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**Review of *Rhetoric and Resistance in the Corporate Academy* by
Christopher Carter (Hampton Press, 2008)**

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Last fall, I worked in a dual role as both a G.A. and a T.A. for the English Department at California State University Northridge. The G.A. position required me to coordinate the freshman writing portfolio norming and scoring sessions for all first-year composition faculty on campus—a faculty that has rarely included full-time and tenured instructors. In effect, CSUN’s freshman composition instructional staff is entirely made up of part-timers and T.A.s.

Two days before the scoring session, I signed a petition to support an impending T.A. strike across the CSU system, one which was to address the absence of fee waivers for teaching associates and which was scheduled for the day of portfolio scoring. This action meant that virtually three-quarters of first-year composition teachers (that fall, the percentage of T.A.s teaching the course at CSUN) could strike. As it was meant to do, this strike would cause various administrative snags, including the fact that a large number of students would be denied their semester grades on time.

The day before the strike, the United Auto Workers Local 4123, which represents the estimated 6,000 CSU students who work as T.A.s, postponed the strike based upon an agreement to negotiate the sides of the fee-waiver issue, to be mediated by California Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (Butler par. 1). But even with the strike postponed, I was left conflicted and confused. As the coordinator of the end-of-semester scoring session, I had struggled greatly with my sense of duty to my immediate job expectations—or the product of my labor—and my relationships with the tenured faculty members who had guided—or is that managed?—this work. My waffling was matched with my worries over withholding grades from my own class of writers if I/we decided to strike. Even more complex, my sense of obligation butted up to the larger collective issue at hand: since T.A.s on CSUN’s campus are paid 60% of a part-timer’s course rate (already a ridiculously minimal pay) and are not granted fee waivers for tuition, the earnings rate for T.A.s would continue to be compromised by the \$1,800 (and rising) semester tuition costs. What was most fair? And how could I view this situation with a discerning, objective eye?

My experience here dovetails with the various personal and political tensions situated in public university labor practices as identified by Chris Carter in his book *Rhetoric and Resistance in the Corporate Academy*, tensions which he then deconstructs and re-imagines so that contingent composition workers can understand the rhetorics and ideologies that shape our individual and collective beliefs about teaching, organizing, and (hopefully) changing our working conditions. Here we are, Carter explains, tenured and untenured and part-time and T.A. university “knowledge workers,” moving into an era heavy with “information age” rhetoric and critical theory. Meanwhile, we encounter students who have, as Stanley Aronowitz observes, “become persuaded that the main point of education is to earn the credentials needed to enter the work world with some kind of comparative advantage” (167). What’s more, we must grapple with tropes such as “flexibility,” “professionalism,” and “academic excellence,” terms which Carter argues are marketed to the student, instructor, and larger community by the university in such a way that it enforces a rhetoric of selectivity and competition, and injects us with repeated messages which support systems of meritocratic, capitalist ideology (39). Tropes like “excellence,” for example, are grounded in a

corporate logic that associates contingency with freedom and fluidity, [while] academic labor uses the term “casualization” to specify three related trends: the world-wide decline of stable and fairly compensated work, the impact of this decline on college teachers, and the role of higher education as a training ground for negotiating the flexible economy. (Carter 85)

Carter warns us to examine such significations, and works to “denaturalize” terms like “excellence” in Chapter 2 of *Rhetoric and Resistance*, suggesting that “a different kind of university is still possible” (32).

First, though, Carter contextualizes—and deconstructs— terms like “excellence,” in order to reveal the ways in which our paths to collectivity and action are obscured by corporate university rhetoric, including categorizations of our work, like “flexible” and “professional.” He locates these anti-labor codes in Freirean theory, as “a condition that locates storytelling power solely in institutional authorities while coding students as information receptacles” (46). Thus, Carter argues that both unilateral university structures and rhetorics which create and sustain the types of teaching assignments in which we find ourselves maintain current material inequities. We might, for example look at how part-time teaching is often described as “flexible” and non-secure, yet it is also “professionalized,” hinting at the mental/manual dichotomization of labor and confusing authority with managerialism, teaching with temporariness. Carter pushes the reader to consider terms like “flexible” and “professional” as “ideology that codes vastly differentiated tiers of power and resources as inescapable” (67). He argues, then, that such coding is trap of capitalism and individualism, but it is not to be retreated from. Instead, these codes should be rhetorically analyzed and then resisted, both in the classroom as we work with students and in the texts and rhetoric we produce as campus organizers. His assertions echo Marc Bousquet’s observations that “late capitalism doesn’t ‘just happen’ to the university. Instead, the university makes late capitalism happen, and it does so by sustaining a semi-formal economy of exceptions and exclusions

to the rights of labor” (par. 1). Indeed, Carter argues that the terms the university uses to describe itself, its goals and its labor often dichotomize its “academic and economic concerns so as to protect administrative control over both” (45).

Carter’s transparent look at the material conditions which shape current university labor practices is certainly *not* a new phenomenon, however, especially when we consider and analyze various labor conditions *outside* of the university. But a general cultural denial that what the instructor does both inside and, perhaps, away from the university (if we are to recognize grading, student advisement, and general course management in addition to classroom teaching) is *actually* labor problematizes the either/or distinction between mental and physical work. Such binary constructions of mental/manual labor “diminish the membership and undermine the overall health of the labor movement” (Carter 19). Carter’s discussion of this false dichotomy is perhaps what advances his argument beyond current conversations about contingency in the university. But what also defines Carter’s work in *Rhetoric and Resistance* are his suggestions for what actions part-time instructors can take both inside the classroom and away from the campus in order to change such either/or distinctions as well exploitative working conditions. Carter argues that by working within larger spheres of labor—and especially in considering the intersections between student-learning, the corporate-controlled learning institution, and unfair labor practices not just on campus but in the local area, academic laborers learn to organize in reciprocal and meaningful ways with other labor forces. Additionally, contingent faculty can critique the structures which sustain exploitative labor practices with their students. As a start, we might simply look at the mental/manual labor division as a cultural construct, since to even compare mental to physical labor is, as Steve Wexler asserts, capitalist (2).

Analysis of and engagement in larger labor spheres by academic laborers—local, national, and global—are what, Carter argues, free us to examine our working conditions. In “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition,” Joseph Harris addresses the current problematic of university working conditions when he asks English faculty to “think through the conflicted class interests of many of us working in composition in order to see if some of the contradictions we face might be turned into opportunities for positive change” (45). But Harris’s article discusses the composition worker’s and the English department faculty’s responsibilities in making change only within the department or university itself. Carter, in true revisionist form, implores us to step outside our departmental bubbles, to engage in critical literacy of various anti-labor rhetorics, and to critique *all* labor practices, mental and otherwise, such that we might recognize various forms of systematic contingency and engage in efforts to create conditions for change. In fact, Carter echoes and expands upon Eileen Schell’s argument that academic laborers need to engage in coalition building with other forms of labor to create a “rhetoric of common cause” (par. 21).

In Chapter 5, for example, Carter applies “social movement labor discourse” to the alliance which occurred between the United Students Against Sweatshops and the Graduate Student Organizing Committee at NYU in 2001 to describe formats in which students themselves might engage in and discriminate between the discourses of labor

and authority and consider unfair labor practices in different contexts. In the example of the USAS, where students created campus actions to address the conditions of local sweatshop laborers, Carter underscores the repeated textual thread in *Rhetoric and Resistance* that the composition classroom could become the location where students can examine the systems which sustain exploitative labor practices and thus reveal the ways in which contingent labor practices highlight the larger facets of labor history, individualization under capitalism, collective knowledge and organizing, and the larger, global productions of value. Thus, like Giroux's argument that "[a]cademics have a moral and pedagogical responsibility to unsettle and oppose all orthodoxies, to make problematic the commonsense assumptions that often shape students' lives and their understanding of the world," Carter suggests teachers use localized examples in classroom discussions and writing assignments to explore class and corporate constructs of labor (par. 4). If undergraduates can intellectualize oppressive working conditions, like those of sweatshop laborers in New York, they can then approach and discuss the logics of activism and organizing against such conditions—as NYU students did in forming the USAS. Regardless of who unfairly labors where, exploitation is exploitation. Even small collective actions like those of the USAS create not just rhetorical but physical antidotes to powerful capitalist and corporate ideology. This type of analysis allows both students and contingent teachers to work together in spaces where they can discuss capitalist and cultural constructions of labor and, as Randy Martin observes, recognize that not just the university, but "[t]he state has positioned itself rhetorically as a guide to *personally* managed well-being rather than the guarantor of social welfare" (x, italics mine). Meanwhile, contingency and casualization continue to have far-reaching consequences, Carter asserts, since teachers' working conditions also directly correspond to students' learning conditions. Carter remains adamant, like Giroux, that students can be energized to "come to terms with their own power as individual and social agents" (par. 4). Without tapping into the potential organizing energy of students, and in denying them a close look the problematic nature of contingency under capitalism, the teacher shuns a responsibility to her students. Thus, Carter's analysis serves as a point of praxis: if systematic contingency damages the student-teacher relationship, that relationship becomes another location for critique and, ideally, activism to begin through collective action.

Carter knows that such change is not so easily done. For one thing, unions have been criticized by rhetoricians, such as Bruce Horner, as reifying the very conditions they seek to change. If the teaching of composition is viewed as work, for example, and such work is contractually protected and supported through a campus union, then the union itself reinforces the managerialism and administrations which oppress the same work that the union seeks to protect through its contracts. My own story at the beginning of this review, for example, indicates my feeling of "distance" from the T.A. union, which currently creates little sense of community for me and my colleagues on campus. But, then, whose responsibility is that? Such "distance" also occurs in the department, since any sense of community is similarly fragmented, if not destroyed, when increased managerialism and contingent employment practices dominate. People like me are left in a sort of limbo in terms of a sense of "place" in our work—an appropriate, if distant echo to Marx's idea that the laborer "feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels

outside himself” (767). In both the department and the union we part-timers can feel nameless, lacking in any meaningful worker identity. Yet Carter counters that there is “more to unionization” than contractual negotiation, since contingent instructors (especially compositionists or “literacy laborers”) can use the union as a space for “critical public intellectualism” (73). He suggests we

re-imagine the real world as a space of struggle, a space where higher education can foster resistance to exploitation rather than only teaching flexible complacency. As unionization helps secure a place for nonconformist visions of composition work, critical rhetoricians can in turn energize the organizing process—maintaining a reflexive consciousness of how language practices inform and sometimes subvert dominant social relations, and thereby better theorize and pursue workplace justice. (73)

No matter how distant we might feel from our unions, Carter argues that contingent laborers *need* such spaces. Unions provide one of the only locations where critical rhetoricians can engage in the organizing process—while still maintaining a critical awareness of its rhetorics and how they might continue to be (re)constructed to create change (74).

There is an additional complexity inside the “real world” where contingent workers might create change for themselves. Carter notes different ways in which fear, perhaps, stifles our voices as part-timers, graduate student-workers, and undergraduates (themselves often contingent laborers). Such fear can easily cause us to regress into notions of individualism. But Carter suggests that in recognizing and articulating such fear, the positions of class within capital come into clear relief and are illuminated such that the university laborer can identify where she appears in such hierarchies and whom she must align with to make the situation different. Still, Carter understands that students, particularly undergraduates, tend to “downplay their exploitation,” and that it is through organic and localized connections, like the relationship of USAS and the GSAS, that critical educators can “suggest a fresh direction for student activism while enriching how we talk and write about resistance in the critical composition classroom” (116).

Ultimately, Carter seeks to revive us from any trope-induced paralysis by re-situating the “politics of ethos” from that of capital (and the laws which support it) to that of social responsibility. And, perhaps most important, throughout *Rhetoric and Resistance*, Carter advocates for organized labor groups in the university to engage in *self-criticism*, as it “compels labor to rectify its own exclusions, to continually rediscover and try to efface its hierarchies of privilege”—one being the privilege which literature-based disciplines seem to hold over rhetoric and composition disciplines, but also the privilege which academic laborers tend to assert over other forms of work (64). Without acknowledging such binary rhetorics and without recognizing academic labor *as* labor, we risk isolating ourselves from the larger social movements for workplace justice, those efforts which can help expose our “situatedness amid the globalization of neoliberal capitalism” (65). What Carter makes clear, then, is that a major part of the work of organizing and activism for contingent laborers within the corporate university involves a consistent examination

of the assumptions we may knowingly or unknowingly make as part of it. Equally important is understanding the ways in which contingent university labor mirrors other oppressive working conditions outside of the university.

Thus, a bit of self-criticism: while I had signed the petition supporting the T.A. action, since the union conceded to meeting with state government and CSU administrators rather than striking, I was saved from having to decide whether or not to actively participate. Does such wavering make me both an instructor of learning and “a model of moral indifference,” as Giroux defines some academics? (64). If I hadn’t participated in the strike, in what ways would that contribute to the disconnection between schooling and public life? While I claim that I (and I presume that many, if not most, of my colleagues) am not morally indifferent, after reading *Rhetoric and Resistance*, I more clearly recognize the ways in which my beliefs about work are conditioned by the managed university and, particularly, the larger capitalist structure, especially in terms of my hedging and fear in the face of action. Bousquet might absolve me of my confusion since he knows that I am embroiled in the “dizzying contingency of the adjunct’s existence, structured by language and policy” (1). But Chris Carter would push me, and contingent laborers like me, to see the deeper point that such dizziness is also “a window into the common condition, capitalism’s permanently temporary structure of feeling,” and that this window becomes our passage to engaging in new and different types of discourse around academic labor (27).

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