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Identity Papers

Bronwyn T Williams

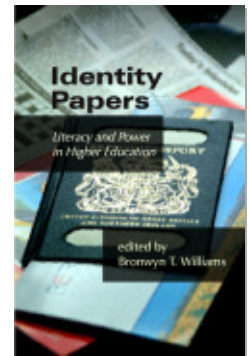
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13

CONCLUSION

Working Bodies: Class Matters in College Composition

Min-Zhan Lu

This is a partial reading of the collection, so let me start with an account of the how-why-what of the questions framing my response. Summer of 2005. I'm putting together a graduate course titled "Class Matters: The Information Age," a project aimed at examining composition scholarship on the relations between matters of class, writing, and teaching from the perspective of social-economic-geopolitical-technological shifts in the United States in the last three decades. I'm working on a talk for the 5th Biennial International Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference with the hope of approaching the conference theme, "Affirming Diversity," from positionalities which are co-constitutive of but yet often obscured by my lived experiences as the bearer of various visible markers of my identity, such as my aging body, foreign accent, skin color, facial features, wedding ring. The June issue of *CCC* arrives in the mail. In its "Summary and Critique" section, I encounter Richard Fulkerson's (2005) survey of "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century." Fulkerson groups "feminist composition," "critical pedagogy," and "cultural studies" under the rubric of "social theories" for their shared "focus on having students read about systemic cultural injustices" and "the empowering possibility of rhetoric," on educating students "to 'read' carefully and 'resist' the social texts that help keep some groups subordinated" (659). He maintains that the aim of composition courses taking the "social theories" turn "is not 'improved writing' but 'liberation' from dominant discourse" (660). And he portrays the turn to "social theories" as "inappropriate" for college composition along three lines, including his concern that such courses will not leave room for any actual teaching of writing and are likely to turn into "leftist political indoctrination" while "showing open contempt for their students' values" (665). The "survey" turns up the volume of the voice of an Arch-"Angel in My House of Composition" with which I see myself, along with all the writers whose work appears in this collection and all its potential readers, as having to wrestle continuously (Lu, "Essay").

Angel: *Essay after essay argues that the nation's college first-year students show unprecedented levels of academic and political disengagement (Durst, Smith). Three-quarters of the students surveyed planned to major in pre-professional fields and list "being very well off financially" as an essential goal. Students are not interested in social-political analysis of identity-difference. They aspire to become professionals rather than academics or social activists. Composition needs to focus on the teaching of writing that matters to the students—writing matters that can help them achieve their financial security and career success.*

Reply: *I too, want to take seriously students' expressed interest in financial and career success. I too, see student writing as the focus of college composition. But Identity Papers reminds me of the necessity to ask: How are we defining writing? What happens to individual students, their writing, careers, and lives when efforts to learn writing in a discourse—academic or professional—are treated as separate and separable from how they shape their past, present, and future relations with peoples whose discursive practices are marked "nonacademic" or "unprofessional" in college classrooms?*

In "Composing (Identity) in a Post Traumatic Age," Lynn Worsham urges us to define composition as "efforts to compose a life, a sense of identity, place, and purpose"—"to wrest meaning from senselessness" (171). Worsham thus marks "familiar" concerns of composition such as "the field of inquiry into writing, literacy, and discourse as well as to the product and process of writing" (171), as inseparable from the "broader" concerns of how "word-work will give us all we will ever know of substance, identity, boundary, location, relation, and purpose" (172). These questions define writing and learning as bodily work conducted by, through, and on material bodies, *Bodies that Matter*, as Judith Butler puts it in the title of her 1993 book. I read Worsham to join critics such as Judith Butler, Janice Haraway, and David Harvey in defining the material body (self, identity or subjectivity) of individual teachers and students as relational and in process as "unfinished projects" shaped by and shaping "a spatiotemporal flux" of processes—metabolic, ecological, political, social, psychological, cultural, economical (Harvey 1998, 402–4, 413). Different social processes, including processes of learning and writing, "produce" radically different kinds of bodies on both the epistemological and ontological levels. "Class, racial, gender and all manners of other distinctions are marked upon the human body by virtue of the different socio-ecological processes that do their work upon that body" (Harvey "Body" 403). At the same time, the human body is active and transformative in relation to the processes that produce, sustain, and dissolve it.

Worsham puts “writing” and the “teaching of writing” in the context of a “catastrophic age characterized by unprecedented historical trauma” (170): a time and place where “the text and texture of expectations and associations that make up the parameters of the ‘normal’” (175) are shattered, life is lived as “survival.” I interpret her use of the term “survival” as referring in part to the intensive labor individual writers put into the survival, termination, or transformation of all the relationships critical to materializing of their body and life as they learn to enact a process of writing to produce the kind of writing products deemed acceptable in college classrooms. I note the same insistence on the materiality of writing and learning permeating the other articles: a concerted effort to treat common notions of what constitutes “academic” or “professional” ways of writing, thinking, learning, or succeeding as material forces constraining how students go about working their bodies, including their sense of identity and their relations with others and the world.

In an article titled “The Body as an Accumulation Strategy,” Harvey (1998) re-reads Marx’s account of “how the laws of motion of capital impinge upon differentially positioned bodies and so transform their internalized subjectivities.” He does so by broadening the focus of the “conventional Marxian definition of class” (which fixates attention solely on individual workers’ positionality in relation to property rights over the means of production) to examining “positionality in relation to capital circulation and accumulation” (405). Using the Marxian distinction between “the laborer (qua person, body, will), and labor power (that which is extracted from the body of the laborer as a commodity),” and the notion of “variable capital” (the sale or purchase and use of labor power), Harvey poses the question of what happens to the bodies (persons and subjectivities) of the individual persons at different moments of the circulation of variable capital: the process in which individual workers sell labor power (a commodity extracted from the body of the worker) “to use in the labor process in return for a money wage which permits [them] to purchase capitalist-produced commodities in order to live in order to return to work. . .” (405). Read from the perspective of the circulation of variable capital, most of the accounts of the educational experiences of composition teachers and/or students we encounter in this collection seem to touch on the ways in which the work of composition participates in the circulation of variable capital: constraining how individual teachers and students push the limits of one’s body, its capacities, and possibilities (407) in the process of extracting from it (or,

producing out of it) a specific commodity—labor power: a set of “academic or professional skills” promising to secure “career successes” and “financial securities” in a given market. More specifically, these accounts call attention to composition’s official role in disciplining individual teachers and students to deem a particular set of thinking, writing, and learning skills (labor power-commodity) as more valuable than other ways of thinking, writing, and learning and to labor over only those activities and relations which promise to facilitate the extraction-production of such market over-valued skills while atrophying all other capacities and relations, including ones critical to “nonacademic” or “unprofessional” aspects of our past, present, and future lives. At the same time, these accounts can serve as a reminder that learning to extract the same set of “academic” thinking, writing, learning skills—the set promising the most financial security-career success on a given market—often poses different challenges for and brings different consequences to differently situated working bodies. Attention to the ways in which the everyday realities of racism, sexism, economic disenfranchisement, homophobia, and agism mediate the materializing of the bodily projects of individual teachers and students is a necessary part of composition, if and especially when financial security and career success seem to be the primary goal of a majority of the incoming students.

For instance, in “‘Who Are *They* and What Do They Have to Do with What I Want to Be?’ The Writing of Multicultural Identity and College Success Stories of First-year Writers,” Jim Ottery urges us to use accounts of the literacy education of students from “oppressed,” “exploited” racial and ethnic groups, such as that of his ancestral cousin, Samson Occom, an educator and the founder of Brothertown Indians, to help students reflect on the transformation of the mind and heart required of anyone making the journey from the land of the “unschooled” to that of “higher learning,” a universe (university) where students are made to extract-reduce their literacy skills to the dictates of “Christianity, the market, and the law” (127). In “She Toiled for a Living: Writing Lives and Identities of Older Female Students,” Mary Hallet examines the bodily labor required of older, working-class, female students. She argues that students bearing such physical markers are often labeled as “not university material” because they are perceived as bearers of a textured toughness associated with reproductive labor, women’s work, or working-class work—as bearers of capacities othered by and thus resistant to the extraction-production of “academic” labor power (86). In “Migratory and Regional Identity,” Robert Brooke uses his own

educational and professional experiences as a case in point to illustrate the particular form of labor power “America education” aims to extract from the body of individual teachers and students: a set of intellectual and rhetorical skills which is “placeless,” enabling one to work wherever those skills are in demand, and thus be “in” a particular place but “not of” it. The ideal state of being for the person with a “college” trained labor power puts at a disadvantage students from rural America, who are facing stark economic conditions such as lack of access to housing, healthcare, jobs, and daily struggling to “make a *living* in” small, rural communities (149, my emphasis).

In “Speaking from the Borderlands: Exploring Narratives of Teacher Identity,” Janet Alsup extends this line of inquiry to the training of secondary school teachers. Using data collected from a longitudinal, qualitative, interview-based research she conducted from January 2002 to spring 2003, Alsup maps the cultural script for the body of the secondary school teachers: one that is “intellectually neutral” and “academically rigorous” but culturally defined as white, female, middle-aged, politically conservative, and heterosexual (117). Alsup recounts the tension some pre-service teachers experience when trying to “place [themselves] in the ‘body’ of the teacher.” Alsup concludes that teacher training needs to move past its “familiar” focus (“simple imitation of classroom practices”) by helping students address the tension they experience between their sense of who they are prior to and outside of their vocational training and the standardized script of who they have to become to function as secondary school teachers of English (120). In other words, we need to treat the “simple imitation” of established ways of “teaching” as material forces constraining how individual teachers and students extract “educational” labor power from their material bodies—pressuring them to devalue or reject ways of thinking, writing, living critical to their lives prior to and outside their “vocational training.”

In “When ‘Ms. Mentor’ Misses the Mark: Literacy and Lesbian Identity in the Academy,” Tara Pauliny conducts a survey of professional advice literature to argue that queer female faculty are expected to play the part of a dutiful spouse: take primary responsibility for the care of “difficult” children by performing un- or under-paid labor and functioning as “silent commodities” (commodities valued for their diversity but relegated to shadows”) (73). I read Pauliny as joining Hallet in calling attention to the ways in which signs of sexuality as well as race, ethnicity, age, and gender are used as external measures of what individual members of diverse social collectives are capable of doing and permitted to

do at various moments of the circulation process, as extractors, exchangers, and-or users of a particular kind of labor power.

In “Social Class as Discourse: The Construction of Subjectivities in English,” James Zebroski argues that individual students’ sense of their self and life before, during, or after college are in large measure shaped by the particular discourse(s) of class available to the student. Using as a point of departure the challenges he faces when negotiating the “working-class discourse” of home and the “middle-class discourse” of the Parents Confidential Financial Statement (a bureaucratic document required of anyone applying for financial aid and the securing of which was his only hope for actually going to Ohio State), Zebroski argues that “the clash of social class discourses” often made students from working-class backgrounds face the “extremely difficult” task of “translating across these discourses” while risking becoming invisible to not only their family and old friends but also their professors and new middle-, upper-class friends (20). I read Zebroski to join others in arguing that, by “just teaching writing,” composition classrooms are not only “exposing” students to a specific—“academic” (and often “new” or “alien”)—process-product of writing but always also constraining how students go about mobilizing their capacities and potentials, pressuring them to submit their sense of what capacities (discursive or otherwise) to develop (and put to use) and which to deskill or reject according to the logic of the job market and the given commodity value of a particular kind of “academic” labor power. This kind of training in turn impinges on their decisions on how to rework—terminate, sustain, change, strengthen—those social relations cogent to their lives prior to and outside the academy but devalued by standardized notions of academic or professional thinking, writing, and learning skills.

However, the articles in the collection can also be read as reminders that the working bodies of individual teachers and students are neither docile nor passive but rather the extractors and bearers of the commodity of labor power as well as “the bearer of ideals and aspirations concerning, for example, the dignity of labor and the desire to be treated (and to treat others) with respect and consideration as a whole living being” (Harvey 1998, 414). They are attentive to the needs and capacities of individual teachers and students to address the potential contradictions between their concerns to become a bearer of the commodity of labor power promising to secure them the economic returns to make them feel “financially secure” and “successful” in their aspired “career” and their desires to pursue ideals, interests, and social relations devalued on

a given market but critical to their sense of the kind of person they were, are, or would like to be in areas of life outside “higher education” and one’s chosen “profession.”

For instance, Jim Ottery posits writing prompts aimed at helping students bridge the gap between the limit points of where they have been, where they are now, and where they wish to go (132). Hallet urges us to following Mauk’s call to design writing assignments, such as a “working diary” (89), which prompt students to “make meaning out of the people-places that constitute their daily lives,” that is, to “flesh out” those social relations, experiences, and desires “flattened out” by the “academic” skills they are trying to extract from their bodies, including their experiences with housework and low-paying clerical work (90–91). Robert Brooke poses a “place-conscious education” (a pedagogy emerging from the ongoing efforts of the Nebraska Writing Project) which asks students to put their concern to “liv[e] well economically”—to amass the “intellectual” skills and knowledge that promise to bring the most economic return “everywhere” (else but the shrinking rural communities)—in the contexts of their and their family members’ interests in, knowledge of, and capacity to live well ecologically, politically, spiritually, and in community, thus exploring options for alternative livelihoods in their region (151–52).

In “Excellence is the Name of the (Ideological) Game,” Patricia Harkin joins Worsham, Brooke, and others to locate decisions over what particular forms of labor power are to be extracted from composition teachers and students in the specificity of the material where-when of individual efforts of writing and teaching-learning. Harkin defines composition researchers and teachers not merely as “persons who raise questions about how to define writing so that we can teach it” but also as persons working in global capitalism (under the logic of multinational corporations): a “grant culture” pressuring us to do work that can secure corporate funding rather than to look for funding for work that we see as necessary and/or interesting (30). Harkin urges us to counter the pressure to extract from ourselves only the corporate-valued labor power of “grantsmanship” by complicating our desire for financial security and career success as a “tenure-line professional” and to do so by keeping rather than losing sight of the “questions that we ourselves raise as a consequence of actual problems we encounter in the classroom, library, or culture”—aspects of our lives devalued and undervalued by the logic of global capitalism (33).

In foregrounding the bodily work of individual teachers and students in a globalizing capitalist market, the articles in this collection pose a

cogent rebuttal to the tirade of the Angel (of my House of Composition) that composition can and should teach “just writing.” They remind us that, when making the writing of our students the focus of composition classrooms while taking seriously their expressed financial and career concerns, composition teachers and researchers need to become more reflective of the market pressures we encounter during different points of our academic-professional lives and more attentive to the material consequences of forgetting that we, like all our students, are simultaneously also the bearers of “nonacademic,” “unprofessional” interests, desires, capacities, and relations which are critical to other areas of our lives in the past, present, and future. These articles can in turn help us re-view how and why the teaching and learning of a specific set of writing processes and products can never be separate from interrogation into its relation to the formation of the individual bodies (self, subjectivity, identity) under capitalism, especially when the students’ primary, fully articulated purpose for taking a composition course is to amass the set of skills that is most likely to secure “financial security” and “career success” in a given labor market. They can also help us re-view the possibilities of making composition a material space for students to use writing and learning as processes for addressing rather than ignoring the potential conflict they experience between their desire to qualify as “having” the most valued forms of labor power at a given market and to sustain, build, and initiate intimate relations with peoples marked as de-, un-, or under-skilled by the logic of capital.

At the same time, the recurring move to ground the efforts of individual students and teachers in specific, historical-social contexts, also cautions us against the tendency to attribute an absolute uniformity and continuity to capitalism and thus, overlook the shifts in its spatio-temporal order throughout its history and especially in what Harvey terms “the neo-liberal hegemony” since the 1970s (Harvey 2003, 62). Harvey argues that the United States has moved since the 1980s from an industrial toward a renter economy in relation to the rest of the world and a service economy at home (66). Technological rents continue to flow from the rest of the world into the U.S. economy, since much of the world’s research and development is still done in the United States (221). U.S.-based manufacturing corporations repatriate substantial profits from their overseas ventures (223). However, most of the return flow pumped from the rest of the world does not compensate for job losses within the United States because it benefits the already wealthy, making the rest of the population even more dependent on the

consumption habits of the upper-income brackets while doing, mostly without benefits, low-paying service jobs that cannot be moved offshore (223). Furthermore, technologically induced increases in productivity, in bringing costs down, do not necessarily improve the quality of daily life for the working and middle class. Rather, it sets in motion a chronic problem of unemployment and job insecurity (224). The logic of capital circulation pressures the laborer to channel her efforts solely to the end of increasing disposable income so as to increase her power of consumption of ever newer commodities such as objects, lifestyles, pleasures, services, trainings, skills (Harvey 1998, 411). Relentless U.S. consumerism generates a consumer market giving the United States a substantial advantage in bilateral trade deals (Harvey 2003, 224). But the recent bout of U.S. consumerism is debt-financed and class-biased. The habit of spending beyond one's means is more and more fueled by necessity, the need of working people to cash in mortgages to pay for the rising costs of health care, medical insurance, and education. The current stage can also be characterized by the increasing volume and speed but also range of goods and services in world trade, unprecedented levels of finance and capital flows in "a global electronic economy" geared toward money that exists only as digits in computers (Giddens 1999, 27; Harvey, 2003, 62). Any fluctuation in the financial market can destabilize seemingly rock-solid local economies as well as the value of whatever money we may have in our pockets or bank accounts (Giddens 1999, 28).

I recite the account of these shifts in the capitalist spatio-temporal order informing my reading of the collection to remind myself and other readers of this collection of the danger of turning any account of the educational experience of a particular student (in literacy autobiographies by individual composition teachers-researchers and students or ethnographic research) and any account of capitalism (especially those written during and about the U.S. society-economy of the period between World War II and the 1970s that have played instrumental roles in the work some of us have produced) into some sort of a master narrative (or commonplace) for cleansing the specificity of the actual material conditions of the writing and learning of individual students in the 2000s, even and especially when these accounts seem to be written by, about, and in the interests of composition teachers and researchers bearing markers of class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality similar to the students one is most interested in reaching. We need instead to approach all accounts of literacy training and U.S. society-economy, including the ones emerging from the articles in this collection and my

invested reading of these articles in light of David Harvey's work, with these questions in mind: What are the hearing systems we've developed through the years when approaching verbal articulations of "financial" and "career" concerns? How might such hearing habits hinder my ability to listen, carefully and respectfully, to the specificity of the material conditions informing individual students' writing and learning?

In "Manufacturing Emotions, Tactical Resistance in the Narratives of Working-Class students," Janet Bean (2003) poses a way of listening that attends to the "languages of the particular, of the body, and emotion": a way of attending to details in students' writing that "poach" various master narratives by "insinuating" into them heterogeneity and ambivalence (111, 103-4). I think Bean's advice on how composition teacher-researchers might best make sense of student writings which appear to reproduce clichés of individualism and meritocracy applies equally well to how we best go about making sense of writings by ourselves and our students appearing to reproduce "seminal" accounts of literacy training and U.S. capitalism informing our work at different points of our training as composition teacher-researchers. If learning to listen to individual students' account of their experience living through "the death and rebirth of Akron" (the uncertainties during the downturn of the late 1970s-1980s when Akron lost 35,000 manufacturing jobs, eliminating virtually all major rubber production in a city that once manufactured two-thirds of the nation's tires and half of the world's rubber goods and Akron's ascent by 2001 to be one of the top ten "new tech" cities of the United States for its preeminence in polymer engineering) is critical to Bean's understanding of how and why each of her students approached their "financial" and "career" concerns in a specific way in a particular text, then learning to break our confidence in our ability to know-hear the challenges students face when "writing and learning in a capitalist society" is equally critical (Bean 2003, 101-2). This kind of learning involves intense labor of the heart, body, and the mind because it is a form of work which brings home the limitations of the kind of labor power we have worked so hard to "possess," sell and "make a living out of" (Lu, "Redefining"). *Identity Papers* offers ample food for us to ponder how and why listening (rather than merely voicing and hearing) remains such a central and challenging task for composition researchers and teachers, myself included, a decade after Jacqueline Royster (1996) made the call in "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own."