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Author(s): Margaret Ferguson

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Come Tell Me How You Live

MARGARET FERGUSON

University of California, Davis

IN THESE REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFERENCE on the Future of Doctoral Education, originally composed as concluding remarks and still bearing signs of their original occasion, I want to address the broad and complex issue signaled by my title: How do we define, and how does our society understand and value, the work that college-level teachers, both graduate students and faculty members, do for a living? First, however, I want to thank our University of Wisconsin hosts: Yvonne Ozzello, Heather Dubrow, David Ward, Virginia Hinshaw, Sargent Bush. Let me also express gratitude to those who planned our conference: Heather Dubrow, Ben M. Feigert, Christian Gundermann, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Robert Irwin, Christine Macdonald, Tyrus Miller, and Amada R. Sandoval. The task force did an extremely good job in allowing conference participants to divide their time productively between workshops and plenary sessions, and the task force should also be commended for ensuring that a genuine conversation occurred among graduate students and faculty members. Although only two students made formal presentations, students cochaired each of the major discussion sections and presided at the final sessions. Those sessions were structured to give graduate students the chance to speak first—and they did, with the result that their questions forcefully reached the floor, even if they did not always find wholly satisfactory answers.

As a faculty member in the institutional role of directing graduate studies in English at a large state university, I gained from this conference many valuable new ideas about job placement and preparation of students for the grueling task of going on the market. But I wish we had been

able to spend more time than we did discussing the intellectual and curricular challenges we are facing in the next decades of graduate education in the United States. If, however, Bertolt Brecht was right in insisting, “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral” (“Food is the first thing; morals follow on”; *Dreigroschenoper* 46; *Three Penny Opera* 201),¹ then it was surely appropriate to focus our primary attention on problems of the “job system,” as the Committee on Professional Employment Report accurately if grimly defines that phenomenon (“Final Report” 31). Feeling that I learned a great deal from the conference but feeling, too, that some of the matters would benefit from further debate among conference attendees and the larger audience of *PMLA* readers, I offer the following three questions.

The first arises, in part, from what I learned from Michael Abram, a practicing labor lawyer who spoke in the plenary session “Predoctoral Issues: The Preparation, Professionalization, and Compensation of Graduate Students.” His thoughtful paper is included in this issue. My question, which also grows out of the lively discussion that took place in the workshop on unionization, is, How can we who teach language and literature both in public and in private institutions of higher education start thinking more productively about the issue of unionization in general and in particular about aspects of our work that transcend the division still presumed to exist between faculty members and graduate student teachers by many in the professoriat?

That division, I believe, has much to do with ideologies of status and with an arguably outdated notion of the university as a system of “shared governance” in which faculty members, especially tenured faculty members, have professional and economic interests in common more with administrators than with others, such as graduate students, who perform teaching and scholarly work. Such a view of the faculty as

management was famously promulgated—ironically enough, against the expressed views of a majority of the faculty members in the institution in question—in the 1980 Supreme Court case *NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] v. Yeshiva University*. The court (or, rather, five of its nine members) held that “the University’s full-time faculty members are managerial employees” excluded from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act—the act that allows employees, including professional employees, to engage in collective bargaining to resolve disputes with their employer.²

For nearly twenty years, the *Yeshiva* decision has impeded unionization efforts among faculty members at private colleges and has contributed to preventing many faculty members from seeing important parallels between their work and that done by lower-status teachers in the university setting. As Courtney Leatherman notes in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, however, some faculty members at private institutions have recently decided to try again to unionize and thus to “think beyond the box” of *Yeshiva*, as one English professor put it. The new unionizing efforts, inspired in part by the recent decision of a labor official to permit faculty members to unionize at Manhattan College in New York, invite MLA members generally to revisit the *Yeshiva* case and consider the arguments of the dissent as well as those of the majority. In the view of the author of the dissent, Justice William Brennan, and the three other justices who joined him, the majority’s ruling was based on a profound misunderstanding of “the governance structure of the modern-day university.”³

For Brennan, the court’s majority erred in idealizing the university as a “community of scholars” in which the faculty’s professional interests are “indistinguishable from those of the administration”; on the contrary, Brennan argued, higher education has become “big business,” and the “task of operating the university enterprise has been transferred from the fac-

ulty” to a largely autonomous administration that “faces the same pressures to cut costs and increase efficiencies that confront any large industrial organization” (*NLRB* 16). Although Brennan’s dissent oversimplifies the peculiar nature of the university as a corporation—a point to which I return below—his eloquent critique of the majority opinion in *Yeshiva* is a text worth rereading, or reading for the first time, as we attempt to think in fresh ways about issues of unionization as they pertain not only to graduate students and staff but also to faculty members in various kinds of institutions.

Faculty members in private universities should think critically about the logic enshrined in *Yeshiva* that defines them as managers rather than workers. The division between faculty members and graduate students, fostered though it has been by significant differences in pay and job security as well as by deeply held views about status differences, may be eroding today. My own view is that those in the MLA who have full-time faculty status would do well to think more systematically about the concerns they share with graduate student and part-time teachers: concerns for health benefits, for instance, or for tuition waivers for spouses or for remuneration.

If faculty members both in private universities and in the public ones currently without faculty unions were to think seriously about the advantages of defining their teaching as a type of work amenable to collective bargaining, then we should follow Mike Abram’s suggestion that rules “about the scope of collective bargaining” might profitably be examined “to develop principles that suit the particular needs of both students and universities.” Rather than simply be for or against the unionization of faculty members and graduate students at public or private universities, we in the humanities, and in the MLA in particular, should use our knowledge of our institutions to work actively to shape the unions we might join and the rules that govern them. University educators who play multiple roles not easily

accommodated under the conceptual categories developed for for-profit organizations—graduate students are both students and employees, faculty members are employees but also may have manager-like roles—can help write and interpret the labor laws that will govern our institutions in the years to come. Abram notes that other organizations have obtained amendments to the National Labor Relations Act or have even brought those defined as managers together with union representatives to coauthor legislation that Congress then enacted. In the wake of the Wisconsin conference, MLA members might undertake a similar project of coauthorship, one that would cross several lines that traditionally segment our membership and obscure our vision of teaching as what most of us do for a living.

My second question is closely related to the first: Can we devote some of the analytic skills we collectively possess to interrogating productively the analogy between businesses and universities that has pervaded this conference as it has much recent discourse about academia? This analogy, invoked by pro-union activists as well as by those who dislike the idea of unions among either faculty members or graduate students, is an extremely tricky one. It merits an essay in its own right; here, however, I want simply to remark that the defining of universities and colleges as nonprofit corporations, which classifies faculty members either as labor or as management, grossly oversimplifies the nature of our workplace. American labor law was developed to facilitate negotiations between workers and managers in organizations that are fundamentally different from those in which MLA members work. We therefore need to be highly skeptical when colleagues (or administrators) suggest that the current job crisis is in any way a natural or inevitable result of downsizing, as that phenomenon is defined, rationalized, and practiced in the world of multinational corporations. I suspect many of us need to bring to our thinking about academic unionization disputes a clearer understanding of the (murky) history of

nonprofit corporations in the United States. One person who has studied such corporations in detail, the lawyer and economist Henry Hansmann, highlights a paradox at the heart of the phrase “nonprofit corporations.” This paradox, undertheorized by those arguing either for or against faculty and graduate student unions, is that nonprofit organizations are not legally barred from earning profits. They are barred only—and this Hansmann sees as their fundamental characteristic—from “*distributing* [their] net earnings, if any, to individuals who exercise control over [them], such as members, officers, directors, or trustees” (“Role” 838).⁴ If one thinks about universities as nonprofits in the light of Hansmann’s analysis of their peculiar features in a capitalist society, many of the arguments about whether faculty members are or are not managers cry out for conceptual refinement.

We should interrogate metaphors drawn from for-profit organizations regardless of whether such metaphors come from administrators interested in downsizing their labor force (on the model of corporations seeking cheaper and more flexible labor to compete in the global market); from trustees of elite institutions concerned with maximizing the interest on endowments (following a capitalist logic highly debatable for trustees of educational institutions); or from faculty members and students who advocate shrinking graduate student enrollments on the grounds that we in the humanities are overproducing PhDs, as if the departments were factories and the students our product. All sorts of business metaphors, I am suggesting, need to be scrutinized and deployed more warily in our discussions of the future of universities in general and graduate education in particular. Some scholars have begun this process of interrogation: John Guillory and Evan Watkins, for example, have analyzed the work of language and literature professors and argued that it entails significant gatekeeping functions through its tasks of legitimizing and (more visibly) formally conferring credentials.⁵

Watkins and Guillory offer provocative perspectives on the social function of humanities professors and in particular on the work done in English departments in the United States. Their analyses suggest that business metaphors are indeed important for the debates about employment with which we have been struggling. But such metaphors are important more as a symptom than as a tool for analyzing, much less for ameliorating, a set of problems that have to do with global capitalism but cannot (or so many graduate students and faculty members maintain) simply be accepted as the inevitable effect of a process that distributes wealth with vast unevenness around the world. Putting intellectual pressure on how we use metaphors that liken universities to for-profit corporations might at the very least contribute to the quest for “pressure points” in the job system that John Guillory urges us to undertake.

My final question also stresses the need for skepticism: How can we best use our professional skills in analyzing complex symbolic structures to assess the complex types of evidence we are receiving—and gathering—about the job system for PhDs in our field? I’m thinking here first of evidence that takes the form of statistics—so important, so hard to use, so easy to abuse. Why, for instance, is everybody’s own department doing better on placement, according to the statistics collected by the MLA, than we are doing overall? I’m thinking also of the evidence contained in surveys like the one Robert Weisbuch referred to after one of our sessions, the study “PhDs Ten Years Later” funded by the Mellon Foundation and analyzed, with particular reference to its data about English PhDs, by Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerny. This survey was carefully done and contains much fascinating data about the degrees of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction experienced by people who received their doctorates in the early 1980s. Seeking to elicit information from PhDs working both in academic (tenure and non-tenure-track) positions and in the business,

government, and nonprofit (BGN) sectors, the designers of the survey posed specific questions about autonomy, content, work environment, flexible work situation, career growth, prestige of organization, and spouse’s job in order to measure a person’s job satisfaction. Strikingly, the survey’s results for English PhDs showed an overall higher degree of satisfaction for those now working in BGN “managerial” positions than for those with tenure-track jobs in academia (Nerad and Cerny 6; fig. 6). But how should we interpret survey results that suggest that many who received English PhDs in the bad job market of the early 1980s were, in 1996, happily employed in business, government, or nonprofit organizations, although those workers were presumably aiming for jobs in universities and colleges when they entered graduate school? Important as it is to devise responsible and creative policies for training literature PhDs for positions outside academia—as the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, under Weisbuch’s leadership, is beginning to do—it nonetheless seems to me premature to base policy decisions on surveys bearing the comforting news I described above. Surely we need to exercise our talents of hermeneutic suspicion here. Does this survey really report “facts,” as Nerad and Cerny claim in their title? Reports about one’s psychic state, even when filtered through questions devised by social scientists about autonomy and other such aspects of one’s work, probably bear at best a synecdochal relation to other narratives that another kind of questioning apparatus (the psychoanalyst’s?) might elicit. Are reports about job satisfaction among English PhDs any more likely to be objectively true than reports about Americans’ sex lives?

In sum, as the fortune-teller might say, in our collective future I see much interpretive labor on ideas broached and debated at this first MLA Conference on the Future of Doctoral Education. I hope there will be a second conference. In the meantime, I am grateful to the MLA staff for continuing their work—much increased

in the last five years—of gathering new information about working conditions in our profession. Parodying William Wordsworth's old leech gatherer in "Resolution and Independence," Lewis Carroll called attention to the difficulty of explaining the artist's mode of work to the public. Neither the White Knight nor the aged, aged man of "The White Knight's Song" succeeds in communicating to each other (or to the implied public) a coherent account of what they do for a living; their exchange pertains to, and challenges, those of us seeking to explain to ourselves and to others what it is that we do when we teach language and literature. At the Wisconsin conference, and with the help of researchers who are gathering information about how teachers of humanities are perceived and hence evaluated by others in the society, we began to do better than thumping one another on the head. But we still have a ways to go from the gate that Lewis Carroll so memorably described:

I saw an aged, aged man,
 A sitting on a gate.
 "Who are you, aged man?" I said.
 "And how is it you live?"
 And his answer trickled through my head
 Like water through a sieve.
 [.]
 So having no reply to give
 To what the old man said,
 I cried, "Come tell me how you live!"
 And thumped him on the head. (307, 311)

NOTES

¹ Hannah Arendt translates the line as "First comes the grub, then come the morals" (45).

² Cited from the summary, analysis, and text of *NLRB*.

³ *NLRB* 16. Justice Brennan was joined in his dissent by Justices Byron White, Thurgood Marshall, and Harry Blackmun.

⁴ For a valuable overview of the conceptual and legal confusions both in the history and in the current status of nonprofit corporations in the United States, see Hansmann, "Role," "Changing Roles."

⁵ For important albeit somewhat different analyses of the work that occurs in English departments, see Watkins; Guillory 193. Watkins emphasizes the work of "evaluation," whereas Guillory stresses "the process of credentialization in linguistic or other knowledges" (Guillory 375n42).

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