhetorical claims to agency and authority are dependent upon responsibility. I want to be clear that this book does not offer an unqualified defense of the US higher education system as it currently operates, nor of the Western rhetorical and pedagogical traditions that inform much of that system. The arguments I make are in many ways critical of both. What I offer, rather, is a case for a more generous, caring, and sensitive approach to public higher education than US universities—historically entangled with broader national inequities, from slavery to the violent expropriation of Indigenous land to segregation to current forms of economic inequality—have ever managed to cultivate.⁸⁸ I offer implicit and explicit critiques of the historical tendency to defund public education at the very moments when teachers and students stop representing the interests of the already well-heeled, and I'm not just posturing in asking when and whether the work teachers and students do is actually worth it given the material and rhetorical conditions in which they're learning and working. But I also offer a hesitant defense of what higher education *could be*,

and occasionally manages to be, bearing in mind that many of the institutions most eager and prepared to replace public colleges and universities are predatory or parasitic for-profit entities that feed on and perpetuate the most utopian versions of student agency and teacherly authority laid out in this introduction—which, not coincidentally, also tend to be the most hollow and exploitative versions of such concepts, ultimately unburdened by the *responsibility* without which we wouldn't have much of anything to learn from one another. It is to that responsibility that I, in conversation with you, hope to attend.