History as the Path of Invention: A Response to Jeffrey Williams

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When a new path is opened, it always turns out to have a history.
—Louise Wetherbee Phelps

In "History as a Challenge to the Idea of the University," Jeffrey J. Williams notes a lurking nostalgia in contemporary critiques of corporate higher education. He laments the university’s confusion of public service with accountability to the private sector, but worries that mere observations of the problem, no matter how trenchant, do little to generate a healthy relationship between the institution and the larger social sphere. More insidiously, denunciations of corporate academia often seem to hint that a better university should divorce its operations from markets altogether, aspiring to a state of refugium where campus participants enjoy a studious distance from the pressures of the information economy. For Williams, corporate critique often reaches backward despite its progressive face, unconsciously evoking an archaic educational model grounded in an ideology of elitist separatism.

While few analysts of academic capitalism purposely endorse the refugium, they generally fail to show a way out of the corporate academy/ivory tower dichotomy. Even those who imagine alternative arrangements stop short of mapping their implementation, all the while deemphasizing the fact that alternatives cannot materialize without proper funding and infrastructure. Among the major innovations of Williams’ argument stands his assertion that ideas of the university—whether the early ones of Kant and Newman or more recent offerings by Readings and Derrida—tend to overlook the concrete conditions in which schools function. In his view, there never was a grounding idea of the university, but rather multiple and competing vistas whose successes depended on the contingencies of their historical moment. With these vistas as a back-
drop, he invites us to devise an ethical horizon for our schools that admits their continuity with the supposedly external world, along with their direct contributions to economic and cultural production.

I want here to echo his call, and more importantly, begin to give an answer, even as I acknowledge that a good answer might better unfold in a book or over the course of a career. Having delivered that caveat, I suggest that the academic vistas Williams illustrates—from refugium to vocational training to the corporate university—underwrite something more than a cautionary tale against nostalgia. As we recognize the vast limitations and occasional advantages of those vistas, we might begin to forward not just a better idea of the university, but a set of material practices that counter rather than merely reproduce the injustices of corporate capitalism. At the risk of taking a constructive position in a discourse that thrives on dissection, I reaffirm Williams' impulse toward reconfiguring the university based on a concern for student wellbeing and on an egalitarian vision of the public.

My intention is not merely to offer a narrative of hope to offset the stories of loss and ruin that so commonly accompany recent discourse on the university. Insofar as such deceptively seamless stories distract us from local conditions of work and study, they constrain our ability to reshape those conditions. But neither do I disavow the importance of narrative as a political strategy. Rather than wholly embracing Williams' attempt to pit the rigor of explication and logic against the purported melodrama of narrative and rhetoric (56), we might better conceive our project as constructing self-consciously materialist stories about the past (and unfolding present) so as to ground our horizon of expectations in the hard lessons of history. Explication, after all, refuses strict separation from narration, and logic stands among classical rhetoric's enduring appeals. The materialist story I wish to tell locates a heightened concern for students and for public engagement in critical composition studies. As importantly, it finds similar concerns in the rhetorical practices of the academic labor movement, whose participants generally reject the refugium even as they attempt to mitigate the impact of fast capitalism on university working condi-
tions. While contributors to both discourses consciously situate themselves within the global economy, organized labor endeavors to generate tangible circumstances where critical literacy can thrive and where teachers can open the naturalized processes of capitalism to analysis and resistance.

Such resistance is unlikely to flourish in a disciplinary research vista where academics define their work as publication while coding service and teaching as minor responsibilities if not outright distractions. While disciplines "legitimate [knowledge] by creating zones and codes of acceptable scholarship that effectively bracket out all that is not always already the progeny of those zones and codes," they also require that the messy specificity of academic labor be reduced to textual products (Malinowitz 291). Where Williams questions our tendency to reify academic labor as published scholarship, he resembles Bruce Horner and Andrea Lunsford, both of whom lament the research university's devaluation of writing instruction and other kinds of classroom practice. (He also reiterates a driving insight of the process movement in composition studies, which has resisted the conflation of work with product since the 1960s.) Horner in particular makes a case for work as a multilayered and dynamic process where teachers and students necessarily participate in rather than disengage from the "real world." For him as for Williams, not only do the so-called real and academic worlds bleed, they harbor social and material continuities that undermine their putative difference. Though "reality" may be a construction, it is hardly one that composition or the university escapes. The reality of post-Fordism is precisely what draws many students to higher education in the first place, not as a sanctuary but as a way to cope.

Even as critical literacy scholars recognize the ubiquity of the economic sphere, they oppose a strictly vocational vista where pedagogy serves only to validate and fill market demand. That demand wields immense influence on college self-representations, as I show in "Marketing Excellence in Higher Education" by tracing the meritocratic logic that informs school policy in various sectors of the Carnegie Classification. As histories by James Berlin
and Sharon Crowley attest, writing instructors have long encouraged students to adopt dominant language practices in a system predicated on uneven resource distribution. But I also recognize strains of composition pedagogy that challenge the inequities of neoliberalism while reaffirming students' aspirations toward financial security. For examples of such teaching, we might look to educators like Patricia Bizzell and Ira Shor, who help students grapple with privileged discourses even as they resist what J. Elspeth Stuckey calls the "violence of literacy"—its deployment within and for social hierarchy. Despite the consonance of such Freirean education strategies with Williams' desire for a revitalized public, he notes how schools tend to commercialize and even neutralize dialogic teaching in their mission statements, constructing problem-posing education as an ostensibly apolitical affirmation of open debate (61–62). While I grant Williams' point, I also hold that reductions of critical pedagogy to an innocuous version of "problem-posing" ignore Freire's particular concern with labor exploitation and class division—problems the university exacerbates but rarely if ever mentions in its promotional literature.

Given the emphasis of critical composition studies on social transformation, we might be tempted to situate it within the Jeffersonian tradition of civic training. Thinkers in this tradition tried gamely but unsuccessfully to wrest the university from private interests in the early nineteenth century—as shown in Williams' (and Christopher Newfield's) analysis of the 1819 Dartmouth case—and they continued to demand that schools serve "the public utility" in the years following. Valuing the larger social good above the desires of specific students, they tied scholarship to citizenship, citizenship to the health of the republic. Although critical compositionists typically argue that society shapes rather than opposes student interests, and would undoubtedly resist the equation of education with training, their emphasis on public discourse sustains a centuries-old connection between schooling and civic participation. This connection informs Berlin's interpretation of consumer culture as a form of social epistemic rhetoric, Ellen Cushman's meditation on ethnography and social change,
and Christian Weisser's account of public service pedagogies—to name only a few of its appearances in composition. Despite the similarities, however, the civic training vista is finally incompatible with critical composition due to the former's limited and unreflective construction of citizenship. Efforts by Jeffersonian Republicans to render the university responsive to the "public charter," while impressively resistant to the privatization of education, were simultaneously efforts to make it accountable to a slaveholding patriarchy. Any present endeavor to revitalize the charter, especially the revolutionary endeavor to which Williams alludes, had better attend to the historically exclusive character of citizenship if it is not to reproduce a discriminatory public.

It is this exclusive character that the Freirean idea of literacy both acknowledges and works to mitigate. Whether in the neosophistic feminism of Andrea Greenbaum or the resistance pedagogy of Joe Marshall Hardin, such literacy entails questioning the power differentials inherent in the classroom and the larger working world. But even as this idea of literacy hints at an attractive idea of the university, we must remember that the discourse on higher education is filled with ideas and is lacking in structural specifics. The idea of education for critical citizenship avoids the nostalgia of other narratives, but too often avoids the question of practical sustainability as well. While I would like to see the academy tie its mission to an expanded sense of the public charter, and would advocate a major redistribution of wealth to support that mission, I also wish to preserve (and in some cases open) spaces for wide-ranging dialogue and dissent within our current horizon. The long-term construction of universities that denaturalize corporate privilege depends on these spaces.

Within the academic labor movement, there exists a cohort of social movement unionists who stand committed to securing spaces for critical literacy in higher education. From faculty to adjunct to graduate student unions, there runs a common recognition that "teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions," and that the erosion of stable jobs in the academy poses a direct threat to pedagogy. Educators who recognize their
replaceability may well hesitate to take up controversial issues in the classroom, even as they find their time, energy, and interaction with students hampered by their efforts to make a living wage. Writing instructors, who make up the largest percentage of adjunct workers, face particular difficulties when trying to engage a hundred or more students per semester in composition as a social and highly recursive process. This is not to suggest that such teachers abandon critical pedagogy within these conditions, or that their working circumstances necessarily undermine their educational ideals. But the argument that teachers should work in these conditions because they can only makes sense within a narrow, utilitarian ethic—one that we could hardly wish to guide university policy. Nor do I mean to imply that all unionists recognize labor contingency as a pressing problem; unfortunately, many of them join unions to better compete with other workers for resources and prestige. I argue instead that vocal sectors of these unions tie the sustainability of critical education to secure, well-appointed jobs. And I want to reaffirm their contention that the material circumstances of academic work should be determined not by the market but by those it most readily exploits.

In trying to secure negotiating rights for those with few job rights at all, academic unions express affinities with living wage campaigns in the larger economic domain. Both forms of activism demonstrate a keen desire to improve conditions for people of color and women. If Krupat and McCreery's *Out at Work* is any indicator, social movement unions also present a growing challenge to heterosexism in the workplace (though much remains to be done on that score). Academic labor literature—and here I include such collections as Nelson's *Will Teach for Food*, Martin's *Chalk Lines*, Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola's *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, and Herman and Schmid's *Cogs in the Classroom Factory*—provides a robust counterpoint to idea discourse, depicting the university not as an abstract principle but as a workplace where historically dominant bodies and ideologies tend to govern. Even Stanley Aronowitz's *The Knowledge Factory*, which Williams rightly critiques for rehashing the great books
tradition, locates the corporate university within the historical shift toward flexible labor while tracing the concomitant rise of graduate student unions. I might take issue with Aronowitz’s curricular vision, but I admire his effort to ground curriculum in full-time, fully compensated employment. Even more, I admire his examination of how organizations at Wisconsin-Madison, Yale, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, and California have tried to make so-called regular faculty employment more regularly attainable. “Casual Nation,” a classic report from the graduate labor trenches, expands the critique of contingency by emphasizing the racialized and gendered character of part-time and nontenure-track work. The National Education Association and American Association of University Professors have released similar reports, featuring particularly unsettling data about American Indian academics, who comprise the smallest percentage of tenured faculty in higher education (0.4%) while holding the highest proportion of part-timers (45%) within any single demographic.¹ How this data coheres with a larger scheme of Native oppression presents a significant question for anyone contemplating the history of the university or its possible futures.

While organized adjuncts share graduate unions’ critique of racial and ethnic inequity, they further emphasize the over-representation of women in part-time positions and their under-representation in tenure lines. Adjunct activist Joe Berry holds that “the entire struggle for equity for contingent faculty can be seen as a key women’s rights issue. Framing it this way can both help us gain allies and help to educate some of our male colleagues” (125). According to such writers as Sue Ellen Holbrook, Susan Miller, and Eileen Schell, such framing becomes especially urgent for composition, where women make up a considerable portion of the instructorate in a discipline that has historically elicited little institutional funding or respect. Whether adjunct and other unions can generate a more equitable labor arrangement in writing studies may depend on compositionists’ readiness to join the movement.² Where unions promote the interests of the least powerful sectors of the workplace, and where writing teachers provide the cheap, gendered labor on which English departments and the larger
university depend, there appears a largely untapped potential for synergy.

In ways Williams might appreciate, both groups resist ivory tower elitism, and both promote the democratization of the public. As depicted in the pages of JAC in 2002, Susan Searls Giroux’s theory of democratization opposes fixed ideas of democracy, endorsing instead a continual striving toward fair distribution of political agency. Driven by concern for historically oppressed constituencies and poorly represented voices, this process presumes a relentless questioning and hence a perpetual incompleteness. In my view, critical literacy instruction represents the convergence of writing pedagogy with the principles of democratization. At its best, organized academic labor defends the material basis for that convergence, and seeks to establish conditions in which similar convergences can occur across the university. But while I affirm labor’s politics of democratization, I want to avoid positioning unionists as a vanguard. It is unions’ conversations with (and inclusion of) feminists, critical race theorists, living wage campaigners, and opponents of corporate globalization—among other movement activists—that help validate their pursuit of workplace justice. Keeping in mind labor’s exclusive history, unions must persistently reenvision the public they would have the university serve. In this, labor is less a vanguard than a node in a network of organizations for whom the theory and experience of public engagement exist in productive tension.

Negotiating this tension might be a worthy project for higher education—not the only project, but a rewarding one. By envisioning education as public praxis, we can begin to answer Williams’ call to “reintegrate work with education” (68). Here “reintegration” involves not merely making education responsive to the larger working world—Williams praises campus cooperatives and lifelong learning initiatives—but recognizing the work that education already entails.³ Though cultural distinctions between study and labor rarely hold under scrutiny, they have proven useful to university administrators, some of whom appeal to the former term as a way to mask and more readily profit from the latter. The
National Labor Relations Board, which presides over workplace disputes at private institutions, determined in 2004 that graduate assistants are students and apprentices but not employees. The legislation effectively authorized New York University to cease bargaining with the Graduate Students Organizing Committee—United Auto Workers (GSOC–UAW), the only recognized graduate union on record at a private university. Whereas critics of corporate academia may inadvertently show affinities for the refugium, corporate advocates invoke the model much more directly as a way to thwart student activism. According to the NLRB and the current administration at NYU, student status always equals privileged sanctuary and cannot coexist with employee status no matter how many courses students teach or how long their “apprenticeship” lasts. While executives claim that the graduate union interferes with curriculum and disrupts the cloistered life of learning, they suppress how that same union has won substantial wage increases and health benefits for its members since its initial recognition in 2002. At least as distressingly, they deny the contributions of worker solidarity to campus democratization. GSOC members are on strike even as I write this response, risking their stipends and their careers to regain bargaining rights and to reintegrate workers and students in the public imagination.

Some who grant that graduate assistantships constitute a form of work may nevertheless hesitate to acknowledge undergraduate labor as such. To my mind, this hesitation points more directly to the refugium’s hold on the cultural imagination than to current conditions in higher education. I share Williams’ resistance to the corporate university’s elitism, while remaining unconvinced by the common logic that divides undergraduates from other workers. Seventy-four percent of full-time students hold jobs during college, while most of the rest are readying themselves for a life of flexible employment after graduation. As Aronowitz would have it, the work of college education helps power the information economy, shaping the subjectivity of casual labor while simultaneously suppressing labor consciousness. Where we
"reintegrate" study with work, we give formal recognition to already existing circumstances.

Williams never entirely dismisses the corporate university as a place to reintegrate study and work, but he insists that such a university needs to distinguish public welfare from private interest so that it can better serve the former (67). He thereby seems to ask not only for a different kind of academy, but a different kind of American (and perhaps global) economy, one that redirects corporatism toward what Louise Wetherbee Phelps calls the "path not taken." Her history focuses on composition studies rather than the larger university, but harmonizes with Williams' effort to theorize a future that is grounded in material considerations and conversant with the repressions of the past. A key repression, in Williams' view, is the university's responsibility to the public charter:

It is strange to think that, had the 1819 ruling followed the dissent of Justice Duvall and sustained a strong sense of the charter, there would be no private colleges in the U. S. but all public universities, or for that matter there would be no private corporations but all public ones. (67)

Though the law may have abandoned the charter, critical literacy scholars and social movement unionists continue to uphold it, attempting to serve a diverse, self-critical public while clarifying that public's historical exclusions. At once committed to social justice and acknowledging its perpetual deferment, they practice the kind of historicism Phelps promotes in "Paths Not Taken," merging utopian aspirations with a determined critique of ideology. As we envision an ethical horizon for higher education, we might conceive the inaccessibility of utopia not as disabling but vital to the project of democratization. Williams' deep contextualization of our current horizon can help advance that project. Following his carefully historicized challenge to ungrounded ideas of the university, we encounter coexisting vistas that variously objectify students and homogenize citizenship, but rarely one that both acknowledges students as workers and invites analysis of how and
for whom their labor produces value. On such excursions, paths not taken become paths of invention.

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Notes

1. This data can be found in Turner and National.
2. Holbrook has estimated that as many as two-thirds of composition teachers are women. Though such teachers may support unionization, they sometimes have limited opportunity to join and contribute to the movement, as the very conditions that necessitate organized activism can also preempt it. In these contradictions lie hidden benefits for management and unmistakable obstacles for unions.

3. Though I admire Williams’ (and Raymond Williams’) emphasis on “permanent education,” especially as it integrates schooling with non-exploitive work and challenges the association of college life with the privilege of well heeled youth, we should carefully distinguish it from the permanent education already favored by post-Fordism. In that latter version, workers must always remain ready to reeducate themselves, often at their own expense, if they wish to keep their jobs.

4. In an article for U.S. News and World Report, Nisha Ramachandran explains that “a whopping 74 percent of full-time students juggle work and school, according to a study by the Higher Education Project of the State Public Interest Research Groups. Forty-six percent of them log 25 hours or more a week on the job, with 1 in 5 working full time.”

Works Cited


I want to begin with the rhetorically predictable, perhaps, but nonetheless sincere gesture of thanking Karen Kopelson for giving my work on “passing” the attention she does and for taking up my call for interrogating our concepts of subjectivity and their ethical, political, and pedagogical consequences. It is always interesting and enlightening, if also at times disorienting, to see how one has been read, and always a pleasure to find that one has been read. I especially appreciate her comment that my book is deserving of more “extended commentary” than it has thus far received. It’s nice to know someone else shares that view besides my mother (though in fairness to those who have engaged my work, such as