

Episode 13: Uncivil Rhetoric

Run Time: 22:41

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BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer, host)
NW: Nancy Welch (guest speaker)
ARL: Amelia Ramsey-Lefevre (guest speaker)
UR: Ursula Rozum (guest speaker)
BO: Barack Obama (news audio)

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

Cue music: "Biomythos" by Revolution Void.

BK: Hi everyone, I'm Ben Kuebrich, and [on] today's show we're taking on the topic of uncivil rhetoric. We've got some great guests. First, an interview with Nancy Welch where she talks about the location and perspective of composition and rhetoric in relation to social movements and the overlap between scholarship and activism in her own experience. Then we get to talking about the role of so-called "uncivil rhetoric" and the necessity of challenging those in power. Then we talk with two local activists: Ursula Rozum and Amelia Ramsey-Lefevre who interrupted President Obama as he spoke at a local high school. They describe raising the issue of Chelsea Manning's unjust imprisonment directly to the person with the power to set her free.

So first, Nancy Welch and I sat down in a conference room at the [2013] Conference on College Composition and Communication. I asked Welch about her experiences in social and activist movements and how it might relate to her perspective on the scholarship in composition and rhetoric.

Cue music: "Indyair" by Springtide.

NW: Well, I think that much of my current work comes out of my experiences of being involved in a variety of struggles that I became involved in not as a researcher or as a compositionist but because facing a set of challenges and difficulties and needing to do something about it. So it can be anything from trying to defend an abortion clinic and the right of women to go in without being harassed to seek whatever services they are seeking to trying to stop a campus writing center from being closed to trying to organize faculty into a union at a time when our healthcare is being dismantled.

And my involvement in any number of local struggles [and] national struggles I guess I would say positioned me as a student of public rhetoric [and] public argument in a way that I found was incredibly rich and creative and instructive and that also seemed somewhat out of step [*laughs*] with what I had been taught in the field, what I had learned, how I was teaching and working with my own students. So I found myself

wanting to bring those lessons and ideas into the classroom. And by that I don't mean bringing them in in order to somehow turn my classrooms into social movements, but it seemed to me that my classroom should be a place where we are talking about and studying and learning from a whole history of really rich, vibrant public argument that otherwise was not being represented in our composition textbooks, in composition readers, and by and large in terms of our composition journals and scholarship.

BK: Next, I asked Welch about how she sees the institutional and intellectual location of composition in relation to democratic struggles.

NW: When I think about what it is about composition's placement in the academy that might align us more with social and economic justice, I think that it is not because of the *prestige* and the disciplinary recognition. It is because of our proximity to working-class people—people who have been traditionally excluded from the academy, from halls of power. It's really that location that certainly shaped how I came into the university. I went to an urban, open admissions university with faculty who had really been shaped by the struggles for public education and access of the late 1960s into the '70s. I think of that as being what really shaped the field of composition and is really what should give our field its sense of its *ethos* and authority.

BK: Given the cultural and political conditions we live in today, I asked Welch what responsibility she thought scholars in the field have.

NW: We have a dual role. One is to actually look outward to all of the ways in which people are trying to [*laughs*], you know, organize and act for change today. So that can mean from the Arab Spring to the Madison Statehouse takeover to Occupy Wall Street to the Chicago teachers strike—the ways in which people are trying to come together and change the direction of not only this country but also what's happening around the globe. I also think most recently of Idle No More rising up against the Tar Sands Pipeline and the destruction that that would cause.

So part of it is about looking outward, but it's not just about looking outward. It's also about looking at what is happening on our campuses—What's happening in our own programs? Who is actually doing the composition teaching and who are the students in our classrooms? What kind of debt have they gone in to be there? And simultaneously be looking back at history, the history of how the right to public higher education was won in the first place and trying to figure out what it is that we do now to both—I think—link up with the different struggles that are happening beyond campus but also to bring those struggles to our campuses because we really need to fight for free public higher education and livable wages for all people doing the work of teaching education. I guess that's part of what I want to bring into the mix, too, is that when I think about public rhetoric, public composition, the public work of composition—that theme of the [4Cs] conference—it is not just about looking beyond campus but is really taking a hard look at what's happening in our own field and figuring out how do we do what the Chicago teachers did.

BK: Considering the responsibilities to challenge corporatized higher education and the democratic movements that Welch has participated in, I asked her for advice on untenured faculty or graduate students who might be interested in participating in similar work.

NW: Before I had tenure, I was involved in organizing our faculty union, and at that point I decided to do two things: one was to never do anything on my own but also to be very visible, but to be very visible with others. And I decided that the safest place for me to be was very visibly out there helping to organize this union with other people so that it would make it harder for the administration to single me out or to retaliate because it would be very obvious that they were singling me out and retaliating *for* being active in this union drive *and* that I would have a lot of other people with me who would be outraged if that were to happen.

Since then, I just have always tried to make sure that whatever I'm doing [I] bring others along with me. One, because it's just not sustainable for one person to try to do everything. Two, one person doesn't have the vision, the consciousness, the knowledge, the perspective that's really needed to know what is the right thing to be doing and to be arguing for. And then also, there's always just a great deal more safety and power in numbers, and the interesting thing to me on my own campus—because I know that there's a lot of concern about, *Well we can't do anything that's too out there because those who are the most vulnerable will be targeted* and so forth. On my own campus, whenever we have had some kind of public demonstration against budget cuts, against layoffs, the faculty and staff who have turned out in the greatest numbers are those with the least amount of security. So there were two things: one is that feeling the greatest need to turn out, and then also feeling like because what was being organized was something very big, something very public, with a lot of people feeling safety in those numbers as well. But I do feel a concern about tenured faculty saying, "Oh, we shouldn't organize anything public because that would be too risky," and then they don't turn out. I think that there's a lack of understanding about what tenure is for. You know, if you have this protection, then you *should* use it, and you should use it not in the ways that are the most comfortable for you, which might be backroom discussions with administrators, but instead you should be putting yourself out there, I think.

BK: Talking more about social movement rhetoric, I asked Welch about popular representation of social movements in our culture and in the field of composition and rhetoric.

NW: Just because it's on my mind right now, maybe I'll start with an example. A lot of people I know are watching the Netflix series *House of Cards*, and there was an episode recently that represented a national teachers strike, and it represented that strike as this angry tumult in the same way that the strike wave in the progressive area was also represented as an angry tumult, disorderly mob. In 1912 as in 2012, a real democratic strike is not an angry tumult. It is really very much a joyous discovery.

I'm thinking here particularly not of the representation of the teachers strike on *House of Cards* but instead the actual teachers strike that took place recently in Chicago. And the teachers who took part in that during the strike [and] after the strike, what they said again and again was that they had discovered themselves and they had discovered each other. They had discovered their students, their students' parents, their communities through that experience. At the same time, though, those teachers were vilified in 1912. The Bread and Roses strikers were vilified as being an angry mob, so we have again and again that representation of any kind of collective from below democratic voice and argument as being uncivil, as being a mob, and I think that compositionists have really instead of studying and learning the lessons of those kinds of actions have bought into it and accepted the kind of ruling class line that we need to have loan mediators to prevent these kinds of arguments from happening to begin with.

BK: Finally, Welch reflects on Dr. John Carlos's talk, where he described the silent protest at the 1968 Olympics. This talk happened just before our interview, so it was fresh in our minds.

NW: There was something that John Carlos said in his remarks today—something to the effect of, *Why is it that you want to make your oppressors feel comfortable?* And I think that when we look at rhetorical means in relation to people who are making decisions that are destroying the planet, that are destroying people's lives, that are immiserating and incarcerating large numbers of especially people of color around the country and around the globe, we should not be concerned about making them comfortable. We should not be concerned about finding a seat at their table. We should be thinking about how it is that we get together so that collectively we can make them very uncomfortable so that we can change them and—again—to do this collectively, democratically in a way that we discover ourselves and each other. So it's not about one person going it alone, but it is also not about negotiating and mediating with a group of people who have shown themselves to not care to about the things that I think we do deeply care about, including the future for most of our students who are not going to be those elites.

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

BK: Welch's final point seems like a fitting segue to talking with Ursula Rozum and Amelia Ramsey-Lefevre who challenged President Obama on the unjust imprisonment of Chelsea Manning, the Army intelligence analyst who blew the whistle on war crimes that she witnessed in classified documents. Manning was charged with aiding the enemy, which carried a possible life sentence. She was found not guilty on that particular charge but [was] still sentenced to 35 years in prison.

Amelia and Ursula are both staff at the Syracuse Peace Council. I should note that their action took place on the same day that Chelsea Manning officially changed her name from Bradley Manning, so Ramsey-Lefevre and Rozum's sign and message reflects Chelsea's prior gender identity and name.

Here, they describe what happened and their planning for the action, including how they got some advice from Medea Benjamin, co-founder of CODEPINK, who has some expertise in interrupting figures of power for social justice.

UR: On Thursday, August 22nd, myself and Amelia attended President Obama’s public talk at Henninger High School in Syracuse, which was held in the gym there. And we got into the gymnasium with a banner tucked under my skirt that said, “Free Bradley Manning.” It was pretty crowded, and we were positioned pretty perfectly at the top of the gymnasium bleachers right across from the TV cameras and diagonal to the president. Protests were expected, so we got some advice from Medea Benjamin at CODEPINK that a cloth banner is actually quite easy to sneak in, and it was.

ARF: We had some choice when we got in about whether we wanted to go into the standing section, which would be right in front of Obama, or go up into the bleachers on the side. I was like, “Oh if we stand, we could be a little closer to him and maybe potentially closer to the media” because another piece of advice that Medea gave us is that we might want to position ourselves near the TV cameras so they would pick up any audio.. But we went for the bleachers, and I think that was a good choice because Obama could see us really clearly, and—as Ursula said—it was really easy to photograph us up there.

BK: So Ursula held the banner, “Free Bradley Manning,” while Amelia spoke these words.

ARL: I said, “President Obama, you must free Private Manning. With all due respect, Private Manning exposed torture. Private Manning exposed war crimes. Private Manning aided the public and not the enemy.”

BK: And to get a sense of what these words feel like spoken to the President in a room packed with hundreds of people, here’s the audio from the event itself. As Ursula and Amelia mention, they’re positioned away from the microphones, so Amelia is quickly drowned out by the somewhat raucous crowd.

ARL: [*News audio*] President Obama!

BO: [*News audio*] But as any middle class family will tell you, we are not ...

ARL: [*Inaudible*] ... exposed war crimes ...

BO: I hear you. I gotcha. [*Crowd starts to boo.*] No, no, no. That’s fine. Wait, wait, wait. [*Booing becomes louder.*] We’re okay. We’re okay.

BK: [*Over audio of booing*] And the crowd here keeps booing for a while as President Obama tries to quiet them.

BO: [*Still booing*] It’s okay. Hold on, hold on a second. Hold on. Hold on! Hello everybody. Hello! Hey, hey, hey. [*Boos*] Hold on. Hold on a minute! Hold on a minute, sir. Hold on. [*Pause while crowd continues booing.*] So now, you know, hold on a second.

[*Crowd begins to applaud and whistle as Rozum and Ramsey-Lefevre are escorted out of the gymnasium.*]

Can I just say that as hecklers go, that young lady was very polite. [*laughter*] She was. And, you know, she brought up an issue of importance, and that's part of what America is all about.

BK: So I asked them for some background. Why did they pick this issue and venue, and what was the response that they got from their action?

UR: For me, part of it is we're part of this larger national movement, and so when we're in Syracuse and we have this opportunity in front of us, my thought was that anyone in the country who has been paying attention to the treatment of Bradley Manning should take the opportunity to, you know, call out President Obama on this issue because he ultimately has the power.

BK: And what has been the media response? Have you been able to get that message out?

ARL: A lot of the headlines that I've seen say, "Manning Supporters Interrupt Obama's Speech." So while there's an unfortunate emphasis on, you know, the decorum or, *It was rude and it wasn't the right venue* or whatever, people bring up the issue at least by acknowledging what we were there to say even if they don't go into a deeper conversation about it, which would be our hope.

BK: Ursula talked a bit more about the response they got from the media here.

UR: The responses have been like, "Manning's a traitor" and "Ursula Rozum's rude," and "Those women abused their freedom and have no respect for Obama" without actually acknowledging the information that Manning released. So that's been really, you know, the most frustrating.

What's irked me a little bit about the coverage is this idea that we were *heckling* Obama, and that phrase is really troublesome because we weren't heckling—we weren't *insulting* the President. We were delivering a message, which is I think really different than heckling. Heckling is, you know, [when] you shout insults and things like that. That's why we try to be very clear when we're putting out statements that we are *interrupting*, we're using our right of free speech. Amelia was very polite in her language—I think intentionally—towards the President.

BK: Then I asked Amelia what she thought of speaking directly to President Obama.

ARL: You know, you sort of expressed interest in [the question], *What was it like to speak to the potentially most powerful person?* So, it did feel like I spoke to Obama, and he heard me, and he responded to me. So one part of me on a personal level feels really empowered about that, and I feel like, *Wow, that was a great action and he heard me.* Then on the other hand, he's very respectful of people like us and Medea Benjamin who interrupt him, but it's sort of almost allows him to be that much more dismissive of it, right? He says, "Oh yeah, that's really important," but he's, you know, not actually addressing our concern. I don't really have hope that we swayed him. I mean, in my heart of hearts, it's like maybe tonight when he's going to sleep on that bus he'll remember and be like *Oh, maybe I need to think about that.* Probably not, right? [laughs]

BK: After explaining what they did in their action, I was curious about if they would support this sort of method of interruption as a tool for naming and exposing injustice elsewhere.

ARL: I guess I wouldn't make the leap to say that because it felt appropriate this time that it's always the best method or that I would recommend it for everyone or that we should always do this or something. As long as the protestors—you know there were legal protestors outside of the speech—are being cordoned off in their free speech zone three blocks away where they can be ignored, then probably this kind of method will continue to be necessary.

Cue music: "Subterranean Zerbie" by The Mork Quartet.

BK: All right, so that's the show for today. Thanks to Amelia Ramsey-Lefevre, Ursula Rozum, and Nancy Welch for being on the show and for helping to describe the necessity of challenging those who are in power and raising issues of social justice and inequality and oppression. Thanks for the work you all do.

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 Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.