

Doing Academic Work

Stefano Harney and Frederick Moten

The Academic Worker

When professors get together outside the university they talk about that thing which dominates them, their work. This conversation may take the form of discussing a product of that work—a lecture in class, a research paper, committee deliberations—but most often it seems to be about conditions of work. One hears talk about course load, the trials of tenure and promotion, salaries and compensation, and of course the quality of the students on which some of academic labor is supposed to fall. In themselves, these conversations are not surprising. Mail carriers have very similar conversations, as do primary school teachers, subway drivers, and millions of other working people in the United States when they come together with those who share their position in the production process. But what is interesting among academic workers is the simultaneous disavowal of the very social conditions of work about

which they speak. Mail carriers may not develop sufficient solidarity for effective political action for many reasons having to do both with their workplace and with life beyond their workplace, but they are unlikely to deny that the mail does not move unless they all work together. Nor are they likely to doubt that their product results from common effort.

But the academic worker often disavows both this mutual interdependence and the sociality of her or his product. This omission is perhaps most telling in the attitude displayed toward students but is present as well in the way academic workers see each other, see race, see the university as a site of work, and at bottom see themselves. For us, this disavowal is both a theoretical and political problem. Our position in this paper is that most professors in the United States are part of the service sector proletariat in this country. There is thus no need to romanticize the relationship between professors and other working people, no need to agonize over the right channel for some connection to labor in other forms. The connection is material. Professors as teachers, writers, and researchers work for someone else producing what is explicitly a commodity as part of a system of industrial capitalism that relies on their surplus labor just as much as it does on the surplus labor of mail carriers, computer technicians, maintenance staff, or marketing specialists. But the subjectivity currently produced by academic labor warrants investigation—for clearly, most professors would not see themselves as described in these opening statements.

An investigation of academic labor subjectivity is both fraught with difficulty and urgent. Any attempt to think one's own position bears risks of myopia, particularly when that position is itself disintegrating, revealing more starkly the contradictions of this mode of producing academic knowledge. Moreover, because we regard this investigation also as a political project, we will be making some overgeneralizations as a step toward trying to imagine academic labor in general. The diversity of academic workplaces from community colleges to multiversities presents variations we can only acknowledge, not explore, at this stage. So too, the wage contracts for academic workers resist too much generalization. What truly does the adjunct finishing a doctorate at CUNY and teaching at Borough of Manhattan Community College have in common with an adjunct named David Dinkins teaching one course at Columbia or

one named Jacques Derrida putting in the same number of hours in the same city at NYU, both for more money than a full-time assistant professor's salary? Our answer is that they share something nonetheless in the nature and conditions of knowledge production in institutional higher education. It is this nature and condition of knowledge production in the colleges and universities that we want to explore. We want to situate the academic worker in that work. Much has been written situating the academic worker within wider social contexts and locating the social position of intellectuals generally. But subjectivity comes also from doing work, not just being a type of worker. And if we are going to explore how professors are invited to see themselves in highly individuated ways, we should start by looking at academic workers producing in the colleges and universities.¹

Let us start by noting that as workers, the economic fate of most professors in this country is tied most closely with the other people who work in their workplace as part of production relations as a whole, and not to their individual talents as teachers or scholars. In other words, it is tied to the fate of the industry and social relations in that industry. It would seem to follow that a political dialogue and action between professors and other workers in the same place of production would be on the agenda. It is not. It would also seem to follow that a political dialogue would be on the agenda between academic workers across the industry. It is not. Such a dialogue would obviate the need to think about the basis for communication between professors and other laborers that would be unmediated by class ideology. Any self-critical dialogue would have to admit that a common point of reference and common reason for wanting to cooperate is already in place.

Political dialogue and action across the industry is admittedly more difficult strategically than one constructed narrowly along occupational lines. But the discussion founders on conceptual grounds before it can address the strategic issue. For although academics can conceive of themselves socially in their common conditions of work, they cannot, for the most part, conceive of themselves socially in their actual production. They may have to put up with similar constraints, such as crowded offices, broken copiers, and low salaries, but these are regarded too often as relations to things and not to another person. Politically we could hope

that this initial sense of common conditions could lead to a deeper sense of participation in a common production process, one that they themselves give its particular social nature, as bearers of definite social relations. But neither the recognized conditions around work nor the unrecognized conditions of a common production process have been enough for the subjectivity of academic workers to break into a collective agency. In fact, the subjectivity produced by this particular production process cries out for investigation.

We argue that the very way in which academics think of themselves as workers interferes with effective political agency predicated on collective self-recognition and representation. While this is a problem for all wage labor, knowledge production generates a version of interference that is particularly acute. This is so because academic workers, as makers of worldly representations, also produce themselves as a productive force that is “usable in common” only in that the discourse of disciplinary knowledge is truly a social product. But typically that product appears under the sign of an individual author, craftsperson, or scientist who believes she controls her tools and product. It is as if knowledge and the discursive instruments that create it could be held in the academic’s hand, as so many objects. While this may be a nostalgic and historically inaccurate view of craftwork held by the academic, the image of solitary self-possession remains potent. The absence of immediate supervision; the luster of authorial imprimatur; the seemingly discrete sites of production; and, most important, what at first sight appears as the disarticulation of knowledge production from its circulation and consumption—all reinforce this view.

But no worker subjectivity in capitalism is ever more than contingent. In this article, we want to push at this subjectivity, finding the weak points that open onto new agency. What we can say already is that it would appear to be not (or not just) the social position of the academic worker in society that complicates the project of collective agency. Certainly all of us have encountered the disjunction between the social tastes of academics and their ability to consume at that level. And certainly all of us have encountered and perhaps used the social capital of the professoriat to assert authority or privilege where our claims to power are otherwise materially weak. For a few of us this may even mean material changes in our

circumstances that authorize our social distinctions. But too much concentration on the social position of intellectuals risks not only a flirtation with functionalism and tax brackets but also a sharp distinction between the social relations of production and the social relations in production. Michael Burawoy gives us the idea of “relations in production,” and we want to use the idea as a corrective and as an opening into a new line of inquiry. Burawoy uses this term instead of the more commonly used “forces of production” to denote the political, ideological, and material conjunction of subjectivity formation in the workplace. For Burawoy, this is a prime site of contingency, and for us, the investigation of academic relations in production is a place to start to push at the subjectivity of the academic worker.² It is a way of getting away from the question of what it means to be an academic worker, a question that seems to lead to social positioning, and to ask finally what it means to do academic labor.³

Academic Work

How is academic work done? What are our actual conditions under which this work is done? What are our practical relations to one another in that work as full-time academic workers? (We will address part-time workers subsequently.) Let us see how far a description of those conditions and relations will take us. Even a cold description of working conditions has little explanatory power in itself, but it is a necessary first step.

As C. L. R. James once reminded us about a whaling ship, a factory has no look, only relations. Most of us working in academia are familiar with the trinity of tasks common to our job descriptions. We teach, we publish, and we sit on committees. Under what conditions do we perform those tasks? We participate in decision making about the fate of our fellow academic workers and sometimes about other workers, such as student aides and secretaries. We participate in deciding on the value of the knowledge product, on curriculum or editorial committees. Some of us participate in criticism of our workplace and its relations. This participation itself has constraints. Whatever their specific configuration, such constraints stem, as they do for all wageworkers, from our compulsion to produce surplus value, our lack of access to the means of production,

and, perhaps most important our total dependence on a production process in general and in history that is capitalism.

The majority of academic workers in this country cannot stop work in protest of conditions. Moreover, at many work sites the power of management exercises both real and perceived constraints over even the limited freedoms enjoyed by most workers. For those able to secure tenure-bearing appointments, the first six years of academic work are almost without any of the limited freedoms outlined above because of impending tenure decisions. This period of insecurity is far longer than for most workers in other unionized fields of production. If it corresponds to the kind of apprenticeship once characteristic of some skilled trades, it also enforces a social distance between full-time and part-time workers, as if to say there is a seven-year difference in skill between those working in part-time and non-tenure-track positions and those tenured faculty members who shepherd the apprentices.⁴ Contrast the recent ability of full-time and part-time United Parcel Service workers to see each other in the other's place, where any worker believed she or he could be forced to lift 150-pound packages alone, on the one hand, or suffer the loss of benefits, on the other.⁵ After this lengthy apprenticeship, promotion decisions controlled in part by management continue to exercise censure over the freedoms in the workplace outlined above. Again, in other unionized fields of production, workers have in place more defined and legally circumscribed systems of seniority and promotion. In fact, the involvement of academic workers in the system of seniority in the academic workplace, called promotion and tenure, is more directly parallel to current trends of managed employee involvement, often in nonunion settings. Tenure committees most closely approximate the managerialist concept of teams, in which workers are encouraged to judge the quality of one another's work while the ultimate decision making remains lodged with management. Management thus achieves a worker-against-worker surveillance in the name of the common goal of quality and flexibility—in the academic workplace, what we would call academic standards and collegiality. Tenure committee members thereby often reproduce workplace fear and hierarchy while also projecting the partly false image of worker control. The same accusation of bad faith pervades labor union critiques

of the team concept.⁶ What makes academic worker teams more threatening to efforts at the liberation of academic work is that unlike with a Saturn car team, academic workers also reinforce the notion of individuality in these standards and collegial behaviors. The Saturn team at least recognizes in each car the social basis for judgments of quality and flexibility, even if those workers do not always recognize that the quantification of that quality and flexibility is derived from their collective labor power. Academic laborers fail to recognize both the sociality that makes this self-surveillance necessary and the self-surveillance itself.

Despite self-policed efforts at productivity, the elimination of departments, like product lines or public services, proceeds apace, affording fewer protections for displaced workers (tenured professors) than many unions have negotiated on behalf of their skilled manual and service workers. The insecurity of the academic worker and the looming threat of losing or never finding another good job are certainly shared by many other wageworkers. All such workers must necessarily feel confused when they not only have been hired by things, by machines, money, products, but now have also been fired by those things with the collapse of stable capitalist accumulation in the last thirty years. Though working for things is hard enough for the wageworker, being fired by them is certainly harder and cause for self-reflection. Of course, that self-reflection must contend also with ideology in the media, in politics, and in education that speaks of the world as if objects were subjects, “erecting them into autonomous power over against him,” as Marx says.⁷ And for the academic worker that self-reflection might be all the more acute if he saw the product of his work as a description (and even a condition?) of this predicament. But although the circumstances of their industry would call for it as much as it would for hospital or sanitation workers, academic workers have not produced these kinds of reflections on their own obsolescence.

Like the overwhelming number of workers who are wageworkers in the United States, the producers of knowledge working in universities rarely own any part of this means of production. The few who have access to some means of production through such patterns of ownership and control as patents, intellectual property, and biotechnological apparatus appear to have this access exactly at the point where the academic workplace articulates with other private and public sector workplaces and

production processes. Few whose whole production process is based in the university have this option of ownership and control. Moreover, at the level of ownership, not access, the “worker shares” or “employee stock options,” for instance, exist for some in the service sector and for some blue-collar, unionized workers but not for professors as a class.

Other constraints on workplace decision making and freedom are better acknowledged, but these constraints have rarely become the object of concerted action by the workers so constrained. Moreover, the boundaries of these constraints have often been drawn too narrowly, occluding many parts and products of the university workplace. For instance, the most commonly investigated constraint on knowledge workers has been the source and availability of capital reinvestment. Rivaling capital reinvestment as a constraint on the power of workers to produce knowledge freely and cooperatively is the area of production orders. The first area is commonly thought to be a matter of state funding or private philanthropy, whereas the second area is associated with private firms, especially weapons manufacturers, biotechnology, and legal-managerial consultancies. Investigations have concentrated on the source of these orders and reinvestment and who controls them. In practice, not only are the state, private patrons, and private firms permanently entwined but so too are orders and reinvestment. Although private philanthropy can extricate itself, it rarely does, and even more rarely does it set up an alternative set of social relations.

State and private firm orders and reinvestments always run together. The nature of knowledge production requires frequent changes and upgrading in fixed capital, of course—new labs, new computers, and new business school buildings. But it also requires investment in new ways of thinking about how knowledge can be produced and new ways, that is, new forms of industrial design, of arranging workers as they make this product. Such new ways might include the creation of centers, journals, seminars, and conferences. These new forms of design have the added benefit of taylorizing academic workers by allowing management to learn about how the academic knowledge process works and can be improved. Academic workers can participate in the redesign of their own work, in the separation of their tasks from their purposes. On the other hand, perhaps, as Christopher Newfield seems to suggest in his essay in

this volume, these moments can be moments of resistance. Reorganization, rationalization, and various kinds of corporatization illuminate in the act the question of a rationality that must contend with not only all the attendant problems of social production and private accumulation but particularly the rational limits of knowledge production, where, as we shall see, the process of production itself appears to contain elements of circulation and the realization of value. We will return to this possibility later in the argument. But for now it is enough to mark the other side—the danger such reorganization presents to academic workers who have a special facility to be complicit in their own disciplining.

Beyond the commonly leveled criticism of this further corporatization of the university (a corporatization of a corporation?) being a reorganization in service to private firms, there are troubling but unexamined reorganizations of production that are tied to wider social relations of production and not to the narrow orders and invoices of firms and states. Here we can consider again the nature of knowledge production and knowledge products. Two kinds of products leave the university: knowledge sold directly as know-how, enlightenment, and entertainment, and knowledge embodied in the student-product. Each has an exchange value, but the first product is most easily traced to the orders and invoices of firms and states, by which we mean its value is realized and measured more easily.

The second product is tied to the ideological state apparatus where the difficulty of realizing its value in fact propels it. The social imaginary acts on knowledge production just as the state and the private firm, which are, after all, only part of that social. The state and the private firm are impulses within that social imaginary but are not exhaustive of it. The social imaginary produces the notion of job readiness, of relevance, of political correctness, of critical thinking, of higher education. Orders are made and invoices sent for writing for business classes, interdisciplinary approaches to science teaching, arts administration, and filmmaking. Of course, the university as a site of production is within this imaginary and acts on it, its products appearing as strange orders returning to it. The professor who so much regarded herself as a craftsworker, as an author of a work, sees around her knowledge without signature, orders and invoices without origin coming not to her but to her workplace, returning

unfamiliar. In this she shares a discomfort with the university workplace as a whole, which struggles “to measure its outcomes” as a way to insist that some value from the knowledge product has indeed been realized in and through the student.

One remarked-on indication of the tenuous control professors have over their own workplace is the growth in casualized labor. Private firms offering temp pools of lecturers are now widely used in Great Britain, for instance. A growing surplus labor pool produced by the industry itself, just as other industries have always produced their own surplus labor pools, is now set up in classic opposition to the permanent workers. The brotherhood and sisterhood of academic discourse and the search for a “noncommodified” way of speaking to each other does not extend to this pool and in fact is set up in opposition to it, contributing to a certain kind of subjectivity of the privileged worker. The risk is that full-time academic workers will regard themselves as the fullest and most complete examples of academic subjectivity. Cary Nelson’s call for reducing the number of Ph.D.’s awarded, for instance, sounds like nothing so much as a return of an older craft union rhetoric that confined itself to controlling who could enter the labor market.⁸

The adjunct pool Nelson wants to reduce resembles surplus labor pool populations in other respects too. It takes advantage of sexism and racism and concentrates women and people of color in its ranks. All the discrimination dynamics evident in the construction trades are present in the North American academic labor force and especially in the pool of surplus labor. Thus the presence of women and people of color in the surplus pool is used as evidence of their unsuitability for permanent work, and their absence from permanent work positions is used to represent their scarcity for such positions. Who has not heard a chair of a department say “if only there were a fully qualified minority applicant,” thus bringing both contradictory moves into play. Within this discursive formation, affirmative action enters as an artificial manipulation of real labor market conditions, rather than action against manipulated labor market conditions. And this move is only one in the discursive struggle over affirmative action. We will return to another later.

With Nelson, then, we have an extension of the team concept beyond the responsibilities of promotion and tenure and onward to the control

and conditioning of the academic labor pool as a whole. Nelson's call for academic workers to take the lead in policing their own levels of employment fits with the manipulation of academic workers by university administrations, states, and private firms encouraging professors to guard standards—that is, levels of production—and collegiality—that is, flexibility and docility on the job—among their colleagues through teams of promotion and tenure. It would be interesting to see in this context who would discipline academic workers attempting a slowdown to protest conditions. Would it be their colleagues? Would the adjunct labor pool be called into service? That such potential complicity among colleagues in the policing of work conditions is not regarded as such by most academic workers is part of our present mystery.

Academic Labor Speedups

The surplus pool is already used to discipline permanent professors, of course, and especially professors in the first seven years of full-time work. It is especially useful against politically active new faculty, but it has a still more basic function in the university. More and more teaching universities and colleges are demanding and getting more surplus labor from their professors as a result of this pool. In the majority of North American universities up through the 1970s, tenure and promotion were possible with little research or publication as long as teaching and service were adequate. But more and more universities are making appeals to this surplus labor pool to squeeze more surplus value from their permanent professors. This happens in both direct and indirect ways. Younger professors in small colleges, technical colleges, and teaching colleges are told directly that if they do not produce, in ways their senior colleagues often did not, the university can go back to the labor market for someone who will accept these conditions of work. Meanwhile, both older and younger professors alike are threatened indirectly by new questions of the cost of tenure and the very survival of the university as private firm or public concern. The argument runs this way: if we do not begin to improve in the ratings of our research, we may not remain solvent; departments may be eliminated and positions cut. In most cases, the university administrations propose to replace costly departments and tenured fac-

ulty with cheaper programs using casual labor, writing programs instead of English departments, for instance—unless tenured faculty speed up production, unless they submit to a speedup of the line.

That so many senior faculty, not to speak of junior faculty, have responded to this management ploy by producing more articles and more books and more grant applications allows us to reflect on a classical question of the two sides of increased productivity and consequently enables us, at least for a moment, to situate academic labor very squarely in the category of mass production. What are the benefits of an increasingly powerful and increasingly socialized process of knowledge production? If it is true that this productivity does not necessarily create academic jobs, what does it create for a society of producers? The question seems both easy and difficult. More knowledge would always seem to be a good thing, presuming we are speaking of a self-critical knowledge. Fields such as cultural studies and physics appear to be models for this kind of increased productivity of self-critical knowledge. Yet beyond the boundaries of intellectual property, who really owns this knowledge, and especially, who controls its growing surplus? Is there a kind of disarticulation of ownership that complicates our understanding of the benefits of increased productivity? If we have difficulty in tracing the ownership, do we not also have difficulty in imagining the realization of surplus value? Where, after all, does this product give up all this new value, and to whom?

What we do know is that the increased rate of production of knowledge has not slowed management's pursuit of surplus value through cutting labor costs while gratefully accepting labor gains in productivity. Thus universities continue to eliminate departments, postpone and cancel new full-time lines, and expand casual employment despite the proliferation of journals, conferences, and book series. Interestingly, those attempts at resistance to this regime come through the knowledge production itself. Here the confusion between the in-fact-social nature of academic production and the presumed-individual nature of that production by the professor undermines attempts to resist or reverse this management ploy. Believing that knowledge production is an individual enterprise in which the worker controls her means of production, the professor mistakes access to the tools needed for her product for the whole means of

production. She believes that if her product is unsuitable for the regime that she can resist that regime. (Or if her product is very suitable she will be inevitably rewarded.) But an individual cannot redirect much less desocialize production at this level of complexity and sophistication in industrial production. The collective knowledge product remains. Within the regime of increased production, newly produced knowledge contributes to the force of production.

Resiting the Line

What, then, has this description of conditions yielded? Have we “sited” an academic production line that reveals the social production of knowledge? Both the industrialization of academic labor in the post-WWII years and its selective deindustrialization, casualization, and new Taylorization evoke images of academic workers on an assembly line. The imagery of the line is bound to disturb the subjectivity of the academic worker. The line invokes the solidarity of the industrial worker, the interdependencies of task, the place of the academic worker in the society of producers. The image of the line can no doubt help us think about academic work. But why is that image so rarely provoked by conditions? What happens during academic work that leads away from consideration of sociality? What happens to the academic worker as she acts out the contradiction of selling her labor power so as to appear to possess it or, as Michael Brown says, as we observe his “labor power’s self-referring inconsistency with itself”?⁹

Class Struggle

There is always something dissatisfying about the line as place to understand class consciousness. Consider members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit in the late sixties, for instance. Their action against the line and its brutality had as much to do with their understanding of the attempted separation—both by police and by Dodge foremen—of immediate action from larger purposes in the African American community. But the self-referring, practical inconsistency of academic labor power goes beyond even this conjuncture of lines. Making

knowledge and making cars is finally different. With cars, production, circulation, and consumption are separate. Sometimes the articulation that is supposed to exist here is not present, and the disarticulation of consumption, for instance, can plunge an industry and its workers into a crisis. With knowledge, this disarticulation appears to vie with articulation all the time. The production of knowledge seems to have elements of disarticulation right inside it. Consider the following questions: Where is the site of production in the classroom? What is produced? Who produces, who consumes, who circulates? Any answer appears to confuse not only the point of production but also the bearers of labor power by generalizing production through consumption and circulation. The professor produces the lecture but tries to realize its value in the quality of the questions he receives after. The students consume the lecture but generate questions. The professor circulates already produced knowledge that he has consumed for his lecture notes. The students produce knowledge on exams and circulate the knowledge of the professor through these exams. The professor consumes the knowledge of the student on the midterm exam in order to produce a new exam at year's end. At no point is any producer not simultaneously a consumer, and at no point is production not subject to the immediacy of circulation. Most important, if value is being realized in any of this circulation, then it is being realized in all of this circulation. The argument could thus be made that both professor and student (not to mention the absent labor of the graduate tutor) are coworkers in the production of knowledge, and that all are involved realizing the value of this work. Such an argument would challenge our sense of academic labor, however, in that it would acknowledge that the majority of academic workers, and of surplus labor, comes from students and not from faculty, returning us to the point that if academic labor is an activity and not a position, there is no reason to look for it only among academics. It also has implications for the politics of production, of course, transforming students from raw material worked upon by faculty to workers at the point of production. But in this argument, is the alleged circulation and realization of value during production any different from steelworkers talking to one another about making steel? It is. In academic labor there is often no product outside of the discourse about that product. This is so all the time in teaching, and often in research.

Where a distinct product is visible in a new chemical compound or piece of machinery or a new human relations model, once again it escapes a purely discursive life by its articulation with other sites of production where its value can be conventionally realized.

A Student and Worker Movement?

If students produce knowledge, if they are also so necessary to the making of the knowledge product, and they are essential to realizing its value, why do academic workers, or students for that matter, not see one another as coworkers? Perhaps the answer lies in the complexity of this very question. What could it mean to be involved in production, circulation, and realization as a student? Of course, nearly all of us in a society of producers are involved in all these operations. But the production of knowledge seems to both elide and disperse these operations. We know that selling airline tickets all day and then buying a car at the end of the day are different operations for us in time and space. We know that working as a travel agent has gained us a salary and moved our bosses' product and that buying a car with our wages has allowed another boss to realize the value of her or his product. But even this oversimplification would be very hard to map for an anthropology course. Who's working in this case? Who owns? Where does surplus go? And how is it realized? We can attempt some generalized answers about how a labor force is thus prepared to serve capital. But we cannot so easily individuate this production process. More important, those in the process have trouble keeping their individual roles straight and thus their liberal individualist identities. This trouble is where we can see the contingency of academic work and the ever possible agency contained in that worker. The insistence on the individuality of academic labor as a practice is always threatened by this trouble.

Students themselves are largely aware that at different moments they are interpellated as customers, products, workers, and owners in the university workplace. Like academic workers, they may not think of themselves as part of a process of production of knowledge within a wider system of profit. They do, however, know that market calculations are taking place around them and perhaps on them. They know that full-

time and part-time academic workers are required to include more and more students in their classes, to speed up the line, allow credits to pile up faster and cheaper, with less attention to quality. But they also know that these market calculations risk constant disarticulation. They know they are produced as commodities, as quantifiable numbers of graduates who feed a labor market, and they work as producers of knowledge themselves on every term paper. Produced as workers, they act on their own subjectivity as workers but also have that subjectivity acted on. Working as producers, they assist professors, produce test results, and work on themselves. Yet they are also wooed not just as the customer as king but through a discourse of partnership, ownership, community, and domesticity. Like their parents, they are sold an education as a commodity where the tension of use value and exchange value cannot be resolved or hidden. Appeals to the value of an education are irreducibly contradictory in this way. This value must be realized in each student to support the university's sales pitch, but when students say, "What's the use of taking this course?" they may be saying a lot.

More and more students are also recognizably workers, outside and inside the university. They are employed in part-time and sometimes full-time work. More and more students are also entering into indenture. Through incurring debt, they have contracted to be workers and so are already thinking like people who must work. Graduates and dropouts who default on loans, on the other hand, are already regarded as lumpen, morally unfit for the rigors of wage labor. It is true, but not very helpful, to say that most academic workers do not view students primarily in this way, as part of the labor force. They do not regard them as coworkers. One can point to the documented unwillingness of professors to make common cause with, never mind join, graduate student labor-organizing efforts, despite some of the worthy exceptions noted in the recent collection *Will Teach for Food*.¹⁰ And if academic workers do not regard graduate students as coworkers or even, in many cases, as workers at all, we can suggest that this has something to do with the way they view students in general.

Academic workers enter into relations with students at the same time as they enter into relations with universities, both state and privately held, as wage laborers hired to teach. These relations are contradictory.

They point both toward and away from the sociality of their labor and toward and away from its appropriation. The academic worker sees in the act of teaching the sociality of the knowledge commodity, but its attempted valuation and circulation by the student at the point of production, in production itself, leads the academic worker to believe he or she owns and controls that product. That is, teaching is not a product until the student also acts on it, and therefore the product is inherently social. It must be made in common, and its value must be realized in exchange. It becomes only through common labor, and it becomes a commodity only through the giving up of labor power. Yet the way it is presented to the student, as something only to be realized in them and taken away to use, also makes that product appear to be something that was created and possessed by the academic worker and then passed to the student. This latter appearance allows the academic worker to retain the imagined sense of individual artisanry and even ownership of the means of knowledge production. To maintain this imagined sense, it is important for the academic worker not to regard the student as coworker in any sense, because this view might lead to the necessity of the student's labor in the production of teaching.

This need to view the student as a passive individual who purchases and takes away the knowledge product helps us to understand why on the surface the relations of academic workers to students is so often described as disturbed or unhappy. Academic workers try to act toward students as if those students were only free-willed individuals entering into a contract to learn. They do not view this as purely or even chiefly as a market contract but rather one between liberal individuals. Many "progressive" universities actually use learning contracts to set up supposedly individual relations between students and teachers. Academic workers thereby take a moment of exchange and try to use it to establish stable identities and individuation. But this moment of exchange, as we have said, is highly problematic because its value is not so easily fixed. It hides the fact that students work on the product that is being exchanged. They create, with the professor, their knowledge of anthropology. Thus the student can sense at least two tensions. First, one often hears the exhortation to "get as much out of a class as possible." It would seem then that the value of a class as a commodity has to do not with how much you pay for it but with

how much work you put into it. It would be a strange thing to say about a Saturn car or an airline ticket. At the same time, the value of a class or an education more generally does not seem to have to do with the individual or with individual effort. A student finds out how much a class or education is worth not in the exchange between her and the university or her and the professor. If she believes such worth can be calculated at all, she will likely determine it according to how much she later gets paid in a job. This is why education is often called an investment, an acknowledgment that its value cannot be known at the moment of exchange. Or she might say it cannot be measured at all and thus deny its status as a commodity. Either way something does not fit. How can an individual professor really know how much to “give” an individual student in either case? The learning contract invites the student to think of herself as an individual, and it helps the professor to believe she is passing a discrete product to the student. But, in reality, not only are the student and professor making the product together, not just exchanging it, but they are also both getting use value out of it and are unsure about its exchange value because its realization is deferred, perhaps indefinitely.

Students and professors are often aware of the problems created by trying to think of knowledge production as a series of singular enterprises relying on liberal individualism and market exchanges. We have all heard faculty complain of the “absurd” page counting in tenure committees or of the “meaningless” computer forms for student evaluations of classes. We have discussed the team concept in academia that makes this operative. Its basis is an evaluation of product that searches for equivalency and exchangeability of the academic worker or, more exact, his labor power. The irony is that academic workers encourage this valuation based on commodity exchange in precisely an attempt to individuate themselves. The price of individualism becomes the tyranny of the market, and many academic workers experience important self-referential moments when this circle closes.

Of course, not all academic workers regard their students through the contract of liberal individualism. Some show a kind of imagined attachment, a romantic link to the students as collective agents of human development or social change. They try to attach a putative worker status to the student that supposes they are not already in fact workers intrinsic to

all the labor of academic workers. This putative notion of the student as worker or change agent takes the student to be someone other, outside the production process of knowledge, someone acted on and activated by that process. Although this position supposes a certain sociality and even a certain agency in learning, it is materially inconsistent and politically always flawed. The bafflement of the academic worker when she fails to mobilize the students as oppressed agents necessarily follows.

It is hard not to be sympathetic to this position, especially when the academic worker has a sense of the student as a class. Many of us know academic workers who are dedicated to helping students analyze and critique society where the object of that critique is actually existing capitalism. The academic workers are admirable for their faith in the human nature of these students and for their understanding of the subject of any such critique (what we would call socialism). Such workers are capable of viewing students as a social group, based on age, race, income, or their superficial place in the education system. They may attempt to teach anti-racism, feminism, anti-imperialism, or pacifism. But it is necessary to be rigorous in critiquing the analysis that informs this position. The production of knowledge requires the student as producer. The student must manipulate the raw material of thought. She must expend labor time in this process. She must and she does add something to the product that the academic worker has not, no matter how insignificant, for the commodity to be formed. She is, therefore, a worker in the production of the teaching commodity. Now it is possible for an academic worker to hope for an agency from students not based on their position as workers, as one can hope for such agency among people in general. But it does not seem to us possible to devise a strategy for that agency which does not recognize, first, that the very act of strategizing implicates the students as workers and, second, that any strategy ignorant of these material conditions of production is at least incomplete.

Race and Academic Work

Thinking about your tools and your product as your own is both encouraged and undermined in the act of teaching students. But it can also be encouraged and undermined by teaching and working with colleagues.

The issue of race in the academic workplace, and especially the discourse on affirmative action, threatens to expose the sociality of the act of teaching and researching. Affirmative action threatens the ideology of individualism among academic workers precisely because it speaks about academic workers in social categories. It is regarded as an attack on the putative individual properties of the academic worker: his talents, choices, and motives. This underlying threat to individualism helps explain the widespread attack on affirmative action among liberal intellectuals and within an industry with an egregious record on racism (and sexism). The connections of the reserve labor pool to racism and sexism in the academic workplace are only one manifestation of racism and oppression in this venue. The academic workplace had to be integrated by federal and state law; legislated action against racism and sexism was augmented by recourse to court action. Together, these instruments forced some progress in the 1970s and 1980s on hiring practices in the university. But universities remained sites of entrenched racism, sexism, and oppression. Minorities, for instance, continued during this period to fare better in the automobile and steel industries, winning more concessions and enjoying more compensation relatively than has been available in the university workplace to the vast majority of minority professors. Schoolteachers unions during the same period developed female leaderships, bringing the conditions and concerns of the female elementary and high school teacher to a prominence they have never enjoyed in the university workplace. In a service sector increasingly occupied in its mass labor by minority women, the ease of recognizing solidarity stands in contrast to one part of that service sector where few minority women work and where little solidarity is in evidence, the colleges and universities (though the colleges stand closer to the rest of the service sector in both aspects). Although the argument that minorities cannot do certain kinds of work has long disappeared in the public discourse of other industries, it persists as a matter of course in academic labor. African Americans are hired to teach African American subjects, and East Asian scholars are asked to teach East Asian subjects. The minority candidate who is hired to teach Renaissance studies is rare, and the minority graduate student in the humanities who is not steered toward his "natural subject matter" is equally rare.

Such racial conditions would seem to be cause for outrage, not retreat.

But race is a social category, and affirmative action is a policy insistent of the sociality of race not just anywhere but in work. Consider the way race as a category within affirmative action has to be discussed. The fact of the social construction of racial communities always threatens to reveal the fact of the social construction of communities in general, including the community of academic workers. To discuss what the category Hispanic means, whether in California the category of Asian can contain meaning, or whether the City University of New York's affirmative action policy on hiring Italian Americans fits in the frame is to discuss potential workers as bearers of social relations that will operate in the act of work. The threat of the social category is that it will become a work category; that any minority academic worker can fill the category, can do the job (and by implications any academic worker in general can do any academic job); that the labor power of one equals the labor power of another; and that for such equivalencies to obtain commodity, production for profit must be in effect. Now the academic worker repels this threat by seizing on the moments of circulation and realization as he did with the student and trying to hold them steady as categories of individuality. In a sense they attempt to reracialize the minority worker as a way to fasten him to that idea of the academic worker as owner of his means of production and controller of his very singular product.

What we are calling "reracialization" is the contradictory act of individualizing the minority academic worker by assigning race to him anew. By individualizing him we mean trying to isolate his work and working conditions from the very sociality of affirmative action that brought him to the work site. Thus we hear the term "the black hire" or "the gay hire" in anthropology, English, or history.¹¹ This move simultaneously reinforces the very particularization of knowledge accompanying affirmative action that many on the left have turned against. And yet that particularization itself is not the same thing as this individualization through reracialization. The particularization of knowledge still affirms each area of knowledge, whether queer theory or critical race theory, as a social product and in fact by its very manufacture reconfirms the sociality of all knowledge products. Reracialization attempts to create distance and difference in the minority worker to avoid possible comparisons with other academic workers. Such comparisons risk the recognition that both mi-

nority and nonminority workers possess the same tools, only usable in common. This distance and difference is accomplished by the invidious opinion that minority workers have been hired to do only certain kinds of work, that they are special cases, highly isolated cases, and that they do a kind of work unlike other workers. They have been hired by this argument for political reasons. That is, they have been hired to enforce a sociality that is not actually inherent, in this view, in academic work.

This reracialization is a trap for both the minority worker and other workers. It seizes on that disarticulation in knowledge production that reflects what Manthia Diawara calls in relation to the African diaspora “the circulation of black things” and attempts to fasten a worker to these “black” commodities of knowledge.¹² But every commodity leads to the next and to fetishization of these relationships. The minority worker experiences the alienation of comparison to things and not other workers, and the other workers experience the alienation of invoking the fetish to dehumanize and reracialize the minority worker. For instance, the Latina who will be considered only for positions in Latina studies is asked if she is willing to be responsible for Latina content in the curriculum and for teaching a course on the Latina experience. If she accepts this reracialization, she accepts not the obvious, a division of labor by race, but the opposite, the fiction that there is no division of labor that in turn can be harnessed to race. That is, if she accepts that it is possible for her to be responsible for these things, to associate with these things, to be compared to these things, she accepts a moment of disarticulation in her conditions of work and her relations to other workers. When she fails, she will say she was not given the backing to succeed as an individual, completing the confused picture of her position in production. That the production of Latina knowledge fails in this workplace to be liberatory has to do neither with deficiencies in a worker nor with a worker’s ability to make this product. She is not the author of the Latina knowledge produced in the university workplace and never was. She is a worker in a system of knowledge production whose constraints easily absorb individual or small collective efforts by those workers. The reracialization encountered by these workers reinforces and is reinforced by its inevitable failure to hold in its valuation against minority things. The social reemerges at the moment of failure only to be accused of a politics incompatible with the kind of labor

in which academic workers claim to be involved. Thus we have the return of the invidious moment of reracialization, when other workers insist on the individual failure of the minority worker and reject the discourse of affirmative action that would lay a social claim on their work.

But the attack on affirmative action or affirmative action workers is not always successful, of course. Moreover, when such workers succeed in producing with a sense of the sociality of their task, they not only subvert the presumed individual nature of academic work but also build the solidarity of such work beyond the academic work site. Solidarities have been built around multicultural curriculums, for instance, that acknowledge the common process of production among professors, students, and communities beyond the walls of the university. The possibility of such solidarity reminds us that despite our focus on the act of producing academic knowledge, the social place of the academic in society does indeed play a role in her subjectivity. The Latina academic worker can use her social place in her community as an academic worker, and that place can militate against a false individualism in the act of work. We are reminded that our focus on that act of work cannot presume that we can always identify where that work takes place or how, anymore than it can presume who is capable of such work.

Community Struggle

In the fall of 1996, a group of academic workers arranged a conference at Columbia University in cooperation with the new leadership of the AFL-CIO. Over eight hundred people, mostly academic workers and students, attended the conference, which was consequently divined as a sign of labor's resurgence and the start of a new labor-intellectual alliance.¹³ Academic workers asked how they could contribute to the labor movement, what role they could play in its rebirth. The announced rebirth of the labor movement occurs at the same time that workers in the academy are beginning to discuss again the relationship between their work and what they perceive to be the world outside of their work. Discussions of becoming more relevant, of writing so that nonspecialists can understand, and of creating links with business outside the site of

the university fill the hours of university administrators and departmental chairs. In his introduction to *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*, coeditor Christopher Newfield suggests that the university should call out to its many publics and ask how it can be helpful.¹⁴ But if the nascent labor-intellectual alliance at Columbia is any example of this interpellation, we must raise several questions about the ability of academic workers to call out.

First, if the social relations of labor for academic workers are approximately as we have described them, we are left with real questions about whether the most urgent point of action for such workers is to build solidarity with others or to build it with one another. At the very least, it would seem that two projects should and must run apace. Second, although Newfield and Strickland do not single out the labor movement, the question of calling out to that movement given the conditions of work for academic laborers begs the question of whether it is a call to help or a call for help. Moreover, to borrow from the language of therapy, such books as Cary Nelson's recent *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (1994) suggest that, as academic workers, we do not know how to ask for help.¹⁵ Nelson's attitude toward the labor movement seems to be that it is all right for some (graduate students and perhaps part-time workers) but that he can handle his addiction to liberal individualism and craft unionism.

Second, the discourse on affirmative action on campus can be read in two ways. Either we can be hopeful that such a discourse even exists, in which case we may have something to say to communities. Or this may be another area where we should receive expertise from community organizations working on social justice issues, not dispense it. Calls to "popularize" academic research and "put to use" this knowledge for social movements resonate differently in light of this discussion. At the very least, rethinking the conditions and practice of academic labor would have to be a part of any such strategy. The popularizing of academic work, without rethinking it, risks spreading ways of thinking about it that could increase invidious social differentiations, not attack them.

Such a rethinking of academic labor in relation to community might start by questioning the distinction itself. Again we are speaking not just

of social positioning, of the problem of stable borders and identities of academia and community, but also of the fragile distinctions in the act of knowledge production itself. We can see academic research as the social act that brings the world outside the academic worker into the center of her labor process and brings her labor process out into the center of that world. If one undertakes to write and teach about Work-to-Employment Program (WEP) workers, for instance, one immediately enters into certain relations with those workers at the moment any recognizable knowledge commodity is produced. The observations of the labor of those WEP workers, interviews with workers, city documents, and social theories in circulation are valued by the academic worker in a process of production. Of itself, this would not necessarily prove the relations we are positing, unless we simply wish to say that all thinking, talking, and writing is inherently social. But this thinking, talking, and writing is work for the academic laborer, and it forms a commodity containing sometimes nothing but this discursive activity. (Of course, contained in books, journals, and conference programs it has a physicality sometimes as well.) In this sense, such work is impossible without the communities that simultaneously make up this work activity in the solitude of the university office and disperse it in the public space of the city park. In some moments, the academic worker may see this relationship as only his ability to represent the world of the WEP worker. But at other moments, moments of conjuncture brought on by the play of articulation and disarticulation, it is clear that the WEP workers are present at the point of production in what is essentially the social act of making the knowledge commodity. At this moment the oral testimony of a worker and the past work of a colleague are necessary contributions of labor at the point of production, and necessary points in the circulation and realization of that product thereafter, asserting the sociality of the enactment and reenactment of academic labor. We can see, then, that to approach communities as an academic laborer, just as to approach students or other academic workers, it necessary to acknowledge certain interdependencies that make work possible. We think seeing that there is no steady distinction between our work and our relations with others is always possible for academic workers because of the nature of our work. The production of knowledge as a commodity

affords us an extraordinary encounter with the sociality of production under capitalism. But it simultaneously assaults us with the most idealized images of the self in the moments of disarticulation inherent in this kind of production. Whether academic workers seize the conjunctures of this labor process remains to be seen. Such conjunctures will not offer a purity of social vision, but they may offer us images of an expanding solidarity.

Notes

- 1 The literature on the social position of intellectuals, producers of knowledge, is large-ranging, from Karl Mannheim, *Essays in a Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), to Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 2 Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1985, 1990). Burawoy is correcting for what he regards as Harry Braverman's overly dichotomized scheme of deskilled worker facing taylorizing manager (*Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974], 90–109). But neither Braverman nor Burawoy is focused on the point of knowledge production, rather than knowledge produced for production. We find it necessary to implicate moments of circulation and realization in this kind of productive process, moments that break us away from the dichotomy of worker and manager and into a managed self that is made in the act of work but not composed of it alone.
- 3 The implication of looking at academic labor primarily as activity and not position is that academic labor does not have to be performed by traditional academics. But for the purposes of this paper we will confine ourselves to academic labor in the academic workplace.
- 4 Stephen Watt, *On Apprentices and Company Towns*, in *Will Teach for Food*, ed. Cary Nelson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 229–63. Watt does not remark much on the unusual length and insecurity of these apprenticeships, though he does draw the comparison with trades.
- 5 Alexander Cockburn, *Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, August 14, 1997, Op-Ed.
- 6 See, for instance, the *Labor Notes* newsletter and publications for a trade union critique of new managerialist models such as “teams,” especially Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997).

- 7 Karl Marx, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McClellan (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 509.
- 8 Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 185–86.
- 9 Michael Brown, *The Production of Society* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 127.
- 10 Nelson, *Will Teach for Food*.
- 11 Although the natural sciences escape some of this race-ing of academic posts for minorities, they are often complicit in race-ing posts for non-minorities and indeed race-ing undergraduate and graduate majors.
- 12 Diawara in Mathia Diawara, Arjun Appadurai, Lauren Berlant, and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Editorial Comment on Thinking the Black Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (fall 1994): 11–14.
- 13 In an editorial in the *Union Democracy Review* (New York: Association for Union Democracy [AUD], January 1997), Herman Benson, founder of the AUD points out the need for academics not to accept the new labor movement uncritically but to analyze the real conditions of work in labor unions and the necessity of democratizing those unions.
- 14 Christopher Newfield, introduction to in *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*, ed. Newfield and Ronald Strickland (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995), 16–19.
- 15 Nelson, *Manifesto*.