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How Soon Is Now?: Writing Work, Education, and Fast Capitalism

Over the past four years I have gone through numerous jobs and have experienced the good, the bad, and ugly aspects. Learning from what I have come to see has taught me that the workplace is not always as pleasant as what you wish it to be. I have worked at places where I have not been treated as an equal, been sexually harassed, discriminated against, and have had issues with management. Through times of triumph I have learned to pick and choose my battles where, as an employee, I could still have my pride, dignity, and self-esteem.

—“Mariah,” university student and waitress¹

IF HORATIO ALGER’S “RAGGED DICK” WERE WRITTEN TODAY, YOUNG DICK WOULD ALMOST certainly continue to display a strong work-ethic, moxy and boundless optimism on his path to success. However, the fast capitalist Ragged Dick likely wouldn’t follow a trajectory in which he learns a trade and then works his way up in a particular business. Now a requisite step on his path to success would likely be a degree at a two-year college or a regional university. Moreover, if Dick is a non-native speaker of English, this path might include a detour at some point to gain adequate fluency. Despite many broad changes in the character and perception of higher education over the last thirty years, it continues to hold a place in the popular mythos as an accessible economic and social equalizer. It is seen as a place somewhat removed from day-to-day economic survival, where deserving people might “catch up.” Film dramas about high school students from under-privileged families, like *Real Women Have Curves*, typically end with the deserving going off to a happily-ever-after at a University. In the television show *America’s Home Makeover*, scholarships for children often take their place among the goodies from Sears and Pottery Barn that are given to families that have fallen on hard times. Like the wedding in a Shakespearian comedy, entry into the university is

1. Students quotes used with authors’ permissions as part of a reviewed and approved research project.

the happy ending. The economic challenges that still plague many students through their educational trajectories and beyond, along with the deeply emotional experiences of class, are magically shed as students pass through the ivied gates. This image of the university as a path to economic success carries its own powerful metanarrative. It exerts a strong influence on the discursive space of our classrooms and is linked to the literate development of our students. The ways that students feel comfortable constructing themselves in classes; what they talk and write about; the languages they use when they talk about it; and the value systems they feel compelled to adopt in their writing, are shaped by where they think they are and what they think they should be doing there.

The quote at the beginning of the article is from the essay of a student enrolled in an advanced undergraduate writing class at a large urban university. Her class was asked to write an autobiography of their working lives and reflect on their experiences as workers. Like many of my students, at 22, Mariah already had an extensive work history at the wide, insecure bottom of the late capitalist economy, working in a daycare center and in a number of jobs in restaurants and retail. Much of that work had been for national chains. In those jobs, she had been sexually harassed by a manager on one job, asked to wear more revealing clothes on another, and even not paid by an employer who suddenly closed his doors and disappeared. Mariah sees higher education as a chance to eventually move out of these types of jobs, and in the meantime, she has tried to live life as a student and worker in low-status jobs with as much dignity as possible. Her essay is among those collected as part of a broader research project that foregrounds labor as an aspect of postsecondary writing pedagogy. The study uses as its starting point the still under-examined fact that contingent labor still significantly defines the sites of postsecondary writing instruction: teachers of the majority of undergraduate writing classes are contingent workers and the majority of undergraduate students are, themselves, part-time workers. According to a recent National Council of Education Statistics (NCES) study, 80% of all undergraduates work while in school, and 39% work an average of 35 or more hours per week ("The Condition"). For many, school is even on the margins of lives that center primarily around families and work. Among those whom the NCES characterized as "highly non-traditional," the majority (67%) considered themselves "primarily workers" rather than students.² In contrast, only 3% of traditional students self-identified as primarily workers. All non-traditional students were more likely than traditional students to primarily self-identify as workers

2. The NCES categorizes a "traditional" student as one "who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time" ("Special Analysis"). A nontraditional student has one or more of the following characteristics: delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education the same calendar year the he or she finished high

("Special Analysis" 29). Like the majority of the highly non-traditional students in the NCES study, my students' school-related work is juxtaposed, on a daily basis, with significant hours on jobs. Like "Mariah," these students have developed deeply entrenched, complicated identities as workers, and many see higher education as a way out of current circumstances. Getting this far in their educations has meant overcoming many challenges beyond those presented by coursework. Non-traditional and first generation college students leave college without getting degrees at significantly higher rates than traditional students and those whose parents were college graduates ("The Condition" 14-15). They thrive within, endure, or just eventually give

"a broader political economy of potentially contentious meanings, values, and identities"

up on institutions that often do not actively recognize their lives and experiences.

In this essay, I argue for the importance of fostering recognition of the discourses of liberal economics, workplaces, and higher education as I discuss a model for writing pedagogy that uses labor and institutionality as starting points for writing and research. Within this model, students

write about work and working lives and critically examine the circumstances of their own educations. They examine the terms and significations of fast capitalism and casualized labor—for instance, what it means to be an "associate" at a retail store, a "contract worker" at a cable company, or an "adjunct writing instructor" in an English Department. They write about their lives as working students and they interview others about their work and work histories. They research and share information and insights about topics as varied as outsourcing, welfare-to-work-laws, healthcare access, economically driven diaspora, and immigration laws.

Importantly, however, this pedagogy doesn't leave its own immediate institutional context unexamined. It actively recognizes that literacy is interwoven with immediate economic and educational imperatives, and it assumes that work inside and outside of the university is a part of a broader political economy of potentially contentious meanings, values, and identities. This pedagogy encourages students to connect the dots that lead from the

school); attends part time for a least part of the academic year; works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; is considered financially independent other than the spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or doesn't not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). Students are considered "minimally nontraditional" if they have only one nontraditional characteristic, "moderately nontraditional" if they have two or three, and "highly nontraditional" if they have four or more.

material terms that shape their lives as students and workers to broad economic trends and the economic politics and discourses that sustain them. Higher education itself relies heavily on casualized labor, and school functions as a system of material and cultural production within, and arguably increasingly explicitly for, fast capitalism. Students, therefore, examine and write about the models of success that can lure many of us into higher education: the evolving relationships between industry and education and the ways that work and educational environments condition social relations through discourse.

I begin with a discussion of the clash between the still solidly upper middle-class aesthetic of higher education and the material lives of the non-traditional, working students that actually constitute the majority of postsecondary students. The following section discusses common, deeply interconnected conceptions of work, meritocracy, and higher education, exploring the contradictions between the bootstrap narrative of success and the harsh terms of the fast capitalist economy within which our students already work. Finally, I share details from a writing course that I have developed to foster an awareness of the discourses of work and education in the contemporary economy.

The Future Perfect: Marketing Narratives of Success

I get through my days knowing that I am earning my college degree and keep in mind that these managers who have the power to tell me what to do today will potentially be working for me after I graduate and obtain a job they could never have with their level of education and lack of integrity.

—“Karen” university student and retail worker

In spite of dramatic changes in the landscape of higher education over the past three decades, a particular ideal, or aesthetic, is still a deeply entrenched part of the popular imaginary, and it continues to shape the public faces of our institutions. My own university’s website, for instance, portrays students living and learning within a calm, cloistered environment. Aerial photographs depict the campus as an enclosed space dominated and buffered by green. While the internal space is all new buildings, primarily in a modern architectural style, the surrounding area is forest and athletic fields—visually suggesting a high-tech, intellectual oasis. Students of different races appear in a montage of pictures in various studios and social tableaux. They sit on grass, at benches, in front of computers or in classes; they walk with friends and play intramural sports; they work in labs and go to basketball games. The site doesn’t completely obscure the fact that the university is in an urban setting. Pictures of the city’s skyline and its professional football stadium are included in the campus tour pho-

tos. Nevertheless, the general impression created by the website, as well as in much of the university's recruiting materials and fundraising publications, is of students living and learning in a pastoral, at least somewhat protected, space. This is space designed to enable bright people to think and work creatively, engaged with the problems of "the real world" but not quite "of" them in an embodied, day-to-day sense.

I do not believe that the university's depiction is dishonest. It is an attractive campus, and this depiction of campus life doubtlessly helps enrollment and fundraising. People expect an institution to put its best foot forward in public presentations. Parents, students, and donors are more likely to feel comfortable with a university that plays on the common conception of what a college campus "should" look like: a calming, familiar blend of contemporary and gothic or perhaps colonial architecture and students who are relaxed but engaged. A modern, urban skyline on the distant horizon in some of the photographs only suggests vibrancy, relevance, cutting-edge technology and the promise of prosperity, the best of both worlds.

The image nevertheless masks much of the daily story of this place and the people who inhabit it. This university is not a protected world separate from "the real world" of work and adulthood. Here, students and faculty are very much of our city and our region, and economic relations of production and consumption and the ideologically loaded discourses that sustain them shape all of our daily lives. Ours is a public, urban university enrolling over 21,000 students situated in a sprawling metropolitan area of over 1.2 million people. Two very busy highways frame the campus and two major interstates intersect less than five minutes away. Most of our students are commuters, and large, concrete parking decks, along with expansive asphalt parking lots, dominate much of the perimeter of campus. Parking lots are ubiquitous because ease of access is important. Hurried students typically travel here by car or bus from jobs, or leave here for jobs when they finish with classes.

John Alberti has lamented that

too often our discussions of the future of literary studies and pedagogy in higher education are limited by models of college life rooted in enduring but increasingly misleading images that take the experiences and practices of elite research universities and liberal arts colleges—more accurately, discursive representations of these experiences and practices that are themselves almost stereotypes—as the norm for higher education. (563)

Alberti points out that the overwhelming majority of students now attend what he calls "working-class" or "second-tier" schools. Not only is there a "a major class division in American higher education," but even the lives of those who attend more elite schools are more economically constrained than popular images of university life would lead us to believe.

While our campus is, to a certain extent, constructed to conform to popular expectations of what a college campus *should* look like, most of our students don't fit the image of the college student from popular media. Neither privileged nor particularly profligate, most don't party their free time away on fraternity row; few enjoy much leisure time or do a semester of study abroad; few have the space in their lives for activist politics; and few take raucous spring break vacations in exotic locations. Primarily first-generation college students from middle, lower-middle, or working-class families, the majority of our students pay part or all of their own way through school with their own paychecks and loans. In addition to being students, for at least part of every week they are waiters, package handlers, fast food workers, telemarketers, front desk clerks, office assistants, landscapers, retail workers, data entry clerks, nannies, baristas, etc. Older students, many of them in our evening classes, sometimes hold more professional jobs as computer maintenance technicians, teachers, office managers, secretaries and healthcare workers. In short, they are not preparing to enter the working world; they *already* help to constitute what the Bureau of Labor Statistics finds is the largest and fastest growing job category in the U.S., the "service-industry" sector. Most of the jobs created by the "new" or "information-age" economy are service jobs, and most service-jobs are low-paying—18.7 million of the anticipated 18.9 million new jobs created by 2014 will be in the service sector ("Tomorrow's Jobs").³

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As with most other large, public universities, the university employs high numbers of adjuncts, who also fit their school work into lives that may include other jobs and classes at other schools. Photographs that accurately depict the daily lives of our students and the majority of our writing faculty might also depict them on gridlocked streets and interstates, searching for spaces in parking lots, or working in cubicles at offices or behind counters at coffee shops—living lives that are anxious, pinched, scattered, and already very "real."

The hard-edged realities of casualized teaching labor and commuting student service workers clashes with the traditional, dreamy aesthetic of higher education as protected, separate space. Writing from and about the material conditions of their lives requires students to

3. The largest number of new jobs created by 2014 will be in Retail Sales, followed by, in order: Registered Nurses, Postsecondary Teachers, Customer Service Representatives, and Janitors and Cleaners. A report recently released by the Department of Education focuses on increasing the number of graduates with technology skills, but various economic studies suggest that professional-level, high tech jobs are already scarce. The category Computers and Software Engineers is nineteenth on the Department of Labor list.

make a conscious effort to confront, or at least negotiate, the generic identities of university and student pervasive in media and encouraged by the marketed aesthetic of the university. That image is, in many ways, still built into college writing as its default, “neutral” subject position. Meanwhile, unfortunately, the term “nontraditional student” often still seems to carry at least a measure of implicit disparagement. Indeed, in my experience, when colleagues use the term it is sometimes a precursor to the identification of some limitation or inconvenience. The implicit assumption is that “nontraditional” is inferior to “traditional.” New faculty from graduate programs at more exclusive universities are warned that they will have to get accustomed to “the students here” in the same tone that white colonial settlers might once have been warned that they will have to adjust to life in the bush. Students considered particularly adept are sometimes spoken of with a regretful tone and said to be worthy of “someplace better.” This tone implies that at schools that do serve large numbers of traditional students, they *do real* university education, but at less competitive institutions we make do. When students’ lives enter the picture in often inconvenient ways—for instance, with a childcare issue, a transportation issue, or a conflict between a work schedule and an out-of-class activity—this intrudes on what is imagined as the proper work and aesthetic of higher education. Meanwhile, teaching jobs at institutions that do serve large numbers of traditional students are scarce because “traditional” college students are now far from average. According to the NCES, in 1999-2000, only 27% of undergraduates could be correctly classified as “traditional.” Indeed over the past thirty-five years, the entire profile of students has changed considerably. Since 1970, undergraduates have gotten older (39% are now older than 25), and more female (56%, versus 42% in 1970). More students are now part-time (39% versus 28% in 1970), and the overwhelming majority of students now work (“Special Analysis . . .” 25).

I am often struck by this unwieldy, ideologically complex convergence between the idea of the university—a consciously negotiated marketing strategy typically embodied in architecture and promotional materials—and the material lives of most of my students. First-year writing programs continue to be sustained through genericized conceptions of students, academia, and academic discourse. Susan Miller has critiqued the “presexual, preeconomic, prepolitical” juvenilized subject of composition (87). She argues that this generic writing subject—though far from the reality—has provided a kind of stability for composition’s theoretical discourse. The ramification has been a depoliticization of literacy education—because students aren’t yet quite real, there are no real stakes riding on what they write. Writing instruction remains innocuous and detached, and “composition” maintains a solid, if marginal and subordinate, place in curriculums. Writing programs and entire lines of textbooks center on this generic conception of college writers and writing. It is far more difficult to standardize pedagogical approaches that conceive of students as already consequential,

already working in a real economy, and already facing the day-to-day challenges of economic survival. Poverty and economic justice may sometimes be the objects of study, but they are less often studied as critical ongoing factors in the present lives of students—a vital part of their experiences and literate lives. Meanwhile, students will pursue their lives in the future within the same fundamental economic framework that creates the conditions within which so many already currently struggle. Pursuing the ideal of postsecondary education therefore requires a stubborn tunnel vision that somewhat denies, or at least brackets off, many of the harsh realities of work and education in the fast capitalist economy.

“Associates,” “Students,” “Consumers” etc.

We keep working and chasing this unattainable ideal that we have in our minds that work can bring us . . . I understand that work will be stressful and make you unhappy, yet I don't believe that this can happen to me. I am chasing this ideal whether I think I am or not.

—“Paige,” university student and office worker

Many of the important, persistent questions for writing teachers center around the authorial position that our students feel invited to occupy and the subjects that they are encouraged to write. Understanding this positionality requires that students gain awareness of, and their own perspectives on, the discourses that shape their everyday lives, at work and at school. Most contemporary approaches to pedagogy in rhetoric and composition proceed from the assumption that writing is “socio cultural,” that literacy and learning deeply intertwine material, social, and cultural contexts. Given that most of our students do have lives as workers that parallel their lives as students, it follows that we should in some way account for how market and workplace discourses interface with the discourses of higher education. Among the oft-cited characteristics of fast capitalism is that it has further blurred the lines between education and work. Education and the marketplace exhibit more synergy. Higher education is increasingly explicitly marketed as a form of job training, and it is now more generally constructed in consumerist terms. Likewise, management theories promoted in business schools and best-selling books reflect a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between language, identification, and increased loyalty and productivity. In other words, they resonate with an understanding of language and culture that has formally been more exclusive to humanities departments.

This phenomenon has been examined in much research over the past decade. For instance, in the influential *The New Work Order: Behind the Language of New Capitalism*, James Paul Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear describe a broad tendency toward discourse-driv-

en social engineering in fast capitalist business practices. Drawing on research from a training program at a technology firm, they argue that policies and procedures in the contemporary workplace aren't just geared toward managing the behaviors of workers that are directly associated with productivity: they are consciously, unapologetically designed to "indoctrinate"—to change thinking and social habits, even identities. These changes are brought about, in part, through the conscious manipulation of language as an habituated aspect of day-to-day social interaction and as a means of understanding ourselves and the world:

What we are really talking about here is a textual creation of a new Discourse . . . with new social identities: new bosses (now "coaches" and "leaders"), new middle managers (now "team leaders"), new workers (now "associates," "partners," "knowledge workers"), and new customers (now also "partners" and "insiders," who are said to drive the whole process).

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Gee, Hull, and Lankshear go on to characterize this discourse as not only "imperialistic" but colonizing, poised "to take over practices and social identities that are (or were) the terrain of other Discourses connected to churches, communities, universities and governments" (26). The spreading of the discourses and practices of neoliberal economics into higher education has been the subject of much discussion of late. David Noble, for instance, notes the increasingly active presence of corporate brands—Burger King, Coke, Pizza Hut, etc.—on university campuses. Others point to the direct impact of legislative funding changes designed to harness more of the work of higher education for private industry (for instance, Martin, Miyoshi, Slaughter and Leslie). Still others, like Michael Apple, Jill Blackmore, Derek Bok, and David Geoffrey Smith, note the pervasiveness of market discourses within discussions of goals and administrative processes in higher education. This work generally describes how "students" are increasingly construed as "consumers" and education as product within discussions of administration and curricular goals.⁴

4. It should be noted that this neoliberal shift in higher education is not just recognized by those who advocate resistance or point to its shortcomings. A considerable number of books, like Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry's *The Future of Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market*, construct this shift as inevitable and either advocate its acceleration, or, in the case of this book, argue for its inevitability and advance strategies for managing it.

As the discourse of the fast capitalist marketplace is increasingly synergized with the discourse of higher education, the boundaries between the “real world” of adulthood and work and the otherworldly state that still characterizes popular conceptions of the university is muddled to say the least. This synergy is not just discursive. The economy relies heavily on part-time, “flexible” and temporary labor, and full- and part-time and “students” supply a significant portion of that labor. Moreover, the economy increasingly relies on higher education for ongoing professional training. According to Stanley Aronowitz, 13% of the American workforce attends some postsecondary institution (28). While the higher average age of students over the past thirty-five years is, in part, explained by the expansion of access to higher education, it is also explained by a labor market that pushes anxious adults back into higher education so they can make themselves more competitive for decent professional jobs. “Lifetime education” may, on the surface, seem desirable for those of us who work in higher education, but large numbers of older, working-age people going back to school is actually among the outcomes of an economic system that leaves much of the American workforce in a state of perpetual insecurity.

Most student-workers spend part of each week working in low-end jobs that can offer little agency, recognition, pay, or even stability. During the other part of the week, students attend classes in institutions that offer the promise of escaping these “dead-end” jobs even as they reinforce the basic cultural and economic logics that create them. In this process, the dead-end job of the present doesn’t come into full focus as the subject of legitimate examination and critique. Rather, it remains on the margins, unvalidated but nevertheless serving as a kind of morality play boogeyman, the impetus for betterment and the cautionary consequence of a lack of ambition and hard work. The implicit goal then is to escape it—to use education to strive within the same economic system that creates large numbers of jobs of the type that so many currently hold and find undesirable—to adapt to a seemingly immutable environment, rather than to critique it and imagine how it might be more just, equitable, and democratic.

Writing Work

Gee, Hull, and Lankshear argue that literacy education should evolve to account for relationships between discourses and social practices within the varied spheres of peoples’ lives: “learners should be viewed as lifelong trajectories through these sites and institutions, as stories with multiple twists and turns . . . As *their* stories are rapidly and radically changing, we need to change *our* stories about skills, learning and knowledge” (6). This is a call for an inevitably problematic and even messy engagement that seeks to create new pedagogies that critique both academic discourses and the discourses of the fast capitalist marketplace.

Among the most salient features of what might broadly be called the “post-process” movement in Rhetoric and Composition are its focus on power, location, and institutional-ity—on spaces of articulation. It “foregrounds the writer’s situatedness in history and in his or her writing practice; and it makes visible the ‘apparatus of the production of authority’ that all writers tend to submerge in their discourse” (Olson 12). Foucauldian, it is not a rejection of authority, but a recognition of how authority derives in particular writing contexts, including within educational settings. Where the writer writes and for whom—i.e. “location”—is, therefore, profoundly important, as are the immediate circumstances of textual production. Bruce Horner envisions writing classes where students and teachers might examine the historical, social, and institutional foundations of rhetorical conventions and what he calls the “social material conditions of process” (35). Other work brings globalization into the frame of analysis, further complicating the conceptions of literacy that inform writing courses at institutions that serve large numbers of non-traditional students. For instance, LuMing Mao examines the complicated “border zones” that form the intersection between Chinese and European American rhetoric. Mao’s own experiences within this borderland inform the ways he approaches literacy in the writing classroom. Mao explores with his students Western and non-Western ways of reading and writing, fostering understanding of, and sophistication with, multiple literacies. Using language as a starting point, this conception of writing pedagogy consciously situates itself in relation to globalization and the discourses of diverse workplaces and, in doing so, resists being centered in any genericized discourse (like “academic writing”). Min-Zhan Lu similarly points to examples that illustrate that English is being used around the globe and is constantly hybridizing, relentlessly changing with individual users in individual contexts. Lu characterizes this hybridization in economic terms, arguing that the needs and values of global “fast” capitalism significantly define the terms of language use and writing pedagogy (43). Even pedagogies informed by multi-culturalism and an awareness of multiple literacies can be subsumed by marketplace prerogatives in often unrecognized ways. Lu, therefore, advocates an interventionist pedagogy for Composition that fosters awareness of “relations of injustice”:

To intervene with the order of Fast Capitalism, it is the responsibility of Composition to work with the belief that English is enlivened—enlightened—by the work of users intent on using it to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of all its speakers, readers, and writers, the work of users intent on using English to describe and, thus, control those circumstances of their life designed by all systems and relations of injustice to submerge them” (44).

She argues that we should see writing education as a way of helping students to “compose against the grain” of the dominating and totalizing discourses of fast capitalism (46).

Carl Herndl and Danny A. Bauer advocate what they call a “model of confrontational performance and articulation.” They draw on the theoretical foundations of the Latin American liberation theology movement—which has heterogeneous roots in both Catholicism and Marxism—to describe a rhetoric that doesn’t cater to the assumptions on which exploitive and unjust social structures are founded. It is unabashedly confrontational, as it “seeks to expose the working of hegemony by disrupting common-sense consensus and asserting powerful alternatives to the dominant social formation. It makes apparent what ‘normal’ discourse obscures: the political, ideological, and metaphysical work of discourse” (570). Herndl and Bauer’s rhetorical model discerns the degree to which subjects “come into being” through writing (581). It recognizes that social dynamics are inextricably bound with the processes of naming—a process enacted against the backdrop of, and perhaps in conscious opposition to, the cultural dominant:

When those who had been excluded from the traditional norms of the universal usurp that position and speak as enfranchised subjects, the performative contradiction exposes the exclusionary nature of the conventional norm of universality and broadens the definition, creating a new space and subject position for the previously excluded. (577)

They, therefore, call upon teachers and students to create a new discursive space and subject position—to “come into being” in politically creative and dynamic ways.

I have devised an advanced writing course designed to enable students to write themselves as student workers—with recognition of how economic factors shape discourse, and through it, identities, desires, goals and creative labor. To be clear, this is a writing course. We develop ideas for research and writing; we journal; we workshop and revise drafts; we reflect on our writing; and we develop writing portfolios. However, the class fosters an awareness of how articulation—the ways we “come into being”—are often overtly framed by political economic factors. The class actively seeks to recognize the relationship between the writer, that which is written, and the immediate educational context within which this process is enacted. Writing is conceived as a mode through which the writer reflexively struggles with the meanings and identities assigned within fast capitalist systems of production and education. It therefore approaches history, economics, and politics as both material and “in process,” created and transformable: the effect of past conditions and human actions and the cause of future conditions.

The first half of class is spent discussing, researching, and writing about issues raised in various readings that center around work. The class uses texts that become platforms for discussions of the material present, what it is and how we have gotten here. Readings are intended to help situate “work” as a trope in American culture. We read historical and con-

temporary work from a variety of sources: including excerpts from Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁵ Students locate more contemporary views of work from a variety of sources, including editorials, political speeches, and, of course, popular media.

We also do more contemporary readings. We have read David Shipler's *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, Michael Zweig's *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. *The Working Poor* has resonated particularly well with students. Shipler relies on intimate profiles and interviews to depict the complex array of factors that contribute to poverty in America—among them, low wages, welfare policies, the cost of healthcare, poor financial decision-making, domestic violence, drug addiction, language and cultural barriers, unequal education, the cost of housing and adolescent sexual abuse, race, and gender. Shipler's book complicates the myth of upward mobility through hard work that continues to play a powerful role in American political discourse. It chronicles the lives of people who are not able to pull themselves out of poverty through work. Interestingly, however, many students see aspects of their own lives in Shipler's stories—the book therefore can't be read with the same detachment and complacency as the works on most literary reading lists.

Finally, we read narratives from *Gig: Americans Talk about their Jobs*. *Gig* is a fast-capitalist update on Studs Terkel's classic *Working*. The book offers narratives spoken by people who work in a wide variety of industries: including a McDonald's crew member, a systems administrator, a Kinko's worker, a truck driver, a model, a web mistress and a professor. This book has been a particularly important teaching tool. Students recognize their own working experiences in these often gritty and complicated narratives. I find that students often seem surprised that they are invited to critically examine their work in a college classroom. I now wonder whether this is indicative of how corporatization sets the tone for contemporary post-secondary education? Students may at least subconsciously conflate the authority of academic faculty and educational institutions with the authority of managers and companies.

Students compile their own work histories, write descriptions of jobs they currently hold or have held, and examine perceptions of work—how these perceptions are formed and how we might rethink them in light of our critical examinations. The professions covered in a single class can be very broad ranging: from textile mill worker and oil changer to insurance lawyer, software developer, and real estate agent. These narratives become rich texts for classes. Through them, we analyze the discourses of work and the material terms they iden-

5. John Alberti's reader, *The Working Life*, published by Pearson Longman in 2004, is a very useful text for this type of class. It offers excerpts from Franklin, Weber, and Adam Smith, as well as work from writers as diverse as Woody Guthrie and Nicholas Negroponte.

tify and often mask—including job titles, job descriptions, specialized jargon of various professions, and the surprisingly common terms that people use to describe the jobs they have held in their working lives—“between jobs,” “shit work,” “dream job,” etc.

During the second half of the class, we turn toward extended group research projects that center on work. Ideas for these research projects often come directly out of the students' work descriptions and interviews. In an interview, one student who works as a telemarketer, for instance, complained that he increasingly calls households at which no one speaks English. He was frustrated because this wastes *his* time. Another front desk clerk at a medical practice whose first language is Spanish complained about the rude comments that patients have made about her accent. Students had very contentious discussions of these interviews, and the contention is very much a part of the politics of our region, which has seen a rapid influx of primarily Hispanic immigrants over the past decade. While some students discussed difficulties with, and resentments about, working with and among those whose native language is Spanish, others conveyed their shock and dismay when they witnessed incidents in which non-native speakers were discriminated against. Discussions about Hispanic immigrants and language provided an opportunity to contextualize immigration in broader economic and political terms. The discussion was fractious and even somewhat disturbing: there was no general, satisfying resolution. It did complicate the overly simplistic assumptions that characterize most popular media treatments of immigration and work. Students researched particular, concrete questions, such as why immigration has been so concentrated in the southeast over the past decade, and how educational and civic institutions might respond to non-English speakers.

Other issues that students have researched in the class include:

- Globalization—treaties, outsourcing, debates concerning, effects on wages and local economies, policies on immigration, the impact of IMF policies on the economies of developing nations, immigration policy.
- Women in the workplace—salary disparities, choices of occupation, advancement, and balancing work and motherhood.
- The labor movement—history, current state of, labor laws, recent and ongoing confrontations.
- Wal-Mart—effects on local economies, labor violations, reliance on public monies and welfare.
- Education—“the achievement gap,” the casualization of teaching labor in higher education, the role marketplace values and needs play in the shaping of curriculum, trends in federal aid for higher education, and the increasing use of contingent teaching labor in higher education.

The factors can also be very specific and personal, and the paths that students take in their thinking are often very surprising. One student wrote about her own experience as a fast food worker and related it to the documentary *Supersize Me*, incorporating some very interesting research on the fast food industry. Her web-based, multimodal project made connections between fast food and fast capitalism, articulating a relationship between poor nutrition, quick calories, and life at the bottom of the economic ladder. A group examined demographics and voting. Students from that group created an interactive web project that presented statistics showing the rate at which voter participation in elections declines with income levels.

Another student, surprised by the under-representation of African Americans among voters, investigated incarceration rates among African American males and recent legislation in a number of states that made it illegal for convicts to vote. A group of students who were all born outside of the United States developed a website focusing on work and immigration. Among that group was a Vietnamese man in his mid-thirties who had started his own small business and a Phillipino woman who, as a child, had been sent to the US to live with relatives to expand her opportunities. Both discussed the difficulties of living and working in the US and maintaining the cultural identities of their native countries. The Vietnamese man wrote about the growing gap between Americanized and non-Americanized generations in his family. He explained the difficulties that many new immigrants face as they adjust to life in the United States and associated a willingness to quickly adapt culturally with the likelihood of relative economic success. The Phillipino woman described the growing independence and confidence she had gained as a worker and student. This has caused friction with certain family members, as she is no longer willing to conform to their expectations for her gender. Her work became an examination of the contrasts between a work discourse within which she believes she is more culturally "American," and a discourse of home that she believes limits her in ways she finds increasingly unacceptable. Another student provided an overview of state and federal child support laws, and described her own frustrating struggle to collect the child support that the father of her young son owed. Her project became an examination of the relationship between this legal/bureaucratic discourse and the material realities of both parents' working lives.

How Soon in Now?

This question is intended to point to the potential benefits of starting on the immediate material present in writing pedagogy. How soon is now at our own institutions? Questions of location in higher education must inevitably target institutionality and the terms of labor in the classroom and in writing programs. Undergraduate writing programs staffed largely by contingent teachers typically offer students little opportunity to critically examine their own eco-

conomic circumstances and the contexts of their own literacy educations. After all, close examination of the real material “location” of undergraduate writing classes might lead students to recognize both the extent to which many postsecondary institutions now rely on contingent faculty to cut costs, and the lack of real investment many English departments and institutions have in high quality writing education. The “aesthetic” of higher education can quickly dissolve when we examine the terms of education work. Because writing faculty are so often burdened with heavy teaching loads, and have little institutional backing or extensive, advanced training in the field, writing instruction is institutionally predisposed toward generic, politically innocuous pedagogies—pedagogies that derive more from mass-produced textbooks and standard syllabi than from the inquiry and experience of teachers and students

“institutionally
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working in particular times and places. Pursuing “location” in writing classes means doing the uncomfortable work of examining the synergy between the use of cheap teaching labor and politically safe writing curriculums—a synergy that is especially apparent at “second-tier” and open-enrollment institutions that serve high numbers of “non-traditional” students and where dis-

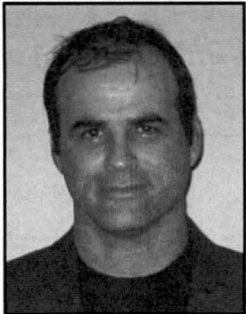
ciplinary, cost-cutting managerial measures (such as even heavier reliance on part-time teaching labor) are more readily apparent.

How soon is now for students to write from the material present rather than from the imagined future? How much does the labor they perform right now matter? These questions evoke a healthy, necessary skepticism toward the discourse that frames the project of higher education in fast capitalism. A class certainly should never be a political soapbox, but it also shouldn’t promote the political/economic status quo from behind the false veneer of professional neutrality. It should ask truly open-ended, if uncomfortable questions. The object is to encourage students to engage in ongoing informed struggle with dizzying cultural and material transformations. Writing education should provide a framework for students to complicate their perceptions of their working lives, to explore how their perceptions and labor are situated through contemporary economic and political discourse. It should invite students to legitimize their own (often working-class) experiences and their present lives as student-workers—so that university space becomes a more rightfully occupied space for working, working-class people, and the present becomes the subject of education and writing, rather than merely a temporary episode that is best hidden, intellectually ignored, and quickly transcended.

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