


Putting Our Affective House in Order: Toward Solidarity Rather than Shame in Departments of English

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In "True Confessions: Uncovering the Hidden Culture of Shame in English Studies," J. Brooks Bouson captures the frustration many of us feel with the competitive and community-breaking shame culture that operates in the field of English studies. Deploying Gershen Kaufman’s work on shame, Bouson notes that American culture is a hidden, but virulent shame-based culture where "the intense focus on competition and success leads to a pervasive fear of failure" (626). According to Bouson, shame in academic settings can act as 'the dark twin of our intellectual pride." Many of us carry "psychic wounds" from scholarly battles and professional slights, and we exercise the potential to inflict such wounds upon our colleagues. I appreciate Bouson’s thoughtful exploration of shame, especially the focus on the "emotional costs" of shame experienced by those who have endured scholarly attacks at academic conferences, those who have undergone shame-based “anxieties”
and fear of disapprobation from our colleagues at tenure-time, and those who have been shamed because of their status as "token professionals and adjunct instructors."

As I read through Bouson's essay, I found myself agreeing in large part with her thoughtful analysis of how shame functions in academia, in general, and in English studies, in particular. Bouson's essay, though, raises questions for me about how we describe and locate the professional subject in the field of English studies. Who is the professional subject in English Studies who suffers shame or inflicts it? How is he or she gendered, classed, raced and located within the academic hierarchy? How is he or she positioned within particular departments as first a graduate student and then a professional and worker responsible for particular kinds of intellectual labor? What subfields might the "shamed" professional subject occupy within English studies? How might our own field of scholarly expertise within English studies—rhetoric and composition—locate itself in Bouson's description and analysis of shaming and academic culture in English departments? Finally, if we are to get our "affective house in order," as Bouson urges, how should we rethink our approaches and interactions in graduate education, in department life, and in our academic work contracts, what David Downing refers to as the "knowledge contract, the set of implicit and explicit obligations that justify both the epistemological and commercial uses of higher education" (5)? In this response essay, I address these questions in an interactive mode with Bouson across three specific topics: graduate education, the lit-comp split in English departments, and the coalition building work of the contemporary academic labor movement.

Disciplinary Shaming in Graduate School

Bouson's analysis of shaming rituals described in the subheaded section "Scholarly Attacks as Scenes of Shame" center on examples cited from literary scholars occupying tenure-track positions. Jane Tompkins and Nellie McKay describe examples of
warlike quarreling and wolfish belittling of our opponents" present at academic conferences (627). Tompkins describes how a woman scholar attacked another woman scholar's recent book, which lead Tompkins to feel she had been "present at a ritual execution of some sort" (qtd. in Bouson 627). McKay describes a male scholar who reported to her that her mentor had "savagely attacked his paper," leaving a psychic wound that "had not healed" (qtd. in Bouson 628). These are familiar scenarios demonstrating the symbolic violence of academic argument culture and its shaming rituals; many of us can repeat our own tales of the "cold affect" Bouson discusses (via Leon Wurmser's work), the cycle of contempt and countercontempt that can encourage hostilities between individuals and departments for years (630). Yet, these examples raise questions about what nuances are at work in these interactions. How does academic rank, departmental and institutional standing, and identity factor into these scenarios, especially for those faculty members who have typically not been well represented among the tenured and tenure-track ranks? How do rites of passage like graduate education "school" us into exercising shaming behaviors and exclusionary behaviors, particularly toward groups underrepresented in the upper reaches of the academic hierarchy?

In "Rethinking the English PhD," an essay commissioned by the Carnegie Association Initiative on Refiguring the Doctorate, Andrea Lunsford discusses how English departmental culture, particularly graduate education, contributes to creating exclusionary and patronizing attitudes as well as a "continued reliance on agonism, on competition, on individually derived and held authority, and on hierarchy as the currency with which we gain admittance to and advance in our profession" (3). Lunsford cites and analyzes a segment from an essay by Beverly Moss, a scholar of African American literacy and rhetoric, who meditates on how graduate education can promote a less than welcoming climate for scholars of color:

One of my most disturbing moments in graduate school occurred when my professor in a critical theory course wrote on my final
paper that my "language was not sophisticated enough to handle the sophisticated ideas of critical theory." As a twenty-two-year-old graduate student, I understood that he was trying to tell me that I did not belong in graduate school, that people like me were not smart enough. I understood that I was the only person of color in his class (and in the entire graduate program) and that he never spoke to me the entire semester. I understood that I was not an acceptable audience in his class. And because I had imagined my audience for the paper I wrote in his class to be people like me, I was an unacceptable audience for this academic exercise. As I went further in the profession, I began to understand that this professor was appalled by my attempt to discuss Hegel and Heidegger in a language other than [the most current jargon]. And finally, I understood that in my own naive way, I was trying to cross a line or blur a boundary; some would consider it a class line, some a color line, some even a gender line, perhaps all three. I am no longer naive about my attempts to cross those lines. (qtd. in Lunsford 4; Moss 167–68)

Moss' insightful reflections on her experience in a graduate course raise questions about how our graduate programs often reinforce exclusionary behaviors and shaming rituals. Scholars of color, both male and female, may experience moments such as Moss' when they are subject to questions about whether or not they belong or if they are "good enough" to be there.

White women may be subject to the same type of scrutiny. Lunsford recounts how she was discouraged from attending graduate school on the basis of gender:

So one day I ventured into my advisor's office to ask about advanced graduate study. I could remember talking with him only once before, when he had signed some forms for me. He listened to me for a few minutes and then dismissed the idea out of hand, saying that I wasn't cut out for a PhD, that I should go home and have a family. I didn't even consider objecting; I just left the office, left the University, and got a teaching job. It took seven years for me to gain the confidence to try again. (1)

Even though the sexist assumptions Lunsford faced are not communicated quite so frequently as they were thirty years ago,
the message, both subtle and overt, that "you don't belong here" or that "you don't talk, think, write, or look the way you should" permeates graduate education, even in a field such as English, which has witnessed a record growth of women pursuing the PhD and a good-sized growth of scholars of color pursuing the PhD (2).

Lunsford's analysis intersects in interesting ways with Bouson's as she questions how academic argument culture reproduces hierarchies, exclusionary behaviors and shaming rituals, especially for groups underrepresented—scholars of color and women—in the upper reaches of the academy (2–3). Yet, she takes her analysis into the arena of graduate education, showing us how we can get our "affective house in order" by reforming doctoral admissions, retention, course work, collaborative opportunities, and community engagement (see also North et al). In order to consider a wider array of candidates from underrepresented institutions and groups, Lunsford advises that admissions decisions should consider an array of factors beyond the typical ones of grades, GRE scores, and scholarly writing samples; students might be asked to submit evidence of their talent in public service and teaching, a statement of teaching goals and objectives, and evidence of their work to integrate scholarship and teaching (4–5). She urges readers to think about ways that reading and writing have changed and adjust graduate curricula accordingly to reflect an expanded vision of textuality and an expansive view of writing that "includes sound, video, and images of all kinds as well as a wide and growing range of genre and discourses, from African American Vernacular English to Spanglish to American Sign Language" (5–6). Lunsford also argues for modifying the doctoral exam process from general coverage to "performative exams, with students preparing written documents, both individually and collaboratively written, and presenting the results of their research to the larger departmental and university community" (7). Such presentations, she maintains, would echo the system "used in many Canadian and some European universities" and would allow for more engaged and connected research (7). Lunsford also calls for collaborative dissertation projects that allow for more than one
researcher, arguing that graduate education should model more interactive models of collegiality, ones where "graduate students are colleagues rather than acolytes, our partners in exploring major issues, in constructing new knowledge, and in sharing the wealth of our experiences, our learning, and our teaching" (8). She advocates the building of cross-rank collaboration through "ongoing teaching/pedagogy circles that would include faculty, staff, and graduate students, again working collaboratively on major questions facing all teachers of English" such as discerning how theory informs pedagogy, creating innovative assignments, negotiating classroom authority, creating opportunities for collaboration, and fair and judicious evaluation and assessment (8). Finally, she argues for connecting doctoral programs with projects that promote the public good, citing Carnegie Mellon's work with the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh as one key example of a successful linking project (9).

However, one of the factors most influencing a revision of doctoral education is the shifting nature of the academic job market, including the longstanding "collapse" of the job market in literature and literary theory and the steady demand over time for rhetoric and composition specialists. As Christine Farris points out, "roughly 30 percent of all English job advertisements in the MLA's job information list had 'composition and rhetoric' as the primary term, or at least one of the index terms, selected for job seekers to search the ad—as many as or more than all the ads indexed as 'British literature' (all periods), the second highest category." (Farris). Even as some programs have admitted fewer students or have established MA or PhD programs in rhetoric and composition, some programs have continued to turn out numbers of doctoral candidates in literature and theory in English, a problem that itself creates a shaming cycle as only a limited number of candidates will be able to obtain tenure-track work (see Bouson, note 11, 645). So the bottom line is not only reform of graduate education, but reform of the size and focus of doctoral programs, a sentiment offered for over a decade now by a range of scholars in English (see Bérubé, Nelson).
A fundamental issue in English department culture, however, continues to be the divide between faculty members in literature and composition—a divide that still governs much of the professional lives of those of us in more traditional English departments. It is this divide between literature and composition, too, that is the cause for many differences, strife, and shaming behaviors in departments of English. Therefore, I wonder why Bouson did not address the literature-composition split as an aspect of the shaming rituals so common in English departments.

Lit-Comp's Gap, Rift, Split, or Divide: A Continued Affective Problem in English Studies

There is a rich historical and contemporary literature acknowledging the reasons for a historic gap, rift, split, or divide between faculty members in literature and composition (see Berlin, Connors, Horner, Miller, Scholes). In *Composition Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert Connors explores the historical reasons for the “degraded” status of the teacher of rhetoric and writing, pointing out that the sentiment that teaching composition is drudge work done by drudges has been around for over a hundred years (171–72). Although composition as drudge work performed by drudges has been a commonplace idea circulated and practiced in English studies, scholars have long tried to trouble the structural inequities and class politics surrounding writing instruction and “bridge the gap” between literature and composition. Winfred Bryan Horner, writing in 1983 as a rhetorician and as a member of the Modern Language Association Teaching of Writing Division, decried the “widening gulf between research and teaching in literature and research and teaching in composition” (1). In the edited collection *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*, Horner summarizes the attitudes of literary scholars toward composition scholars and teachers of writing in departments of English:
Research in composition “has until very recently not been encouraged or even tolerated.”

New assistant professors hired to teach composition and administer writing programs are warned that “promotion and tenure [will] not be awarded on the basis of research in composition.”

Graduate students in English interested in teaching composition are advised that “the serious business of the department is not research or teaching in composition but research and teaching in literary studies.” Thus they learn to “cut corners” in their teaching, avoid research in rhetoric and writing, and see composition as a “dreary task.” (6)

The denigration of writing and rhetoric as legitimate areas of scholarly analysis and teaching in departments of English has been a longstanding point of contention and discussion in the field of rhetoric and composition and, to a lesser degree, in the mainstream discourse of English studies. A February 13, 1998 Chronicle of Higher Education article, “Bad Blood in the English Department: The Rift Between Composition and Literature,” attempted to represent the “hierarchical divisions,” “scripted parts,” and continued differences between academics focusing their study and teaching on writing and those on literature and theory (Bouson 634). As Robert Scholes put it succinctly in the article: “The best scholars in literature do not regard the research of people in writing and rhetoric as serious,” says Mr. Scholes. “They don't accept work dealing with pedagogical problems or classrooms as on the same level as literary analysis or theory” (Schneider). Moreover, the “best scholars in literature” may not see work on rhetorical history, rhetorical theory, or composition theory as having any merit either. Composition faculty's contact with students, with the “great unwashed,” as Susan Miller reminds us, taints the whole enterprise of rhetoric and writing.

Many of us have learned to live with and/or ignore the condescending attitudes of the “literati,” those who Frederick Crews refers to as faculty who pride “themselves on their ‘pure research’ and their rarefied philosophical concerns,” those who look with
“distaste on efforts to impart literacy to the masses of students who will never be able to grasp a paradox or date a text.” (160). In fact, many of us have spoken out for years about the disrespect, anger, and frustration we have felt as rhetoric and writing faculty in English departments where our work is devalued and considered “less than.” Schneider acknowledges that while the literature composition split is longstanding, faculty in rhetoric and composition are vociferously beginning to speak out against it: “What's changed is that people—from elite academics to angry adjuncts—are talking about the problem and, in fits and starts, trying to remedy it.”

Although a number of English departments have changed their attitudes toward rhetoric and writing, especially as the job market in literary studies has “collapsed” and rhetoric and writing faculty have earned tenure and gained authority and stature in their departments, a “shaming” culture may persist. Furthermore, if we dig deeper in the rhetoric and composition spaces of English departments, we often find internal splits, tensions, and conflicts there as well. A 2003 Chronicle of Higher Education article by Scott McLemee, “Deconstructing Composition: The ‘New Theory Wars’ Break Out in an Unlikely Discipline,” addressed the splits and tensions within rhetoric and composition over questions of theory and practice. The article was followed up by an online colloquy with Gary Olson that fostered discussion about differences within rhetoric and composition.

Interestingly, many of us, including myself, find ourselves in departmental spaces completely outside of English studies, even though we have doctorates in English. A growing number of faculty members who specialize in rhetoric and composition inhabit writing programs or writing departments that function completely independently of English departments. We have broken our bonds to English departments, as Maxine Hairston advised, in her 1985 CCCC Chair’s Address, “Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections.” Given those historic “broken bonds” between English and rhetoric and composition, I wonder how such independent writing department structures play out different affective
tensions and conflicts. In my own department, the tensions and conflicts are not about literary studies, between lit-comp, but largely between our department and other departments over views of what constitutes successful literacy instruction. Our internal tensions and conflicts, when they occur, tend to be between generations in the department or between scholarly areas within rhetoric and composition. The field of English studies, thus, proves to be complicated and many-layered in ways not immediately recognizable if we paint English studies with broad-brush strokes.

My point in rehearsing some of the tensions in English departments between those who focus on composition and rhetoric and those who focus on literature is to suggest ways we can take Bouson's analysis into different corners of the English department or, for that matter, into independent writing programs that have split off from English departments. Moreover, those of us who wish to investigate the issue of affective relations in English departments further would be well advised to read Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche's insightful edited collection *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, which richly describes the affective domains of those who work in rhetoric and composition. Furthermore, we may want to examine how some traditional English departments have tried to deal in concrete ways with the literature and composition split. In a recent *Academe* article, Christine Farris discusses how the English department at her institution tried to bridge the divide so often reinforced between scholarship and teaching and between literature and composition through engaging their senior faculty "in teacher preparation and the teaching of the first-year course," designing "a second pedagogy seminar in the teaching of literature and culture to follow and build on the composition pedagogy seminar." Farris describes the seminar as a collaboration between faculty and "experienced TAs in the conception, design, and teaching of a first-year English course that integrates literature, culture, and composition. If taken over two semesters, the course also fulfills the first-year writing requirement." The collaboration allows faculty and TAs to "redis-
tribute labor and to unify the teaching of reading and writing in ways that need not be disconnected from or threatening to instructors' scholarly interests." Strategies like these help us engage in work that brings together the members of English departments around a common enterprise such as literacy instruction or introductory literature courses.

Building an Academic Solidarity Culture
Instead of a Shaming Culture

In the conclusion of her essay, Bouson argues that we need to "engage openly in a discussion of the personal and emotional costs of our highly competitive and stratified academic culture" and that we need to use "moral suasion to help promote changes in our professional attitudes and behaviors in the deference/emotion system of the academy we inhabit" (640). Bouson convincingly argues that when we treat our colleagues with contempt, we invite others to do so as well, including journalists and public officials. I like that Bouson points to individual and collective responsibility for creating the dynamics of the academic culture, our profession, and our departments. However, moral suasion and psychological self-examination are two of many paths toward change; academic solidarity movements such as unions and professional work coalitions provide us with another set of strategies for building a department culture of respect, fairness, and visibility rather than a culture of shame, rage, and invisibility—a culture that is based on collective action and solidarity, not on the competitive academic star system that Bouson aptly critiques.

Bouson discusses Sosnoski's analysis of the class shame of token professionals, "professors who teach in mainstream universities but spend more time in teaching and service work than in researching" and the invisibility experienced by adjunct faculty (634). The American Association of University Professors indicates that forty-three percent or more of faculty at American colleges and universities teach in part-time and non-tenure-track
positions, and these positions comprise over half of all faculty appointments in the U.S. (American, "Part-time"). Despite a large presence as the teaching force in English departments, contingent faculty often speak of feeling invisible, devalued, and exploited, and for good reason given the pay and working conditions of many contingent faculty appointments (see Schell and Stock). The invisibility daily felt and experienced by contingent faculty is well documented in the scholarship on contingent academic labor, as Bouson acknowledges in his citation of essays drawn from Michael Dubson's edited collection *Ghosts in the Classroom*. The contingent faculty members portrayed in Bouson's essay are largely depicted as those suffering through their working conditions, not active agents against the structures that work to devalue and discredit them. While the portraits of invisible faculty ring true at many colleges and universities, at an increasing number of institutions one may see contingent faculty and graduate students actively campaigning to improve their working conditions and change department and university cultures, collectively bargaining work contracts, participating in labor actions, and reaching out into communities surrounding their colleges and universities to make common cause with workers in other sectors of the economy.

The invisibility narratives, thus, have counter narratives in those expressed by contingent faculty like Dubson and many of his colleagues in the Boston area who have created cross-institutional coalitions such as the Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), a group that works to improve the working conditions of contingent faculty both nationally and internationally through collective bargaining and cross-sectoral activism, linking local labor and community groups with academic labor efforts (American, "About"). The academic labor movement, especially the branches led by contingent faculty and graduate students and by organizations like COCAL and the American Association of University Professors, provide us with models for addressing the invisibility and disrespect experienced by the more marginalized members of English studies and provide us with strategies for
addressing the hierarchical class-based shame that Bouson discusses.

The organizing campaigns of graduate students and contingent faculty described in collections such as *Will Teach for Food* (Nelson), *Steal This University* (Johnson, Kavanagh, and Mattson), the special issue *Works & Days* "Information University: Rise of the Education Management Organization," the electronic journal *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, and essays by contingent academic labor activist Karen Thompson document theories and practices of organizing as well as on-the-ground labor actions taken at specific institutions. These resources model and argue for what Marc Bousquet has referred to as a "labor theory" of agency in higher education, a theory of agency that is about building solidarity and collective action among academics across the divisive lines of rank and position to address issues of common concern such as working conditions (pay, benefits, contracts), academic freedom, funding for higher education, and the enterprise of keeping higher education democratic and accessible to a wide range of students. As Bousquet and others have argued, a labor theory of agency in higher education is particularly urgent as the widely documented corporatization and globalization of higher education has accelerated the casualization of the higher education work force (see Nelson, Noble, Martin, Rhoades, Slaughter and Leslie).

One of the most successful large-scale events to call attention to contingent faculty's working conditions and to diminish the problem of invisibility and disrespect has taken place biannually for the past six years: Campus Equity Week. Scheduled for the last week in October and the first part of November in 2001, 2003, 2005, and upcoming in 2007, Campus Equity Week, "known as Fair Employment Week in some states and in Canada, is designed to draw attention to the dramatic decrease in the proportion of professors who hold tenure-track positions—now only 35 percent of the faculty in the United States" (American, "About"). Deploying "street theater, petitions, information tabling, rallies, legislative hearings, union drives, and mass screenings of Barbara Wolf's
insightful documentaries on contingent academic labor," Campus Equity Week has helped organizers on local campuses raise awareness of the use and exploitation of contingent faculty, spearhead union organizing campaigns, initiate concrete changes in contingent faculty's working conditions and status on specific campuses, and involve local communities in addressing the growing exploitation of contingent faculty (Schell 314). As Joe Berry, one of the chief organizers of the Chicago Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor, put it, Campus Equity Week "demonstrated that there is now a national movement among the literally hundreds of thousands of adjuncts, part-timers, lecturers, and visiting professors who make up the casualized contingent majority in the college classrooms today" (1.1).

In contrast to the invisibility mentioned in Bouson's essay, the contingent academic labor movement has fostered among contingent faculty acts of courage and principled action and feelings of confidence, self-respect, and pride, which contrast sharply with the shame-based feelings that Bouson describes. This is not to say, though, that the academic labor movement does not carry its own emotional baggage and hierarchies and that it is not plagued by its own affective problems; academic unions and professional work coalitions are not utopic, non-hierarchical spaces, but they do offer interesting spaces for intervention and spaces where we have a fighting chance at presenting a "united public face," in Bouson's words.

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a glimpse into some corners of the English department and academia in general—graduate education, the lit-comp split, and the academic labor movement—where we can take concrete action to address some of the tensions and conflicts Bouson describes around academic argument culture and its shaming effects. Bouson's rallying cry to "get our affective house in order" is one we need to heed in English studies no matter where we are or who we are.

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