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**FORWARD:
THE INSTITUTION AS FALSE HORIZON**

(for Kent Puckett and the *Workplace* collective)

Workplace is a semiannual electronic journal that asks you to join with Graduate Student Caucus as the agent of a new dignity in academic work. This means that most of its contributors will try to convince you that becoming a *Workplace* activist is in your immediate and personal best interest, even by the narrowest construction of careerism.

Let me be clear about this. If you're a graduate student, I'm saying that becoming an activist today will help you get a job in your interview tomorrow.

If you're an undergraduate, or parent, or employer, I'm saying that a dignified academic WORKPLACE delivers better education.

By "dignified" I mean very simple things.

I mean a higher-education WORKPLACE in which first-year students—those most at risk for dropping out and those requiring the best-trained and most-expert attention—can expect as a matter of course that they have registered for classes taught by persons with experience, training, and the terminal degree in their field (usually a Ph.D.), an office for conferences, a salary that makes such meetings possible, a workload that enables continuing scholarship, a telephone and answering machine, reasonable access to photocopying, and financial support for professional activities.

Remove any one of these values, and education suffers. Who would ask their accountant to work without an office? Or a telephone? Or training and professional development?

Most of the teachers encountered by students in first-year classes have none of these things. No office. No pay for meetings outside of class. No degree. Little or no training. No experience to speak of.

Little wonder that nobody's happy with the results.

Good News, Bad News

The good news is that there's plenty of work in higher education teaching for those who want to do it. The bad news is that all of that work no longer comes in the package of tenure, dignity, scholarship, and a

living wage that we call "a job."

The present system of adjunct labor resembles the late 19th century system of lecturers and tutors where only a few made a living wage and the rest lived as scholars have lived for millenia—as monks.

But by 1970, strong faculty associations, academic unionism, and social enthusiasm for higher education had created historically unprecedented concrete utopias of the North American campus. At least 3/4 of higher-education teachers worked for a living wage and part-time salaries were much closer to parity with full-time labor.

What that means is that faculty in the mid-20th century *created* the expectation of a just workplace for higher education teachers, even at the instructor and tutor level. Everything we associate with the professoriate—the aforementioned living wage, academic freedom, support for research, democratic classrooms, faculty governance and so on—were first imagined and then achieved by a united activist faculty.

We've inherited those expectations, but not the habits of organization and social action that made them a reality. And the concrete utopia of an earlier academy is slipping away.

Tripping Over Our Gowns: Elaine's World

"For years, I've been trying to make the life of the mind coexist with the day at the mall." —Elaine Showalter (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1/23/98, page A12)

Twenty years ago, a scholar took her first job ABD. Today, it takes a book contract. By the time most Ph.D. degree holders find jobs, they have already done nearly enough scholarship to qualify for tenure. Soon enough, the only way to get a tenure-track job will be to have had one already.

The 1998 President of the MLA, Elaine Showalter, responds to the failure of dignity and opportunity in academic work with blame-the-victim pronouncements (graduate students write badly), an embarrassing enthusiasm for the corporatization of the academy (graduate students need training in organization and management), and an economically-naive effort to get hold of our working lives and prospects with low-rent market metaphors.

Elaine's World is thickly populated. Few scholars of the baby boom understand the conditions under which they work. An entire generation has been looking the other way while the college classroom has been turned over to a teaching corps of graduate students and flexible labor—really, much too often, just about anyone with a few hours of postgraduate education and a primary source of income enabling them to take on first-year teaching as a kind of ill-paid philanthropy.

Remember "vulgar Marxism?"

Well, you might call the scholars of the baby boom possessed by a kind of "vulgar liberalism," the peculiarly-naive application to higher education working conditions of dimly-remembered gleanings from Econ 101.

Example. We like to talk about tenure track job advertisements as the "demand" and recent Ph.D. holders as the "supply" for the annual MLA job "market."

From these *analogies* we argue pseudo-economic solutions that will in theory balance "supply" and "demand": senior professors should retire early, graduate schools should admit fewer students, etc.

Of course these solutions are mostly bunk.

The jobs of most retiring professors are eliminated, not replaced, and nearly all graduate schools admit students to fill labor quotas. (Look at what happens to the 'graduate programs' in foreign languages at large universities when the administration scuttles the foreign-language requirement: presto, they vanish.).

Any economist will tell you that the chief determinants of higher education working conditions are law (in the form of appropriations and statutes) and institutional policy.

The Institution and Other Artificial Horizons

At public universities, working conditions are profoundly influenced by state law, as in New York State, where the legislature annually renews, the Governor eagerly signs, and the Mayor cravenly applauds, a bill encouraging the retirement of tenured professors.

It is *official* fiscal policy to rid the university of tenured faculty, create "graduate programs" and deprive the undergraduate of instruction by tenured faculty with an active research life, academic freedom, expertise, pedagogical experience, and a pedagogically sound workload.

It is official policy to tax graduate student earnings as work (and not financial aid) while denying graduate students the social benefits of work (such as unemployment insurance and compensation for disability).

It is official policy to make student debt (acquired on the bogus promise of apprenticeship) unforgivable in bankruptcy.

Most states restrict the access of teachers and graduate students to many of the rights of labor.

I have heard—and I hope it's not true—that the Florida state legislature has established by statute the number of pages to be produced in its composition classrooms.

These other notions—of supply and demand, and free markets and so forth—have an important place in the intellectual history of economics. But any connection they have to our working experience is chiefly rhetorical. There just isn't any such thing as a free market, any more than there's a world of Ideal Forms.

The idea that our working lives unfold in a "marketplace" only escapes inanity to the extent that it is actively pernicious.

The Excrement Theory of Postgraduate Education

Even if there were such a thing as free market of academic labor (as the MLA in gorgeous innocence of economic thought after Adam Smith has consistently fantasized) the "supply" of that labor is not the Ph.D. degree-holder, but graduate students and part-timers.

The degree holder is the waste product of a job system that produces Ph. D. holders but does not use them in any significant numbers. In language and literature more than any other field, the first-year teaching machine runs on non-degreed labor.

Crunch the numbers with your own brain. At your typical large research institution's English department, you might see—in a good year—one full-time hire. But you'll see about forty graduate students admitted that year.

The newly hired degree holder will teach about 4 classes a year, mostly to English majors. The new non-degreed persons will collectively teach about 100 classes a year, all to the general student population.

It doesn't take Einstein to pick out the real "labor supply."

The fact that some of these graduate students eventually get degrees is an entirely incidental byproduct of a system that needs ever more non-degreed laborers (graduate students are nice, but not necessary) and ever fewer degree holders.

Who's Teaching Johnny?

While degree holders are snapped up in increasing numbers to do the communications labor of corporations, political elites, and mass entertainment; the actual teaching on the college campus is done by persons without significant experience, with little or no training, no certification, and in most cases a teaching future of fewer than four years.

Most part-timers do not hold the Ph.D. and never will.

Neither will most graduate students. Dropout rates of sixty to eighty percent raise no eyebrows in top-20 language programs. Perhaps half of those who do get degrees ever teach in the tenure stream: this means that—even in good programs—perhaps one out of every eight or nine persons who are permitted to teach as graduate students subsequently go on to teach as an assistant professor.

This makes Navy SEAL training look like a cakewalk. ("Look to your left. Look to your right. Only one person in your row will ever go up for tenure.")

Nor —speaking of the armed forces—does it take exceptional genius to observe the emergence of a professionalized standing army and the corresponding development of a deprofessionalized, flexible, amateur teaching force.

Your average American youth can name more weapons than parts of speech.

Most North Americans pass through a regime of required language studies and most do it without ever encountering a person holding a Ph.D., or even someone with a telephone number—much less an office!—to call her own.

First-year courses are the courses through which, often, everyone who goes to a given school **must** pass. Distressingly, this means that—where taught by graduate students, as at the "better schools"—the courses that nearly everyone takes are typically taught by persons who have zero to four years of teaching experience, persons who more likely than not—by virtue of circumstance, inclination, or capacity—

simply have no future in college teaching.

These are persons who simply cannot have more than four (or perhaps six) years of experience—because the system of first-year teaching is designed to annually dispose of each and every one of its most experienced teachers, inexorably replacing them with entirely new persons, all of whom have one in thing in common—

Years of experience: Zero.

The logic of this system is replacement, not apprenticeship. If its logic were fully played out, it would run without producing degree holders at all. It doesn't create good teachers; it just teaches cheaply.

This is not to say that graduate students and part-timers don't teach with energy and commitment. On the contrary, it takes extraordinary quantities of both to teach when your office is the trunk of your car.

But unless first-year teaching is the only activity at which adult humans don't improve with experience, training and professional development, offices and telephones, the expectation of a future and a living wage, it seems obvious that Johnny's education will improve more or less in direct proportion to improvements in Jane's working conditions.

If It's Not a Market, Why Do We Call It One Anyway?

The reason we think about our working conditions, freak out, and reach for the absurdly-inappropriate intellectual toolkit of the market is the soothing logic of laissez-faire. The idea of the "market" tells us that an invisible hand will magically intervene and resolve the problems of our working conditions without any intervention on our part. Which is wrong, hugely wrong, but really very appealing.

As the result of sustained graduate-student agitation, there have been first, hesitant gestures toward an other-than-market epistemology of academic labor in recent MLA communications. Most notably, the report of the Committee on Professional Employment (CPE), largely authored by Sandra Gilbert, attempts the important substitution of the concept of "job system" for "job" market" in its historical analysis.

Nonetheless, laissez-faire logic is still dominant in MLA governance.

The well-meaning CPE report is a good example.

To its credit, the report acknowledges that academic labor is shaped largely by complex political, social and economic factors—and it in this analytical section of the report that its collective author struggles visibly to abandon the entrenched language of "market."

But in framing solutions, the CPE ducks all of the difficult questions raised by its historical overview.

It is inescapable that to address a political, social, and economic circumstance, it is necessary to frame political, social, and economic solutions. Which is to say that we must commit political, social, and economic actions. (Such as those proposed over the past two years by Graduate Student Caucus and passed by MLA's Delegate Assembly over the sustained and vigorous opposition of the Executive Council, staff, and Organizing Committee: see Kelley's report in this issue.)

But the CPE backs away from this simple conclusion. Frantically resurrecting market logic, the CPE rather sweetly and hopefully suggests that departmental self-study will resolve the labor crisis, holding onto the myth that degree-holders are the labor supply and that there are somehow too many of them.

(There is in fact a huge *shortage* of degree holders. If degree-holders were the ones doing the teaching, there'd be far too few of them.)

You see, the CPE resurrects the goofy idea that degree holders are "overproduced" in order to ignore the thornier problem catchily describable as the "underproduction" of jobs.

This is really just the *recovery* of jobs given away while our minds were wandering the mall: in 1972, the City University of New York had more than 10,000 full time faculty. Today, it has fewer than 5,000.

The CPE's nutty return to market ideas shows that their market theory is really just an excrement theory. The CPE's real commit to department self-shrinkage, department re-tooling toward "market" needs, prospective graduate student caveat-emptor, and alternative careers shows a primary dedication to flush away the degree-holding waste product, not to employ them as teachers.

Showalter's victim-blaming and wildly counterfactual recent "President's Column" (MLA Newsletter 30:1, pp. 3-4) goes further than the CPE report in embracing the excrement theory.

Graduate students, she insists, deserve to be dumped on because they are a pretty shiftless bunch. If you'll pardon the liberty, she basically insists that graduate students *are* excrement. They write badly. They lack communications skills transferable to corporate and public life. They lack the ability to organize, manage, and negotiate.

With due respect, I've never met this sort of graduate student. And I don't know anyone else who has ever seriously attempted to describe graduate students in these terms. Much less the president of an association of which graduate students make up one-third of its present membership (and all of its future membership).

Most of the graduate students I know do, have done, or certainly could do journalistic, creative, and technical writing—generally for pay, often very good pay. They not only have the sort of transferable skills that Showalter suggests would be swell for them, they do in fact transfer them into public, corporate and creative life easily and gracefully. They are organizers, managers, and negotiators, usually very good ones: they produce more scholarship while doing more teaching in more creative ways than any previous generation of scholars.

The primary symptom of the commitment to excrement theory is the grossly erroneous conviction held by Showalter and the CPE that persons who have earned a doctorate in language and literature need help in finding non-academic work.

Yeah, right.

Most degree holders can find nonacademic work in a heartbeat. Most degree holders have had to do some of kind of nonacademic work to support themselves en route to completing the degree. Your typical graduate student knows a hell of a lot more about nonacademic life and its pecuniary options than her department chair.

Instead of urging that departments use their resources to set up non-academic placement bureaus, Showalter and the CPE should be issuing sticks to degree-holders to beat away the corporate recruiters trying to hire them away from their vocation.

Ph.D. degree holders don't need MLA's help to find corporate work. They need MLA's help in preserving the dignity of teaching work.

Shaking the Billion Tree

The MLA's proper business is making sure that teaching is done by degree holders—and that means getting busy on the political, social, and economic fronts. It means telling the truth about who's teaching Johnny. And for how much.

It means that we have to write bills and get them sponsored and lobby for their passage.

It means that we have to stop running from those who diminish our work and make our case, that the failings and triumphs of today's vital new print cultures are inescapably mediated by the triumphs and failings of our scholarly and pedagogical engagement with the traces of past print cultures. It means that our care for the dignity of students in our classrooms must be matched by an equally affirmative politics aimed at ensuring the workplace dignity of all of our colleagues.

Activism Doesn't Just Make Jobs; It Gets Activists Hired

Now, I promised you that the writers of *Workplace* would persuade you that being an activist was in your very own personal and very own short-term best interest.

I think that when you read these tough, smart people, you'll say to yourself, yeah, I belong with this crowd. And I think that you'll then be part of the movement making jobs out of this work, which is in the general best interest of all.

But I can give you three straight-up reasons why going activist today will better your personal chances of getting hired tomorrow.

Number one. Activism builds character, and degree-holders need character in abundance. Right now, it takes 3 to 5 years of generally very humiliating job searching to land a position that the candidate identifies as satisfying. Only activists have the stamina for that. This makes a certain painful logic: your average careerist gives up and goes where she can find a career.

You might even say that at this historical moment, there are no "careers" in the academy—only struggle—and activism is the modality of living with struggle.

Number two. Junior faculty plays a big role on hiring committees. These are people who have already found that speed-up continues even more feverishly on the other side of getting the job. They aren't looking for colleagues who can only talk about themselves. They are looking for colleagues to stand shoulder to shoulder with them and say, hey, get real, slow this damned thing down.

Junior faculty want colleagues who can articulate across the divide of the interview space our collective

position in this mad labor system.

Number three. Activism improves your work. Let's say you accept the principle that all study of past cultural practice is a contribution to the history of the present. And let's say that you also accept the testimony of your exhausted body that the present is a time of struggle for the profession.

Then it follows that activism—which is after all nothing more than constructive engagement with power at the present time—it follows that activism is a kind of necessary precondition for doing really good work.

I think so, anyway.

Do make *Workplace* and the Graduate Student Caucus part of your life and thought and work.

I can't promise you a revolution. But I can promise you some very butch shoulders to lean on.

Warmly, Marc (Fall 1998: University of Louisville)

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