Dangerous Writing

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**HOW “SOCIAL” IS SOCIAL CLASS IDENTIFICATION?**

What type of consumer is your hybrid offering designed to attract? Adult learners tend to be more open to an online experience because it allows them to balance their professional and personal lives with their educational pursuits. Traditional students—those aged 18 to 24—tend to want face-to-face, classroom-based learning. Corporations may prefer a little of both, to allow employees to work and study at the same time. Segmenting the market by consumer types and needs—adult, traditional, current, new, credit, non-credit—and designing programs that fit these segments and needs are important early steps.

—Kristin Greene

The above quote is from an article published in a recent *Inside Higher Ed*. (Greene 2006) It begins with the question “How can colleges best mix on-campus and online delivery of instruction?”—an initial move down a conceptual road that frames higher education firmly within a business management rhetoric. The phrasing is not “education,” but “the delivery of instruction.” The distinction is important. Postsecondary “education” typically suggests dynamic interaction, active give-and-take, open inquiry, contentious questions concerning content and pedagogical method, and informed professionals making decisions at the level of the classroom. These aspects of education are difficult to sell, difficult to make portable, and famously impossible to quantify with validity. In contrast, “instructional delivery” suggests a much more stable, transposable entity—something that can be packaged and delivered for a fee: a commodity. Surrounding the commodity is a constellation of contracted relationships—of prescribed roles, identities, values, and niche packaging—that are characteristic of a market. The political economic rhetoric of the article is built on clear objectives and rationalized operations, on organizational efficiency and measurable outcomes. This rhetoric defines education according to the terms of capitalist economics: it is driven by the imperatives of exchange and competition. Success and failure can be quantified.
How “Social” Is Social Class Identification?

According to terms that are established at the onset, as “students” are “targeted consumers” of a product carefully crafted to attract their dollars. They will pay for a product that is necessarily predictable enough to make the exchange “fair” according to market logics of exchange.

Most institutions of higher education continue to project a gentrified aesthetic. Campuses are designed to create the impression of a separate space, at least somewhat removed from the “real world” of direct engagement in economic and civic life. This conceptualization is built into the marketing campaigns of institutions throughout the country. Architecture that is ready-made for pictorial montages; magazine rankings; branding slogans like “Dare to Be Great” and “Thinking Ahead”; and sleek Web sites—in some cases actually featuring models posing as students—are combined in marketing schemes calculated to attract students and dollars.¹ In practice, the boundaries between the “real world” (of adulthood, work, and global capitalism) and the somewhat otherworldly, scholarly aesthetic that still characterizes popular conceptions of college life are muddied to say the least. As David Geoffrey Smith has argued, in contemporary higher education there is an ongoing and increasingly severe clash between “corporate economic fundamentalism [and] the dreams of liberal democratic culture” (1999, 100–1). The working lives of students and many of their writing teachers are significantly shaped by the terms of work in fast-capitalism—on a daily basis. Though typically these terms are ignored or left on the margins of discussions of literacy and pedagogy, economic logics significantly create the contexts of postsecondary writing and learning in the United States. As the discourse and productive logics of the marketplace are aligned with those of higher education, educational and economic production, marketing, and consumption are more uniformly and strategically configured. The kinds of conceptual spaces necessary for the adoption of the critical perspective that many of us consider essential to the mission of higher education are more difficult to foster in environments that are substantially geared toward marketable education that purports to produce marketable students. Moreover, students’ and teachers’ lives inside and outside of school are shaped by a matrix of political economic factors—from the marketing and administration of their universities to the policies and discourses of their work away from school. The creation of a

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¹ “Dare to Be Great” is the slogan used by the University of Louisville. The University of Phoenix uses “Thinking Ahead.”
space from which students might gain more critical and more strategic understandings of writing and themselves is discouraged by the everyday material processes of work and production in many of today’s postsecondary institutions.

The situation is generally discouraging, but far from impossible. A political economic understanding of those everyday processes of writing and writing education can help teachers and scholars to avoid (1) conceptions of postsecondary institutions as culturally elitist, which misidentifies true power structures and (2) homogenized, culturally centered, nonmaterial conceptions of class that prevent more accurate naming of the terms of work and education in fast-capitalism. These terms require creative new pedagogical responses that bring the general and the immediate into dialectic, highlighting contradictions and creating the space for alternative self-authoring.

WRITING CLASS

A number of very contemporary factors make it as important as ever that class be made more conspicuous in the public political discourse, including the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States; the systemic political disenfranchisement of the less- and under-privileged; an increasingly transnational economy that puts labor at a disadvantage globally; and the neoliberal philosophy that has pervaded all spheres of society, including government and education. The argument I will make in this chapter, though, is that critical pedagogical approaches to writing pedagogy that center on explorations of class have generally not proceeded from a political economic perspective, but rather have articulated class as a social identity, an aspect of culture examined in isolation from the political economics of production. This derives, in part, from a reluctance to deploy any potentially disruptive political economic analysis and vocabulary—a reluctance that comes out of the success of the right in stigmatizing leftist speech. It is also a continuing legacy of the position of rhetoric and composition within literary-studies-dominated English departments, where distanced textual analysis tends to be favored over the active view of rhetoric described in the first chapter. The ramification has been a failure to recognize and act upon important shifts in relations of production and the character and function of education, and this failure diminishes the full creative and transformative power of writing education.
An encouraging backlash against postmodernist theory has emerged across humanities disciplines precisely because of the way that it has positioned the function of education and discourse. The arguments are wide ranging, but generally they critique the tendency of postmodernist theory to emphasize textuality and representation at the expense of materiality and history, undermining the possibility of a galvanizing and hopeful politics. Sociologist Raymond Morrow, for instance, argues that in its most popular form, as a kind of simplistic reaction against political economy (and critical theory) as totalizing “metanarratives,” postmodernist theories proclaimed a radical pluralism and voluntarism oriented toward ahistorical understandings of the here and now. Theoretically, social analysis was reduced to cultural theory and was understood primarily in purely discursive terms that neglected the extratextual dimensions and material aspects of institutions and social reality. (2006, xxii)

A postmodernist perspective has led to text- and identity-focused writing pedagogies that apply class as a generalized category of understanding to discursive representations (such as in literature or pop culture). Class in representations—for instance, in pop culture—is often the subject of critique, but class as a historically produced, political economic position is not. Because it is seen more as a stable category of identity—with which one either empathizes or identifies—than as lived, always evolving, and dialectically shaped, class is treated as roughly equivalent to other social markers that have had their potential as counter-hegemonic political identifications contained through corporate appropriation: gay, African American, etc. Moreover, the position of the critic herself in postmodern analysis is bound to an ethos of skepticism and ambivalence. Class analysis as an aspect of rhetorical study has thus been marred in the quagmire of distanced analysis, losing its power as *praxis* in the fuller sense of the term. Rather than being a part of an actionable political vocabulary that names and addresses the structural causes of injustice and inequity, the rhetoric of class is divorced from political engagement and appropriated within a “tolerance” discourse that is largely silent about political economic justice and process. Alienation among students is an existential dilemma, a generalized cultural “ennui,” rather than an outcome of material relations of production on jobs and at school. This is true even of

2. For an excellent critique of postmodern critical theory along political economic lines, see Bauman (1997).
critical pedagogical approaches. As Morrow describes it: “Against the excesses of postmodernism, it can be argued that critical theory without political economy retreats into a free-floating cultural space that loses contact with the historical specificity necessary for its insights as a form of social analysis and critique” (2006, xxii). Ironically, class inequalities thus come to seem an organic inevitability rather than a product of specific, changeable material and historical processes. Indeed, this may have evolved as the precise political economic purpose of contemporary text-focused critique. Terry Eagleton argues in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* that critics began in the 1980s to “speak culturally about the material” rather than materially about culture, paradoxically—from a Marxist point of view—displacing bodies from the material into the discursive (48).³ Mark Wood writes that

during the 1980s and 1990s, self-identified progressive academics became increasingly disconnected from struggles for social justice, human rights, and ecological sustainability. This was also a period in which many academics, informed by poststructuralist discourses, contended that racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual discrimination and oppression (a category whose ubiquity was matched only by its operational ambiguity) are as significant as capitalist exploitation and state repression. Many theorized social relations as being constituted primarily if not exclusively by discourse, culture, and subjectivity. . . . While much was written about jouissance and the subversive play of libidinous bodies, much less was said about the individuals whose labor made possible this writing. Cyborgs, transexuality, and difference received far more attention than did janitors, the working day, and justice. (2005, 218–19)

Similar cases have been made by Henry Giroux, Zygmunt Bauman, Carl Boggs, David Harvey, and Peter McLaren. McLaren associates postmodern literary critiques with cynicism, passivism, and retreat from intellectual engagement and responsibility. As McClaren describes it, the “hidden curriculum” of fast-capitalist education “is largely the same as it was during earlier phases of industrial capitalism: to deform knowledge into a discreet and decontextualized set of technical skills packaged to serve big-business interests, cheap labor, and ideological conformity” (2000, 33). According to McLaren, “We occupy a time that is witnessing the progressive merging of pedagogy to the productive processes within advanced capitalism. Education has been reduced to

a subsector of the economy, designed to create cyber citizens within a teledemocracy of fast-moving images, representations, and life-style choices” (29).

Surveying the range of recent treatments of class in writing pedagogy, one finds a critical absence of discussion of how the economy and higher education have changed over the past three decades and how those changes are reflected in everyday writing classrooms. All of the dynamic cacophony surrounding and significantly constructing classroom practice is largely silenced in the interest of a narrowed focus that positions postsecondary writing within stable disciplinary and institutional realms—outside of the fast-capitalist logics of socialization and production. An economic and politically mobilizing definition of class is supplanted by descriptions of dialects, habits of communication and consumption, and isolated instances of social embarrassment. In these inert manifestations, class becomes what German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim call a “zombie category”: a fossilized term from a past era that no longer has the power to name the material facts on the ground in a way that creates new opportunities for human agency and justice.

For instance, in a recent *College English* devoted to issues of class, Sharon O’Dair relies on very traditional, static notions of institutionality and class in her critique of what she believes are “bad faith” critical writing pedagogies. In “Class Work: Site of Egalitarian Activism or Site of Embourgeoisement?” O’Dair claims higher education as a solidly middle-class endeavor, and describes class as a set of social characteristics and dispositions. It is important to note that though O’Dair is seeking to enter a rhetoric and composition discussion, she self-identifies as “a literary critic interested in the theory and workings of social class, particularly education’s role in maintaining and reproducing class distinction” (2003, 594). Her interest in class therefore seems analytical rather than political or moral in the active sense. Moreover, she doesn’t exhibit a multiple-literacies perspective that values the languages of diverse peoples—a perspective that arguably now defines the mainstream of rhetoric and composition studies. Disregarding the three decades of work in literacy studies and rhetoric and composition that complicates one-dimensional, instrumentalist notions of Standard English, O’Dair associates recognition of working-class and nonstandard rhetorics with institutional decline:
In this time of great social urgency, perhaps literary critics and compositionists should not be concerned about standard English, the intricacies of logical argument, or even the writing process; perhaps they should think of themselves as politicians first, and literary critics or compositionists second, if at all . . . what seems to be at stake here is not just literary criticism or a fine writing style but also the value of intellectual accomplishment and distinction. How far do we go in promoting egalitarianism in the academy? (2003, 597)

O’Dair suggests that working-class students are largely in need of remediation without making the project of remediation historically problematic: “How many students who require remedial instruction in English and mathematics should we admit to undergraduate study—40 percent? 60 percent? More?” (2003, 597). She argues from the general premise that the vast majority of working-class students are in college because they want better occupational opportunities. They perceive higher education as a way to achieve such a goal, and that perception is rooted in their understanding that higher education will help them gain access to and perform better in the weird bourgeois or professional worlds they wish to enter. That perception may be somewhat hazy, and they may not grasp, for example, that a degree in and of itself is no guarantee of better occupational opportunities or that standard English is the lingua franca of bourgeois and professional life—but when they do grasp those facts, they will feel cheated when they recall that their composition instructor purposefully decided not to initiate them into academic discourse but instead to value the language and knowledge they already knew. (2003, 598 [emphasis mine])

There are many things to take issue with here: for instance, the monolithic generalizations about “we” and “them”; the belief that she knows enough about them and their knowledges and languages to make these generalizations about their desires and assumptions, but they know so little about her institution; the belief that expert knowledge of an academic discourse, like the discourse of literary criticism, makes one any more expert or adept in the discourses of other professions than any other novice. My primary concern, though, is with the presumption that most working-class students aren’t really legitimately a part of institutions of higher learning—a perspective that I believe wrongly isolates the cultural aspects of class from how it is lived and reproduced in daily life. This is essential because writing and discourse are an integral part of the reproduction of the political economic structures that maintain class inequities. In O’Dair’s view, a view that I suspect isn’t uncommon,
though working-class students attend postsecondary institutions in high numbers, they still don’t really constitute those institutions. The socio-material doesn’t significantly constitute the real—so they are not we. They are outsiders to whom the institution/we must continually reach out to its/our detriment. They don’t really belong, and it would be better if many of them are therefore, in O’Dair’s words, given an “excellent primary and secondary education, as well as excellent secondary and postsecondary vocational training,” because this is what is best suited for a working-class consciousness—which, in her construction, remains largely monolithic, implicitly naturalized, and at the very least external to the central concerns of higher education.

What are the assumptions about class, postsecondary literacy, and institutionality that drive the assertion that writing education is the project of a “middle-class professoriate” (2003, 593) and that “colleges and universities have been and continue to be part of middle-class culture” (601)? Evidence abounds that the project of writing instruction at most institutions of higher learning is not carried out by an instructorate which can legitimately be said to be solidly middle class, at least not from a political economic perspective. Higher education is increasingly reliant upon contingent, para-, and nonprofessional teaching labor, and nowhere is this more obviously the case than in postsecondary writing classes. If one defines class narrowly along the lines of educational attainment and privileged cultural knowledge, then an undergraduate degree and an M.A. are the minimum requirements for middle class membership. However, can a teacher really be considered middle class while working part-time or as a contracted laborer at clearly subprofessional wages, and often without benefits? Someone hired to teach courses at a postsecondary institution might be able quote William Blake from memory or talk with intelligence about discourse and cultural studies while she stocks the shelves at night at Barnes and Noble in order to make ends meet, but does that make her “middle class”?

Michael Zweig, in Working Class Majority (2000), argues that higher education doesn’t necessarily lead to class mobility, but Zweig’s argument is that class is more a matter of political economic power than cultural distinction. Recognizing the difference is especially important for an understanding of how class functions in the fast-capitalist economy precisely because outward, “cultural” markers of class from previous eras—clothes, dialects, musical taste—though certainly not gone, are also now not nearly as reliable as markers of class position.
Zweig, an economist who directs the Center for Working Class Life at the University of Michigan, defines class

in large part based on the power and authority people have at work. The workplace engages people in more than their immediate work, by which they create goods and services. It also engages them in relationships with each other, relationships that are controlled by power. A relative handful of people have great power to organize and direct production, while a much larger number have almost no authority. In a capitalist society such as ours, the first group are the capitalist class, the second group the working class. (2000, 3)

When we, as Zweig suggests, see class in terms of power over production and relationships—in other words, in terms of political economic positioning and processes—rather than in terms of cultural markers of class distinction, we can’t assert that higher education across institutions, especially writing education, is solidly middle class. Convincingly wielding the social characteristics of cultural distinction might, in some cases, correlate with power, but it hardly constitutes it.

Zweig argues that culture is more productively and accurately seen as an aspect of the political economic: “Economic and political power are related and reinforce one another. The power to affect our culture comes from control over economic and political resources, but influencing the culture tends to strengthen one’s economic and political power as well” (12). When we look at who is actually teaching in higher education and under what conditions, the middle class status of teachers as a whole is quite tenuous. Moreover, the significant majority of all students in postsecondary institutions (73 percent) are classified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as “nontraditional,” and many of the criteria used by the NCES to define “nontraditional” status—such as works full-time and finances own education—do correlate with “working-class” status.

So what of the relationship between class, writing, and postsecondary institutions? As Jeff Grabbill argues, “literacy” has little meaning outside of particular institutional spheres, and “literacy education” does not exist as a transcendent, definable entity—it is always a deployment, a range of actions undertaken with situated (often even explicitly articulated) ideas of what literacy and education are and how they should be pursued. As Grabbill puts it: “Institutions give literacies existence, meaning and value” (2001, 7). Institutions are systems of meaning-making and valuation—they are mechanisms of political
economic production. When those institutions involve literacy, they create (with varying degrees of specificity) what literacy is and why it is important. They construct what is desirable and undesirable, and they often carry explicit means of shaping how people see literacy and how it is to be evaluated. When institutions deploy their own versions of literacy, they do so according to broader, contentious assumptions about what constitutes the primary identities, roles, and purposes of human beings. For instance, English-only edicts in governmental policy and education are specific, contentious assertions of “American” identity, and when institutions caste literacy in terms of employment, job training, economic competitiveness, political consciousness, and cultural sophistication they emphasize and value different aspects of what it means to be human and what are the most important functions of language. That said, however, it is also important not to see institutions as overly determining, static, or detached from the everyday actions and choices of people: “Institutions are people; they are systems by which people act collectively” (Grabill 2001, 7). Institutions aren’t just policies and figments of the imaginary, they are political economic entities: material, historical, continually recreated by the real people who labor within them.

O’Dair characterizes as “nonsense” the arguments of those concerned with class in writing pedagogy, like John Alberti and Joseph Heathcott, who have called for institutions to become more explicitly working class in their orientation (2003, 596). But what Alberti, Heathcott, and Amy Robillard (who examines narrative as an element of working-class cultures) are calling for is not, as O’Dair would characterize it, a degradation of higher education and literacy in the interests of inclusion, but a fuller and more strategic response to what postsecondary educational institutions actually already are now. A statistical handful of elite institutions do serve high numbers of privileged students—but as Alberti points out, most are not elite, and most students are not privileged. I would add that most writing teachers aren’t either. Higher education as a whole can be seen as solidly middle class only when we ignore that class is an aspect of political economic positioning and power in specific times and places. Rhetoric and composition is likewise bound to be a process of “embourgeoisement” only when we envision it as isolated enculturation or analysis, rather than as ongoing material praxis carried out by real people in real locales under real material terms.
Even other more nuanced and politically committed work also tends to favor a definition that is generated more by cultural representation and identification than political economic relations and production—for instance, Tim Libretti’s “Sexual Outlaws and Class Struggle: Rethinking History and Class Consciousness from a Queer Perspective” (2004). Libretti’s generally provocative and well-structured argument is framed in terms of a binary between two factions. On one side are what he calls “angry white men on the left,” a term he borrows from Jesse Lemisch. On the other are people who focus on identity politics in relation to class. In Libretti’s binary, people in the “angry white men” faction believe that too much focus on identity politics has splintered the left. The angry white male faction believes that a turning away from class politics and toward diversity issues has left progressive politics without a focus or a means to foster widespread support. Libretti associates this faction with homophobia, racism, and a general ignorance of the relationship between social institutions and economic structures. In contrast, he wants to emphasize the connection between class politics and cultural institutions. Drawing on Lemisch, Mary Bernstein, and Robin D. G. Kelley, he says that “they either don’t understand or refuse to acknowledge that class is lived through race and gender” (Kelley, cited in Libretti 2004, 155). Libretti thus builds his position against the image of the antiquated, homophobic, angry white male leftist—a leftist that, he asserts, is too willing to ignore the degree to which capitalism is dependent upon the maintenance of specific social and sexual norms. He locates heterosexual monogamy at the center of the capitalist social system and argues for the importance of “queering” that social institution through a dialectical materialist approach: “Simply put, the full and genuine development of an anticapitalist class consciousness . . . demands a gay perspective and entails, if efficaciously articulated, a politics of gay liberation, of total sexual liberation” (2004, 62). Libretti advocates careful study of the writings of James Baldwin and John Rechy, both of whom articulated a queer identity in relation to class identity, finding that gender and class cannot be teased apart:

What these authors have provided for the radical imagination seeking to invent new political subjects or write new narratives of class struggle and liberation is the crucial wisdom that this imagination must include a queer dimension if it is going to produce a genuine blueprint for revolution. (2004, 170)
I am convinced of the value of integrating questions of gender and sexuality into discussions of class and identity. I am less convinced, however, that queer identities and lifestyles that are not attached to an explicitly radical economic (rather than culturally centered) politics are threatening to the fundamental social structures of fast-capitalism. This is not the same political culture within which James Baldwin did his primary work. There is much reason to believe that industries in the new economy are becoming very accommodating of nonheterosexual identities and lifestyles. The Human Rights Campaign foundation (HRC)—which rates companies according to their policies concerning lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual employees—found that 265 of Fortune 500 companies offer domestic partner health benefits. Anything less than 100 percent is not enough, but this is enough to indicate a large and growing willingness to accept nonheterosexuals into the normative center of capitalist culture and power as long as its fundamental economic architectures go unchallenged. Moreover, many of the corporations that form the very core of the fast-capitalist economy—from financial sector companies like American Express, Bank of America, and Capital One; to technology companies like Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Intel; to pharmaceutical giants like Eli Lilly and Company and Pfizer—all received the highest (“100”) score from the HRC for their policies concerning gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual employees. I wonder whether a “queering” of heterosexual “normalcy” still carries the revolutionary power that Libretti imagines. Among the many oft-cited attributes of fast-capitalism is its cultural agility—its ability to adapt with sophistication to cultural shifts while keeping its foundational political economic structures solidly intact.

In another College English article, Jennifer Beech self-identifies as “both scholar and redneck.” Beech very usefully describes the historical, cultural complexity of the term “redneck” and points to the fact that most postsecondary university students attend “second-tier” or ‘working class’ colleges.” She finds that even in these colleges, working-class, “redneck” students are left out of considerations of diversity in pedagogy, which means that we are ignoring or alienating a considerable portion of the current postsecondary population (2004, 176). Beech addresses recent assertions—made by O’Dair, Russel Durst, and Joseph Harris among others—that critical pedagogy ignores the “instrumentalist” motivations that working-class students often carry into higher education. These scholars argue that students want to pursue conventional
notions of success—better jobs and middle class cultural “normalcy.” Beech counters, very persuasively in my view, that critical pedagogy can critique privilege even as students become more adept at understanding and, if need be, adapting themselves to multiple discourses:

Critical examinations of language’s role in maintaining oppressive race and class structures can productively engage students oppressed by or comfortable with “normative” whiteness, facilitating their ability to critique and resist (deconstruct) oppressive mainstream stereotypes and even allowing for students to imagine and employ (reconstruct) more ethical discursive practices. (2004, 176)

Beech discusses Jeff Foxworthy’s jokes, “redneck” music, and a book called *The Redneck Manifesto*.

Beech’s article is important; however, as with Libretti, the focus is on social identity largely in isolation from political economic concerns. If, as Beech desires, students do “imagine and employ (reconstruct) more ethical discursive practices,” will it bring about awareness of the root causes of economic injustice and systemic exploitation that are built into global economic policies? My concern is that working-class markers like “hillbilly” can take a place among other social identifiers not to be discriminated against on the job or referenced derogatively at socially mixed gatherings. Working-class, rural culture is now already a clearly identified marketing niche—the target of the marketing campaigns of NASCAR and Wal-Mart, music and automobiles. Is a kinder ethics toward culturally disparaged peoples a goal of class identification and study? What about a deeper, more revolutionary and equitable distribution of power, access, and resources? Class is not genetically produced; it isn’t something we celebrate with festivals and parades or give its own official month. Class can describe how people live and identify, but we can’t lose site of the fact that it is ultimately about unequal relations of power. I recognize the importance of understanding gender, race, and sexuality as aspects of labor and class struggles in the United States,

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4. In the same issue of *College English*, Julie Lindquist (2004) advocates developing empathetic responses to class issues. As with Libretti and Beech, I believe that this is valuable work that helped my understanding of my own pedagogy, but I again think we also need class analysis that is explicitly connected to the project of understanding and addressing the structural causes of economic injustice. I bring David Seitz’s (2004) article, from the same issue of *College English*, into chapter 4. His approach to work memoirs starts from an examination of work that does shift focus to relations of production: the cultural is examined in terms of the economic.
and I also recognize the importance of fostering awareness of the social markers of class distinction (dialect, dress, consumption habits, etc.). However, when the social and cultural (rather than the political economic) aspects of class are the points of emphasis, class is too apt to being appropriated. Corporations can do tolerance workshops and extend benefits to same-sex couples. Classrooms can be forums in which people share experiences and revelations about their own socio-economic status and resolve to be more sensitive and aware of difference. Meanwhile the irreconcilable contradictions and systematic injustices of the economic system that creates class disparities remain largely unexamined. Class-focused education can even serve an ameliorative political function in higher education in fast-capitalism, as justified anger is directed toward coping and understanding.

In the next chapter, I will offer a pedagogical model that can help highlight structural contradictions and doesn’t seek to foster closures, reconciliations, or even “tolerance” of class-based inequalities. In the remainder of this chapter I focus on the broad changes that have occurred in the economy over the last four decades. I believe that critical pedagogical approaches might be more centered on the realization that a significant transformation has occurred in the global economy and that rhetorics of social identification and identifications of points of struggle need to be modified to account for the new terrain. The fast-capitalist economy has outpaced many things, including the ability of those who find reason to take issue with its fundamental logics to sustain a discourse of critique and transformation.

FAST-CAPITALIST LOGICS—FROM THE STEEL MILL TO WAL-MART

All the profits that you see in American business today come from not paying employee benefits. All the money on Wall Street that they’re pushing back and forth comes from people like me paying our own dental bills. [Laughs] Because temping at large corporations is a big deal these days. And you know large corporations don’t do anything that doesn’t save them money, so they have their work broken up into distinct units that can be done mindlessly. And they bring in temps whenever they need us, and they don’t pay us benefits, and they let us go whenever they don’t need us anymore. (58)

The above quote was uttered by “Chris Real,” a temp worker interviewed for the book Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs (2000). Gig is a fast-capitalist update on Studs Terkel’s Working: People Talk About What They
Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do (1972). Terkel’s Working is deservedly a classic and still a commonplace on reading lists in classes that examine work and class. Working was certainly among the many books that helped me, as an undergraduate student, begin to take more ownership over my own working-class upbringing. But reading the book now, over three decades after its first publication, one immediately recognizes that Working comes out of a distinctively industrial-economy context. It is still deeply engaging and certainly well worth reading, but its interviews with, among others, mine workers, cab drivers, spot-welders, an “airline stewardess,” and a “super market box boy” invite the reader into a world of work that is clearly in the past.

An intense, troubled period of economic, social, and governmental reorganization was underway in the early 1970s and that reorganization has had profound effects on work, education, and discourse. During this transformative period, the power of labor steadily diminished, altering not only the fundamental relationship between employers and labor, but the essence of what it means to be a “worker” and a “citizen.” Many of the interviews in Terkel’s Working can even be read as a portrait of the breaking down of the particular balance mediated by government between workers and industry that had been established by the New Deal. The Keynesian relationship that characterized the political economy of the 1950s and 1960s had been driven by a view that government had a vital role in preventing the abuse and exploitation of workers in a free market economy. This view had not come about naturally, of course. It was an inventive and effective means of containing and eventually disarming the widespread and increasingly politicized anger fueled by the capitalist economic collapse of the 1930s. By the 1960s, however, the American left had largely abandoned an oppositional economic project. This was due to a number of factors. Wealth was being spread more evenly than before across the (white) strata of society, which created a middle class of unprecedented size. Labor unions had been weakened by cold war purges of economic radicals; top-heavy union bureaucracies developed complicitous relationships with management; and the academic/intellectual left turned toward cultural issues and eventually its own conversations, and away from workers’ rights and what was happening with relations of production. The celebrations of the social advances of late 1960s and early 1970s counterculture masked fundamental rightward shifts in the American economic structure that disempowered workers and widened gaps in wealth and power. As Louis Uchitell describes it,
The “about face” that came about in the 1970s shifted agency to “entrepreneurial, hard driving managers”—theorizing that a globally competitive economy required giving management maximum flexibility. Job security as a right and an essential component of general well-being—the right to have secure employment—fell away from the political economic discourse. (2006, 6)

A theory of government as a protector of the well-being of all citizens was replaced by a theory of government that facilitated the agency of management for global economic competitiveness. This new theory moved the political focus away from maintaining systemic checks and balances and placed the responsibility for secure employment more exclusively on the workers themselves. Workers began to find themselves in the untenable position of seeking individual solutions to systemic problems. The economic system’s failure to create good, secure jobs was made to seem like failures of skill and will in individuals:

Unfettered enterprises, the argument now went, would expand more rapidly and, over the long run, share their rising profits with their workers, doing so voluntarily through job creation and raises. If that did not happen—and it did not happen for tens of millions of people who lost their jobs—well, that was the fault of the job losers themselves. They had failed to acquire the necessary skills and education to qualify for the increasingly sophisticated jobs that were available. (2006, 7)

So changes in the structure of the economy and government shaped the way that workers tended to view themselves, their work, and their rights.

In 1933, U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins led a march of striking steelworkers in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Prevented from addressing the workers by local town authorities, she marched to the post office to speak to them from federally owned space, signaling that the federal government would stand behind workers in some labor disputes. It is nearly impossible to imagine a high-ranking government official now standing with workers in a labor dispute. In the 1970s, job security as a fundamental right of citizens and an essential component of general well-being fell away from the political discourse and out of legislative policy decisions. In its place came the era of managerial flexibility and worker insecurity—an era in which government hesitated or increasingly refused to intervene in employer/worker disputes; and when it did act, it often acted on behalf of employers. In place of the industrial ideal of the loyal company man came the fast-capitalist ideal
of the self-interested entrepreneur. A host of governmental policies—including international trade agreements that included no protections for workers and the so-called “right to work” legislation that weakened unions in states across the country (twenty-two states now have such laws)—have fundamentally changed the terms of work in the United States. In 1981, nearly fifty years after Frances Perkins stood with striking workers on federal land in Homestead, Ronald Reagan invoked executive authority to fire and replace striking air traffic controllers. This is the exclamation point signaling the arrival of a new period of philosophical and economic transformation, the symbol that organized labor no longer had real political clout and that the balance had now shifted largely toward the interests of management and shareholders to the exclusion of those of labor.

Political economic developments have not just changed work, they have changed how people generally self-identify as workers, how they view education and civic life, and how they view themselves in relation to the broader economy. In America, the shift away from a manufacturing to more of a service- and technology-based economy has actually also been a shift toward less-secure white-collar employment. In their most recent comprehensive report (2002/2003), the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) summarizes:

Job security fell in the 1980s and 1990s as workers began spending less time with one employer. The long-term trend in job stability is disconcerting for a number of reasons. First, workers who are displaced from their jobs often find new ones that pay less and are less likely to offer benefits. Further, many employee benefits, such as health insurance and pensions, are tied to employers. Workers who switch jobs not only tend to start at the firm’s minimal number of vacation weeks, but they may have to go through waiting periods for employer-provided health insurance. (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003, 9)

According to the report, “low-wage industries [primarily retail, health, and temporary services] accounted for 72.9% of all new jobs in 1989–2000” (see also Galbraith 1998; Osterman 2001). The EPI report tracks a thirty-year trend toward diminished job security and benefits—for all workers, not only less formally educated workers in the manufacturing sector. Since the digital technologies boom of the 1990s, the general assumption has been that high-paying, high-tech jobs are available in large numbers if only more Americans were qualified to take them.
While this assumption diverts attention away from those companies that outsource high-tech jobs in order to keep labor costs low and maximize shareholder profits, it isn’t supported by the available statistics. Indeed, the growth in reliance on part-time work and the increasing number of workers who are also in school are among the factors that have tended to make the unemployment rate a weak indicator of job availability and security.

In *Working*, people’s expectations and frustrations generally stem from an industrial-era belief that the economy can and should offer workers a degree of permanence and loyalty. This is not to romanticize industrial-era work. Many of the workers’ lives are certainly hard, and the jobs fall short of what workers’ feel they have a right to expect. Nevertheless, the workers generally see themselves in definable, sustainable occupations rather than in “positions,” and there is often clearly a collective identification with a class—sometimes explicitly stated, other times implied or manifested in an identifiable rhetoric. Terry Mason, the “airline stewardess,” was only twenty-six at the time that she was interviewed for *Working*, but she had already been on the job for six years and clearly saw herself in a steady, long-term career. Moreover, though the terms of her employment were shockingly sexist (for instance, her airline had an “appearance counselor” who had the power to take women off of shifts if their appearance didn’t meet the standard), at that time being an “airline stewardess” brought considerable prestige, a mark of sophistication, and elevated class status. Her family, most of whom had never been on an airplane, boasted to friends of her position and her travel (Turkel 1972, 48–49). Steve Dubui, a steelworker near retirement interviewed for *Working*, had been working since his teens at the same unionized mill for forty years. He had endured a long, hard working life, but he looked forward to retirement and regularly spent time talking with his fellow workers about what they were going to do when they retired. Unfortunately, however, the forces of the new global economy that would have such a devastating impact on workers in the U.S. steel industry in the coming decade were already well underway. He described the changes:

And they’re forcing more work on ya. It’s knockin off men, makin’ cutbacks here and there to save money. They’ve knocked off an awful lot of jobs. With the foreign imports of steel they’re losin’ money. That’s what they say. I suppose in order to make a profit they have to cut somewhere. But I told
'em 'After forty years of work, why do you take a man away from me? You’re gonna force me into retirement.' All of us were real angry. (1972, 552)

Turnover is so integral to the terms of work in the new economy that having the same job for one’s entire adult life is almost unheard of.

The portrait of the working world found in Gig (Bowe, Bowe, and Streeter 2001) is in many important ways wholly distinct from that of Working. The economy of Gig is far more casualized, and the total portrait of work that emerges from its interviews is more about contingency and risk than expectations of permanence and security, cynicism and “free agency” than hopeful expectations and class identification and solidarity. Workers interviewed for Gig work in an economy that is driven by digital technologies, thousands of specialized “niche” jobs that are only temporary, and low-level service jobs—such as those in retail and the food industry—that are created by mammoth international corporations like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s. Perhaps more importantly, in Gig many workers talk of making regular changes in both jobs and careers. As labor historians Paul Le Blanc and John Hinshaw write,

Since the mid-1970s, the real wages of those fortunate enough to have full-time employment have declined by 20 percent. Even many unionized workers whose wages and benefits have kept pace with inflation share the common view that the labor movement is dominated by entrenched, self-serving bureaucracies having little positive relevance for the lives of working people. And the condition of labor markets will surely deteriorate as corporations and public employers accelerate the process of eliminating full-time employees in favor of temporary workers or so-called self-employed contractors. (2000, 13)

Consistent with the general milieu described by Le Blanc and Hinshaw, the workers of Gig seem to expect little loyalty or continuity from their employers, and they often articulate their relationships with their employers as a kind of mutually exploitive gamesmanship. In the new era of managerial techniques that are designed to quickly foster loyalty in ever-evolving workforces—an era in which employees are usually referred to as “associates” and hierarchies are said to be more “flattened”—there is actually much cynicism on both sides of the manager/worker equation. In Gig, workers talk about the kind of forced cultures that employers try to create on jobs to increase productivity and a sense of loyalty. For instance, a worker at Kinko’s describes training as mostly focusing
on “indoctrinating you into this Kinko’s philosophy. . . . I think they believe that you’re less likely to rip them off or be irresponsible if you feel like you’re in a family-type thing. So they get you in all these little ways. They give you grades. You’re treated like a kid” (72). Workers play along, with low expectations of their employers and carrying the burden of maintaining employment within an economy that thrives on short-term, “flexible” labor. A sixty-six-year-old Wal-Mart greeter in Gig who has no intention of ever being without a job makes an interesting contrast to the nearly retired steelworker in Working. Those not in an economic elite generally don’t expect to ever have a retirement phase in which they don’t work at the end of their careers. The media often presents portraits of seniors at work as positive and voluntary, illustrative of how the capitalist economy can make even the elderly feel relevant and productive. The reality is that the economy is seeing the effects of nearly forty years of the erosion of workers’ rights, benefits, and relative wealth. Many seniors are working because they have to work—and they get low paying service industry jobs because that is what this economy is producing in large numbers.

William DeGenario’s recent collection Who Says: Working Class Rhetoric, Class Consciousness and Community illustrates the difficulty with fostering a galvanizing, counter-hegemonic discourse in the current political economy. DeGenario seeks to identify a distinct, historically continuous working-class rhetoric. He contrasts this working-class rhetoric to the work that has formed the canon of traditional rhetorical study, which he links to elitism and idle privilege. Indeed, he points out that much of the rhetorical theory that forms our disciplinary canon is “often characterized by a disdain for physical labor and the people who partake in such work” (2007, 1). He locates the origins of this elitism in Aristotle, and follows it through Quintilian’s figure of “the good man speaking well” into contemporary conceptualizations of rhetoric. The “good man” [sic] is an educated man who is socially empowered to speak and be heard. In other words, the good man speaking well is enabled by existing power structures. In contrast, DeGenario describes working-class rhetorics in terms of their largely antagonistic dialectic with the very elitist political and social institutions that have largely sustained rhetorical study. Working-class rhetoricians have not had “the conch” as a birthright, they have been forced to seize it—and once they have, their rhetoric has been about power. He seeks to locate a rhetorical history that is alternative to the official, elitist lineage—one that carries a “transformative
function,” an imperative to take action. He therefore, perhaps naturally, gravitates toward labor unions in his explanation: “Inspired by the discursive activity of labor unions . . . working-class rhetorics agitate and antagonize the static words on the pages of rhetorical texts and suggest contemporary scholars invent their own class-conscious readings of such texts.” (6) This antagonism with power that helps bring about a working-class rhetoric occurs on a variety of terrains, from admissions policies at universities to popular media and workplaces. An essential point for DeGenario, though, is that “class” is still real and class-consciousness is articulated through working-class rhetorics. Therefore, as scholars we need to do more to help people recognize “that class (and by extension, class division and class conflict) exists” (6).

What follows DeGenario’s introductory theorization of working-class rhetoric is an intriguing section called “Toward a Working-Class Rhetorical Tradition”—five very readable chapters that deal in some way with the history and rhetoric of the labor movement. This section as a whole persuasively locates a workers’ rhetoric of solidarity and opposition, but it locates it in a bygone era. This is where I begin to struggle with the premise of a historically continuous working-class rhetoric. “Working class” is a part of the actionable vocabulary of historic, violent struggles at Matawan, Lowell, Homestead, and Youngstown—struggles that happened during the first half of the last century. It evokes images—fictional and historic—that are deeply embedded in the American historical consciousness: the Joads; tent cities; gun thugs; ruthless, scowling white male industrialists; Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint—young and beautiful and finding identity, moral clarity, and a commitment to justice in grainy black and white. One chapter focuses on the rhetoric of Depression-era miner strikes, and two others focus on aspects of labor-oriented rhetoric from the first two decades of the twentieth century. The remaining two chapters examine memorializations of historically important labor battles in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Youngstown, Ohio—two cities still trying to recover from economic devastation caused by the loss of steel mills that were the locus of these struggles. This section deals not only with labor struggles that are solidly in the past, but also with industries that are no longer a preeminent part of the American economy.

Other pieces in this collection analyze rhetoric in specific, current professions, but in my view fall short of locating a contemporary “working-class rhetoric” that persuasively articulates a common, American
working-class consciousness. Workplace rhetoric in working-class jobs is not the same as working-class rhetoric. The concrete workers, truck drivers, and migrant farm workers described in these chapters are clearly “working class” in terms of their economic circumstances, and some are clearly speaking back to power. However, they don’t articulate their struggles and identities as part of a common national or international movement. They don’t seem united by a mutual awareness of common interests or even a common political consciousness that is shared across occupational realms. These are the elements of a broad and powerful political movement that can be enabled by a common rhetoric of critique and opposition. This doesn’t discount the importance of the collection or the lives and struggles it describes. It does, however, complicate the continuity that DeGenario seeks to locate among working-class rhetorics across time. In what ways are the political economic struggles, identifications, and rhetorics of these contemporary workers different from the rhetorics employed at Matawan and Youngstown? Will the same rhetoric work for the workers of Working and Gig?

The economy has changed dramatically over the past three decades, and though some scholars have addressed those changes, rhetoric and composition as a whole has not developed an adequately rigorous discussion of what they have meant to our work. Given that being working class now doesn’t exclude many from higher education, how do the contexts of literacy education shape the rhetorics that are enacted there—how might they change rhetorics of opposition? The political economic context that creates the terms of work for American workers doesn’t stop at the university gates. A continued reliance on dated conceptions of higher education and identity markers that are more static and cultural than dynamic and economic prevents us from constructively naming and addressing the terms of work and education in fast-capitalism. If we are looking for starting points for an examination of class in America, we need look no further than our own writing classrooms, where we are likely to find a part-time worker teaching a classroom full of part-time workers, and where marketing images on Web sites and brochures create a slick, icy aesthetic that is largely alien to the daily material lives of most students. Class might not only be the sometime subject about which we think and write, it might also be the condition from which we think and write. In the following chapter I offer a model for a writing pedagogy that seeks to highlight the character and contradictions of work and education in the current economy. The model emphasizes relations
of production at work and in education, as it seeks a galvanizing politi-
cal rhetoric that is adapted to current economics. An important aspect
of this pedagogy is that it is not founded on the need for resolution
and there is no prohibition on anger: it actively resists easy closures as
it explores the deeply systemic contradictions that are inherent in the
worlds of work and education.