The other new neighborhood we are introduced to is New York City's gay community. McBeth outlines the characteristics of what he calls gaylect, "a viable rhetorical universe" that "relies on shared lexical, paralinguistic, intonational, and other linguistic usages that differ from dominant speech patterns" and that enables gay males to establish self-identity and offer resistance to "heteronormative situations." McBeth offers a variety of lively textual examples and asks us to pay attention to gay and lesbian language, "not as a means to identify and ridicule their lispy sibilance or husky butchness but as a way to figure out how one community makes meaning in the world." Learning about the language of "Gays and Lesbians, people of other races, creeds, and classes, second-language students, underprepared students—all the people whose habits, linguistic and otherwise, perplex us," he concludes, can lead us beyond myths and stereotypes to new sources of resolution.

Thus, in these pages we take an important journey from being teachers in the ESL classroom, enforcing patterns of arrangement, to remaking ourselves as learners attuned to hearing the voices of the world. If these scholars succeed in making rhetoric the more important term in contrastive rhetoric—rhetoric in all the richness of its theory and practice—then perhaps it is time as well to change contrastive to comparative and to move beyond our emphasis on differences to a more balanced approach that allows for the possibility of similarities. Students of comparative literature, after all, study a variety of literatures, never suggesting that all should be contrasted with one. After understanding the many sources for our differences, we might also learn what we carry in common in our rhetorical suitcases.

Electric Rhetoric appeared in 1999 amidst active debate in the academy over the function and value of electronic screens in the writing classroom; the controversy has only intensified since as our initial enthusiasm over the computer's ability to deliver interactivity, equality, independence,
and diversity in our classrooms continues to be tempered by empirical research and teaching experience. Kathleen Welch’s book examines through an Isocratean lens some of the challenges facing a screen-dominated pedagogy. Her charter statement for Electric Rhetoric is that “literacy in the United States in the twenty-first century must account not only for the new configuration of intersubjectivities brought about by the merger of consciousness/mentalité and electronic articulation but must also account for the social constructions in which writing takes place.” To fulfill these desiderata, she proposes a “re-theorized” classical rhetoric, which she defines as follows: “In Electric Rhetoric, classical Greek rhetoric and writing practices are Isocratic, which is to say Sophistic, intersubjective, performative, and a merger of oralism and literacy.”

Welch argues that ignoring screens—film, video, television, computer—in our writing pedagogy only ossifies our students’ perceptions of rhetoric as irrelevant to their lives. Screens are in the life of the academy to stay, for better or for worse, and if academics wish to keep open a small window for public discourse on screens built and dominated by big business, they must actively theorize screens with their students. According to Welch, Isocrates provides a powerful model for scholarly interaction with screens. The “fragmentation, teachability, . . . Otherness, and relativism” of the sophist’s logos seems well-adapted to the fluctuating needs of a computer-classroom pedagogy. Welch envisions a rhetoric of screens powered by Isocrates as an effective antidote to the “linearity, rationality, and dualisms of the entrenched Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle” that now dictate composition instruction as it still labors under the current-traditional paradigm.

To use Isocrates toward these ends, however, Welch must “re-theorize” him, a Herculean labor that she undertakes toward the end of the book’s first section. She first grafts into his rhetoric Walter Ong’s theories of literacy and the “second orality” of screens; she then attempts to “race and gender” Isocrates’ misogynistic, imperialistic paideia. Along the lines of Ong’s 1988 Orality and Literacy, Welch argues that we inhabit a “second orality”: this is the epistemological world left to us after, first, the phasing-out of primary orality with the advent of print, and, second, the decline of print in favor of screens beginning in the 1950s. To cope well with this “second orality,” we need a flexible, associative rhetoric based on oral and aural modes, like Isocrates’, rather than the rigid hierarchy and linearity left over from centuries of an Aristotelian privileging of writing over speech. But there are class, gender, and race problems with Isocrates that Welch must address. To take the sting out of
Isocrates’ sexism, she argues for recuperating contemporary women sophists and philosophers like Diotima, whose fragments Welch believes should be taught on a par with Socrates. To efface the restrictive borders of the racial world in which Isocrates taught, thought, and lived, Welch proposes to reconstruct the relationship of that myopic cosmos to the dreaded racial chaos beyond its walls. To achieve this re-racing of Isocrates, she suggests a methodology along the lines of Martin Bernal’s reassessment of the roots of Greek history and philosophy in Black Athena.

In the second section of Electric Rhetoric, Welch further adapts Isocrates to the agora of screens by considering both the constraints and possibilities they bring to rhetoric as its new primary media. Examining the characteristics of news broadcasts and internet sites, she proposes new koinoi topoi that will extend the reach of Isocrates’ paidea to TV/video and computer screens: these include common topics like “contrasting opposites” and “praising some things on the air while privately praising other things,” as well as new rhetorical moves that Welch calls koinoi topoi but that actually resemble specific topics, or idia, of video—such things as “editing” or the “sight bite.”

In the final section of the book, Welch argues that her adapted Isocratean methods will help construct a new literacy, which she defines as an “intersubjective activity in encoding and decoding screen and alphabetic texts within specific cultural practices [that] recognizes the inevitable deployment of power and the control that larger entities have over these media.” This new rhetoric, infused with the “dynamism” of Isocratean orality, will help women and minority groups in the writing classroom. Welch claims that Native American students in particular, since their heritage is still deeply imbricated with the ethos and values of orality, can aggregate cultural power to themselves through screens. Outside the classroom, in a move reminiscent of Richard Coyne’s argument in Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age, Welch suggests that by training software designers, via Isocratean methods, to appreciate the contingent and arbitrary power of the metaphors they construct with their user interfaces, computer science professors can encourage both diversity in screen use and decentralized, democratic control of screens in America.

Having just read Isocrates for the first time, I was in many ways perfectly positioned to read Welch’s argument. I found several specific aspects of it persuasive and useful. First, fresh from reading Antidosis, I could immediately see many of the connections Welch makes between
Isocratean rhetoric and the new literacy of electric rhetoric. For example, she points out Isocrates' "sampling" behavior in _Antidosis_ as he splices in sections of his previous discourses as examples of his technique. In addition to this "fragmentation," the "associative" construction of his discourse is essentially a hypertextual strategy, creating a natural and compelling connection with web-surfing and the other modes of screen literacy that Welch advocates.

Second, having just read the Poulakos/Schiappa debate over rationalist versus historicist reconstruction of ancient texts, I found Welch's textual methodology a welcome compromise. Before she re-theorizes an Isocratean term, she proposes to collocate its meaning by examining it within the "constellation" of terms that it consistently appears in in his work. As I will discuss below, when defining terms in, Welch occasionally sidesteps her own methodology, but I consider it a powerful and promising tool for those of us who do historical rhetorical analysis.

Third, I recently taught Neil Postman's _Amusing Ourselves to Death_, and my students and I were more than ready to hear an academic rejoinder to Postman's elitist claim that television has destroyed all the wonderful critical faculties in our heads that print culture had constructed for us. I appreciated Welch's avowal that screens are here to stay, and the only result of a scholarly snubbing of them will be wholesale privatization of the media.

Unfortunately, Welch only gives surface attention to the corporate ownership of screens. If indeed "the polis of our time exists on the screens of televisions and computers," then the private ownership of those screens and what they broadcast is a major obstacle to any "re-theorizing" of screens, Isocratean or otherwise. Welch does not address Postman's valid caveat that all television programming that does not explicitly advertise a product has, at the very minimum, adopted the screen rhetoric of advertisement. Screens sell the products of the power brokers in society, the big corporations. How, then, can screens realistically empower academics to "better include non-White, non-European groups" on the strength alone of a resonance that Welch senses between those cultures' oral traditions and the "oralism/auralism" of screens? She cites the interactivity of computer screens over television screens as a way that marginalized students might begin to take control over electric rhetoric: "the computer promotes activity." However, she largely equates interactivity with "clicking" and surfing Web sites. While she addresses passivity with respect to gaze and the computer screen, she does not confront the intellectual passivity with which students accept what is
written and structured for them by screens. This dangerous passivity, coupled with the corporate ownership of screens and the persistently low computer literacy levels among entering women and minority college students, threaten to skew any application of electric rhetoric to the college computer classroom. Welch is more than certainly aware of the body of research in recent years indicating the continuing disenfranchise­ment of women and minorities in the computer classroom and in distance education; a more balanced discussion of these problems would have served her argument well and made her promise of “empowerment” of writing students through screens seem less overly optimistic.

The remaining criticisms I have of Welch’s project likely stem from the fact that I am not in her target audience. I should be, since I am a writing teacher and she is avowedly writing this book for writing teachers, but Welch’s language often cultures me as Other, as outside the in-group of colleagues who read her terms the same way she does and thus require neither definitions nor explanations. For example, Welch defines electric rhetoric as “the oral/aural/written structures of consciousness/mentalité.” For those of us unfamiliar with the prior conversations over these terms in Ong, Havelock, Vygotsky, and so on, this definition is unreadable. “Consciousness/mentalité” is equally difficult to define from context, as Welch only briefly refers to a dusty Vygotskian conception of first language acquisition as a “feature of oral discourse” on her way to arguing that thought cannot precede language and, therefore, that language constitutes consciousness. This claim is debatable at best in current neurolinguistics, but Welch does not debate it. Neither does she define what she means by the binary “oral/aural,” or what “aurality” even adds to the equation. Apparently, if one has read Ong, the terminology is clearer, but given that Orality and Literacy includes generalizations like one that claims oral texts in general “preserve the status quo,” it is clear that by channeling Ong, Welch is sacrificing current sociolinguistic assessments of the often radical nature of oral practice in non-Western cultures. Her application of Ong’s other terms is often confusing. She evaluates a news broadcast according to Ong’s eighth principle of “homeostasis” merely by stating that homeostasis in Tom Brokaw’s presentation “fits well with the post-Fordist move to maintain equilibrium.” These and other “definitions” make it clear to me that while Welch claims to be writing for writing teachers and humanities scholars, she is really writing for a small set of her rhet/comp peers who have read the same texts she has. I found much of her language as unapproachable as the “pseudoromantic” pedagogical edifice she claims to lay siege to
with this book. What’s more, I am a graduate student teacher, one of the workers she needs to enlist in her program to revolutionize literacy in the writing classroom if she wishes it to be effective.

This language problem points to another way in which Welch excludes me from her program: through the role she gives the student in electric rhetoric. She argues that she is reclaiming all five of the features of Isocrates’ paideia: “aptitude, knowledge of different kinds of discourse, practice, a teacher who provides instruction in the principles of discourse, and last, a teacher who models a mastery of discourse.” However, her focus in *Electric Rhetoric* is on “making bears dance,” on the theory of writing education. She does not acknowledge the heavy reliance of Isocrates’ paideia on the inherent talents of the student (much less the classist underpinnings of that reliance) as problematic for her redeployment of his rhetoric; consequently, she must emphasize theory over aptitude and praxis when recuperating Isocrates. As a result, I find little in *Electric Rhetoric* that I can put into practice in my next session in the computer classroom with my students. The only models Welch gives of what Isocratean electric-rhetorical pedagogy would look like in the classroom amount to rhetorical analyses of a Web site and a news broadcast, exercises that a great many of us do already with our students, and do well. More crucially, however, she alienates graduate students (who handle the bulk of first-year writing classes at most universities) by insulting those of us who somehow got the impression from our scant pay, limited training from supervising professors, and crushing workload that the job we do is a “low” one. Welch mocks the attitude of these “teaching assistants” by saying that we remind her “of a familiar joke: I would not be a member of any club that would stoop so low as to have me as a member.”

I believe that Welch is honestly trying to revolutionize her and our pedagogy to make our students agents in the production and consumption of electric rhetoric. However, if she wishes to succeed, she may wish to reconsider her exclusion of many writing teachers from her project through unclear terminology, a privileging of theory over praxis, and an unexpected *ad hominem* attack.