Transcript for Episode 12: This We Believe

Run Time: 15:58

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer, host)
KS: Karrieann Soto (producer, host)
CS: Cindy Selfe (guest speaker)
PF: Paul Feigenbaum (guest speaker)
SL: Steve Lamos (guest speaker)
EC: Ellen Cushman (guest speaker)

Cue music: "As Colorful as Ever" by Broke for Free.

AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

BK: Hi everyone, I'm Ben Kuebrich, here to introduce a special edition of the show.

This week, we are partnering with the "This We Believe" project to bring stories from the field of rhetoric and composition about the meaning of democracy. Stay with us for Cindy Selfe, Paul Feigenbaum, Steve Lamos, and Ellen Cushman who talk about democracy in our classrooms and in the world, in theory and in practice, and through linguistic and social action.

These are just four of many audio and video recordings that make up the This We Believe project. The others will be hosted on the This We Believe Website, which you can find at twb.syr.edu or from the link at our website. Your participation in this project is strongly encouraged. You can record your own responses to a list of questions or get in touch with the Writing Democracy project at CCCC in Indianapolis.

To start us off today, here's Karrieann Soto, reading the This We Believe statement of purpose.

Cue music: "Murmur" by Broke for Free.

KS: Seventy-five years ago during the Great Depression, a division of the Works Progress Administration called Federal Writers' Project (FWP) employed writers and researchers to create "a new roadmap for the cultural rediscovery of America" via local guidebooks, oral histories, and folklore. Today, college writing programs, service-learning programs, and scholars across the disciplines are engaging in university-community partnerships that might together create a similar roadmap rediscovering 21st century America.

After the 2008 crash, numerous commentators suggested the idea of a new FWP. Although it became clear by late 2009 that Obama's stimulus package would not fund such a project, the idea inspired a conference, Writing Democracy: A Rhetoric of (T)here,

in March 2011 at Texas A&M-Commerce. Over 150 scholars, students, and community members convened to examine concepts of place, local publics, and popular movements in an attempt to understand and promote democracy through research, writing, and action. Since that time, those involved have continued to talk and develop strategies for linking writing to democracy.

This We Believe is an attempt to expand and archive those conversations. FWP 2.0—our name for a fledgling 21st century Federal Writers' Project—has been reaching out to students, teachers, and everyday citizens asking them to record a short, two-minute response to any of several questions:

1. To paraphrase Raymond Carver, "what do we talk about when we talk about democracy"?
2. What does U.S. democracy look like to you? How do its realities compare to your dream of democracy in our nation and in our world?
3. How does writing, as cultural work, serve the project of democracy? What possibilities does writing hold for helping us to reimagine and reinvigorate U.S. democracy locally and nationally?
4. In this time of growing interconnectedness and economic globalization, what opportunities and challenges face democracy beyond national borders?

Cue music: "Murmur" by Broke for Free.

BK: So here we go. We're going to introduce four amazing scholars who offered to respond to some of these questions about democracy.

AH: This is Allison Hitt, and I talked with Cindy Selfe, Humanities Distinguished Professor at The Ohio State University. We met up in Las Vegas outside of the 4Cs conference to chat about how narratives serve the project of democracy.

CS: For me, one of the important intersections between democracy and writing has to do with the stories that people tell about their lives and about their involvement with the world and the goals that they have in the world. And I think sometimes when we think about democracy, we think so *big*—you know, governmental systems and city-wide systems—that we lose sight of the individuals who are talking about those systems or who take part in those systems. For me, writing provides the *lever*, the way to get *into* a system, a democratic system, and then to make it your own through the telling of a story.

One of the projects I've always enjoyed doing is having people write about their lives, write about their goals and aspirations, write about the ways in which they'd like to live their lives and live their lives in their communities and be involved in their communities. And in that way, get at what it's important to them, and in that way influence democratic understandings of systems. But it's the stories that people tell that give me the best hints about those democratic goals and aspirations, and that's why I love the notion of the national Writer's Project—the idea that as a country we even could pay people or encourage people to go out and collect those stories from people. Stories fascinate me.

They're so laden and richly textured with the values and the literate activities of individuals that it makes me happy to think of that as shaping the communities within which they work and live and make change.

Cue music: "Murmur" by Broke for Free.

BK: I met up with Paul Feigenbaum, Assistant Professor at Florida International University, and he talked with me about ideal vs. real democracy in theory and practice. We also recorded this outside in Las Vegas, so there's some nice background noise. Here it is.

PF: I've worked with a lot of organizations over the past 10 years or so that pride themselves on being democratic and egalitarian—nobody's above anybody else. And I love the theory of that, but the practice of it has often fallen far from the ideal because even when there are not formal distinctions and hierarchies, what I've noticed is a lot of informal hierarchies develop. And it's not because anybody's being disingenuous or intending to pervert their ideals. A lot of it is for expedience sake.

I guess my ideal of democracy is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) where their meetings would often go 24 hours. The idea was everybody's voice must be heard and respected. In that respect, to do democracy in the way they understood it is very slow, very time-consuming, very inefficient. The organizations that I've worked with realistically have not had the time for that. Everybody is busy with other things: they have full-time jobs, they have families, they have other commitments. Despite their commitment to the ideal of democracy, as time-saving devices we end up not discussing things the way we want to. We end up not hearing each other. We don't listen to each other. We don't have time to talk, to express our voices. [*Siren*] A lot of informal hierarchies develop. They start off informally, and then over time they become sort of formal. So democracy for me is—in practice—really, really hard. I don't think I've actually ever experienced it in practice.

Cue music: "Murmur" by Broke for Free.

BK: Next, I talked with Steve Lamos, Associate Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and asked him about the relationship between democracy and higher education.

SL: I think one of the ways in which I think about that question is, *What is the present and future role of higher education in the United States?* And I'm still going to reference the panel that I was just at where the folks were talking about the ways in which thinking about higher education has shifted from a public good to a private investment. That is to say, from something for which we as a society are responsible—we as a democracy are responsible—*to* something that individual human beings are responsible for themselves. And the panelists made a really important point. That shift in thinking has also coincided with some of the most widespread disparities in income that we've seen in many, many decades. That shift from public to private certainly has been accompanied by a massive student debt, rising tuition costs, and this growing sense among many folks across the United States that higher education is something increasingly reserved for elite people.

To me, I think one of the biggest challenges that we face as so-called mainstream higher education institutions—the ones that you know about, the state schools, Syracuse vs. University of Colorado, where I'm at—is to try to imagine ways to counteract some of those forces so that our students are able to participate without literally walking away from undergraduate education with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt. In the meantime, we're witnessing for-profit institutions capitalizing on the shift from the public responsibility for higher education to the private responsibility.

They're more than happy to assume higher education as kind of private responsibility and they're more than happy, at the same time, to say, *we offer you a kind of consumer-based experience that you want. Our classes are geared towards your needs. We have small class; we'll offer them to you at times that fit your schedule.* And so while we're on the one hand—"we" being traditional higher education—aren't responding very well to these shifts, it seems that the for-profits—the University of Phoenix and others—are doing a great job of marketing what it is that they're doing. The question is, *does the education that they supply enhance or undercut democratic ideals*?

If higher education is at least in part about critical thinking, about citizenship, about making sure that the work in the world that we do is ethical and moral and matters, I'm not sure that we, in more traditional higher education, haven't done a particularly good job yet of justifying the work that we do in ways that are palatable in this new climate.

Cue music: "Namer" by High Places.

BK: Finally, I met up with Ellen Cushman, Professor at Michigan State University. This is just a small piece of a longer recording to be posted on the This We Believe Project website. In this segment, she describes a more democratic concept of knowledge production and a re-ordering of disciplinarity structured around this more democratic understanding.

EC: We haven't necessarily changed out the imperial constructs of knowledge-making, and those are also based on individuals, right? You become *the* author and as an author, your job is to produce knowledge that speaks to a very narrow audience, so on and so forth. I mean, you kind of understand how it is, how institutions are—like academe are—built on the individual scholar's research or individual team of scholars' working toward a very specific area and how it is that department structures, I think, also are deeply imbued—deeply colored by the imperialist legacy

And so what happens is that our knowledge work tends to be—as democratic as we try to make it, as much change as we may try to seek in bridging with communities—we still ultimately are positioned in ways that continue to replicate the problematic structures in the first place. And so to me that is both a challenge and an opportunity. What does academe look like without disciplines? What does it look like when groups of scholars who have various knowledges and skill sets within particular areas and they can be very, very deep—what happens when they work together to solve larger problems?

And, to me, a really interesting university would be one that is based on solving problems almost exclusively and that teams of scholars work together to identify questions that are important to multiple peoples and that they work with multiple peoples to create knowledge and that the knowledge is honored and that the expertise of community members is honored to solving and addressing those problems or creating something new and wonderful or inventing this incredible app or this cure to a disease, so on and so on and so on. There's so much work that we can do together that would move us beyond disciplinarity, which I think is the largest problem.

And so what I'm doing there is talking about academe as a microcosm for nations and democracy, and if you see this state as a discipline for example and how states identify their citizens and disciplines identify their scholars. I'm drawing a larger parallel there.

Cue music: "Note Drop" by Broke for Free.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Allison Hitt and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.