

## **Affect, Labor, and the Graduate Teaching Assistant: Can Writing Programs Become “Spaces of Hope”?**

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Those in subordinate positions can and must be taught, especially in school and workplace, that emotional responses (such as anger, rage, or bitterness) are always inappropriate and unjustified personal responses—forms of emotional stupidity, so to speak, if not psychopathology—rather than suppressed social responses to the objective conditions of humiliation wrought by structures of subordination and exploitation. In general, the dominant pedagogy of emotion refuses the expression of anger by subordinates. More importantly, it schools anger to turn inward so as to become silent rage or passive bitterness, where the energy for political action can be derailed in the pathos of the personal.

—Lynn Worsham, “Going Postal”

This labor is required to present itself to management scrutiny as “independent” and “self-motivated,” even “joyful”—that is, able to provide herself with health care, pension plan, day care, employment to fill in the down time, and eagerly willing to keep herself “up to speed” on developments transpiring in the corporate frame even though not receiving wages from the corporation; above all, contingent labor should present the affect of enjoyment: she must seem transparently glad to work, as in the knowledge worker’s mantra: “I love what I’m doing!”

—Marc Bousquet, “The ‘Informal Economy’”

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We begin with these paired quotations because of their relevance to the situation of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), perhaps especially in Departments of English. On the one hand, GTAs have been schooled to suppress negative emotions that arise in the course of their employment; on the other, they are generally encouraged by those who manage them to learn to take pride in their work. A few months ago, the six of us<sup>1</sup> began our exploration of the question of affect and the graduate student worker, in partial response to one GTA's refusal to suppress his own overwhelming anger and despair. We wanted, first of all, to resist the "dominant pedagogy of emotion" that would have us internalize emotional responses as merely personal, in order to deploy them instead as starting points toward collective action. In addition, we wanted, as part of this discussion of collective action, to ask how writing programs, which employ so many current and former graduate students as contingent laborers, might become what David Harvey has called "spaces of hope." What are the conditions of possibility, in other words, for transforming a labor situation in which graduate student workers are expected to suppress negative emotions and overcome negative perspectives on their work into a space of hope and possibility, of improvement of education and working conditions?

Writing programs represent a managerial vanguard of sorts in that, unlike most other academic units that rely on contingent labor, they generally offer and require some sort of training before the academic year begins, along with a semester-long course in pedagogy. Bousquet characterizes this managerial vanguard as "composition's 'peerlessness'—its nonequivalence with the other disciplines—[which] is likely to become increasingly visible as its 'excellence,' in Bill Readings' sense, *with composition exemplifying the ideal labor relation of the managed university* to which all other disciplines must conform" ("Composition" 503; emphasis in original). If writing programs function as a kind of representative workplace of the managed university, however, might they not also have promise as a locus for change? That is, because GTAs in writing programs are likely brought together as workers more often than contingent laborers in other departments, they potentially have more opportunities for collectively reflecting on their work situation and perhaps organizing for some sort of collective action. For that reason, writing programs seem to offer promising conditions for the construction of spaces of hope—spaces for "thought experiments about alternative possible worlds" (Harvey 199). Harvey argues that leftist thought has been imprisoned too long in what Gramsci famously called a "pessimism of the intellect" that has made the imagining of alternatives difficult: "The inability to find an 'optimism of the intellect' with which to work through alternatives," according to Harvey, "has now become one of the most serious barriers to progressive politics" (17). As a theoretical alternative to a pessimism of the intellect, Harvey offers the concept of "dialectical utopianism," a "spatiotemporal" utopianism "that is rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points

towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical developments" (196). One of the key tenets of this dialectical utopianism is the recognition of the relationship between particular bodies and a globalized labor process. "The particularity of the body," writes Harvey, "cannot be understood independently of its imbeddedness in socio-ecological processes" (16). At the same time, "boiled down to its simplest determinations, globalization is about the socio-spatial relations between billions of individuals" (16). A space of hope, in short, is a space in which these relations are recognized and in which alternative futures for and by these individuals can be collectively imagined and, ultimately, constructed.

Transforming writing programs into spaces of hope, therefore, means taking a bureaucratic abstraction that privileges administration and recognizing that writing programs are made possible *not* primarily by the management of a writing program administrator but by the labor of individual teachers. These individuals are related to each other and to workers throughout the world by virtue of their labor. Our discussions, consequently, began with the idea that GTAs, along with their writing program managers as potential allies rather than caretakers, might be able to work together to imagine and enact specific plans of action, to challenge workplace inequities collectively.

At the same time that we came together to discuss the possibility of collective action, we also began to notice that instances of action among GTAs (most notably in the form of unionization) have tended to occur at elite private and flagship state universities (those institutions formerly categorized as Carnegie Research I) more often than at institutions like our own (large state universities that do not enjoy flagship status).<sup>2</sup> Although exceptions certainly exist, and while it might be that Research I institutions simply employ a greater number of graduate students, we've begun to wonder if it might be that these institutions also harbor a critical mass of graduate students whose class backgrounds provide them with a sense of entitlement, leading them to more readily recognize their subordination as graduate student workers. We ask this question not at all to disparage the real gains made by graduate student unions, but to try to make sense of the slowness of graduate student workers at institutions like our own to organize for collective action and to try to account for some of our own group's conflicted emotions regarding their work as GTAs.

In fact, we've come to believe that recognizing both the collective *and* conflicted emotional responses to GTA work is necessary in constructing a space of hope. Harvey maintains that when people come together to imagine alternative futures, "we must always do battle with a wide range of emotive and symbolic meanings that both inform and muddle our sense of 'the nature of our task'" (158). In other words, the road to collective action is not a short one: it isn't, at least in our experience, so simple a task as recognizing the exploitive situation of GTAs and then moving to unionize. As a result of this sometimes difficult and uneven process, we

find ourselves better able to offer a series of accounts that arose during our discussions rather than a specific plan of action. These accounts are presented as individually written pieces because they do not represent a group consensus. Rather, they come from a middle ground dissensus between “unconscious” participation in a particular labor situation and conscious organization for collective action—a middle ground that rarely appears in the scholarship but that likely represents the situation of many GTAs, perhaps especially GTAs in institutions similar to our own. A discussion of this middle ground thus offers a necessary contribution to the question of how to effect change in the managed university. In particular, we find it crucial to consider the ways in which emotional schooling—affected as it is by class, gender, and other social locations—might complicate responses to collective action.<sup>3</sup> If writing programs are to function as spaces of hope, the people who work in them must base efforts toward collective action on affective “recognition and mutuality,” which will require careful listening to and consideration of diverse affective positions (see Worsham 239).

What follows, then, are accounts of our efforts toward recognition and mutuality, efforts to seriously consider our working conditions and, at the same time, our emotional responses to those conditions. We begin with accounts of the emotion that prompted our discussions and follow with two types of issues that tended to recur in our conversations: the issue of conflicted emotion among the group members when confronting the situation of GTAs, and the issue of identifiable trends that, it was generally agreed, call for some sort of action.

#### **Beginnings: Coming to Consciousness as Labor and Management in a Writing Program**

As part of an assignment for our department’s required pedagogical seminar last fall, Steve wrote a personal essay in which he recounted his struggles as he taught first-year writing for the first time. He read this essay aloud to the class, of which Donna was a co-teacher. Donna was particularly struck by the raw emotion that Steve made no effort to hide: she found it striking, in particular, because most new GTAs, as a result of the dominant schooling of emotion, tend to repress negative reactions to their work, especially when addressing supervisors of their work. Because our groups’ discussions of affect and labor were in part a reaction to Steve’s candor, we begin with an excerpt from Steve’s essay:

*In their pre-State University existences, most of my first-year comp students lived in homes with a busy working parent, or parents, who were too beat down from work to do much with them. The poorer high schools, which housed over half of my students, functioned as giant containment centers that were more like prisons for hundreds of unwanted bodies. Are you with me on this? When they come here to Camelot, they find that nothing has changed. The State, in its boundless efficiency*

*places these under-prepared students before equally under-prepared GTAs, and its only rationale for not doing the right thing is that it would be “too expensive” to hire the competent de-programmers the students really need.*

*My reaction to this Orwellian nightmare was profound. I came near to physical collapse. Because I had no immediate alternative, I availed myself of the minimalist Student Health service, where I found them happy to provide, at full retail price, all the Trazadone, and Prozac I required to place myself in the “zone of acquiescence.” I also began to take a variety of over-the-counter supplements to counter the Trazadone, all of which contributed to a hazy kind of functionality. I reasoned that this approach was preferable to the alcohol and tobacco other GTAs had begun to rely upon. I should mention that the GTAs who had backgrounds in education seemed better prepared for what they were being asked to do. In the third week, I sent a whining letter to my sponsoring professor at another university, claiming that my focus as a writer was being appropriated by the teaching side of the equation, and that I had no concept of how relate to my students, who seemed, themselves, to have no concept of how to relate to a university. I also confessed that I was afraid of being seduced by the human tragedy before me.*

*Mike Rose’s book Lives on the Boundary was a comfort at this time. He had not distanced himself from his subject as had many other theorists (it seemed crucial that I not distance myself). He spoke of key mentoring figures—educators who were willing to teach in virtual war-zones and rescue as many of the left-behind as possible. He said it was direct involvement with these mentors that had made it possible for him to crawl out of the slums. It all suggested that personal sacrifice and dedication to the student was the key, and I blamed myself for the private life that I had lived for so long as a writer. The ancient argument about the efficacy and utility of art began to jangle my overly medicated head as I realized the full implication of what I had to do. It seemed that I had been appropriated into a scheme that I would have run from had I known the facts, and now, I seemed to be appropriating myself as well. I began to see a common level of damnation in my students and myself. We had both been enticed, and we were both unprepared.*

*For awhile, I was able to console myself with some nightlife and reacquaint myself socially with other GTAs, I learned that while some of us were having our trial and error efforts rewarded in class, there were*

*growing dangers on our side of the tracks. An older man is quick to recognize the stages of addiction. I had been addicted myself in my early 20s, and now I saw several of my young GTA friends headed that way. For awhile I kept up with their drinking, but the expected reaction of the anti-depressants to alcohol quickly let me know that it had to be one or the other, and not both. Had anyone ever done a study on us? Had any of the theorists made a connection between our lifestyles and our ability to be effective teachers in what all agreed were less than optimal conditions?*

Donna heard this question as a challenge: to what extent *had* composition scholars taken into account the affect of composition teaching? To what extent *had* composition scholars seriously taken up the question of workplace anger and despair? Overall, these issues are rarely discussed, at least in part because of a tendency in composition scholarship to conflate the roles of teacher and manager/scholar and thus to offer pedagogical strategies without consistent consideration of the material situations of those who might be compelled to practice them (see Strickland).<sup>4</sup> In fact, as she describes in what follows, Donna began to realize that she unwittingly was enacting a managerial imperative:

*Although I hardly counted myself a manager (because I wasn't holding an official administrative title at the time), I wasted no time in asserting my managerial imperative last fall in my first encounter with Steve. At a pre-semester workshop for new graduate teaching assistants, Steve expressed anxiety over his sense of inadequacy in being able to address grammatical errors in students' papers. My answer, which I at the time regarded as being politically astute, drew from my study of the history of composition teaching, a history that demonstrates the ongoing anxiety of the middle class when confronted with student "error." So when I answered Steve with what amounted to a dismissal of his concerns by explaining that there's nothing new about teacher anxiety over student error and that there are much more significant aspects of students' writing to worry about, I had no qualms about the work that my answer was doing. To my mind, I was simply educating an inexperienced teacher.*

*What I was doing, as I would now describe it, was asserting my professional-managerial authority in a way that denied any potential challenges that negative GTA emotion might pose. Moreover, I've come to realize that part of the work that I had set for myself in teaching the pre-semester workshop and the required pedagogical seminar was to change the way GTAs, like Steve, feel about teaching first-year writing. I wanted to convince*

*them that the teaching of writing is politically-charged work that can gain real interest and meaning if a person becomes immersed in the intellectual possibilities of this work. In short, I wanted them to take pleasure in their work, to come to enjoy it. While I continue to believe that teaching writing can be politically meaningful and also intellectually pleasurable, I've come to feel uneasy with the "comfort" that Mike Rose's narrative offered Steve. My efforts to politicize the work of teaching first-year writing, in short, were potentially functioning as a basic form of managerial control: I wanted to change the way GTAs feel about teaching. Given the objectively exploitative situation in which most GTAs work, changing the way they feel becomes a way of extracting more labor from them. As Eileen Schell has explained, there are real costs to caring, a cost exacted especially often from women teachers who gain "psychic rewards" but pay "a distinct emotional and material price" (83).*

As a result of Steve's honesty regarding his affective relationship to his work and Donna's desire to complicate her role as a manager of GTA emotion, the two of them began to discuss the possibility of co-authoring a piece on affect and graduate student labor. Around the same time, Jen initiated an informal meeting of graduate students, partially in response to her feelings of isolation that resulted from being home working on her thesis all week and her need to verbally work through the ideas she was learning in her Foucault seminar. Initially, she started putting on a pot of coffee at two o'clock on Fridays, and anyone who wanted to talk Foucault was welcome. Steve was one of the first regulars. Soon, the question of affect and graduate student labor was part of this informal discussion group, and Donna was invited to join. After a few weeks, we had a core group that began to seriously and collectively consider the problems that arise in our particular workplace and to develop strategies for working against these problems—to change the conditions themselves rather than GTAs' feelings about them.

### **Gratitude and the Conflicted Affect of the Working-Class GTA**

Having raised the question of our emotional relationships to our working conditions, several of us expressed conflicting feelings about the possibility of collective action. Jen found the term "exploited labor" problematic, although she agrees that working conditions need improvement. Matt further suggested that feelings of gratitude in connection with a sense of under-preparation might create an unconscious desire for emotional management on the part of the GTA. Both of these positions create barriers to a space of hope. Jen first describes her own shifting perspective, which she identifies as stemming in part from her class background:

*I came to graduate school having spent the first year of my son's life bartending and substitute teaching, supplemented by welfare. As a single mother, I was very aware that there was a good chance that we would remain poor for most, if not all, of Avery's childhood. For this reason, I was very interested in the class stratification of the educational system and its function as a social sorting mechanism, not only at the secondary level but in the public school system as well. I suppose I wanted to find a way to create a space for him in which my awareness of the attitudes and practices of public education would allow me to fill in some of the gaps and demystify the process of schooling for him. However, I did not necessarily regard my own situation with the same critical eye. Our initial discussions about what a space of hope is and how to create one required me to distance myself from my situation as a GTA in a parallel fashion.*

*Part of the reason I hadn't done this before was simple disbelief that I could get paid for thinking and talking and writing about things. Now that I think about it, many of us who are involved in this project are from working-class backgrounds, and that probably contributes to our ambivalence about considering ourselves "exploited labor." My brother and sister work in a factory that manufactures hardware for caskets, often beginning a shift as early as four a.m., and always coming home dirty and bruised. They make a little more money than I do, but I shower before I go to work instead of after. Though I don't make much money as a graduate assistant, I have a flexible schedule, and my affiliation with the university has given me access to subsidized housing and excellent daycare. This is a sweet deal, and I embraced my position as an instructor of writing with the enthusiasm of a zealot. Like Donna, I consider the work that we do as instructors of first-year composition politically important, particularly given our undergraduate student population.*

*As an Instructional Assistant, I served as a kind of middle manager between the new GTAs and the writing program administrator. Again, like Donna, I strongly emphasized the political importance of the position. My conflict is slightly different: on the one hand, yes, perhaps encouraging a certain emotional stance toward an exploitative situation is problematic; on the other hand, as a GTA myself, I don't have the full weight of institutional authority behind me. This, I suppose, was a missed opportunity, as in some ways I was in a better position to point out the problems with the system. I do think that perhaps setting GTAs up to believe that an*



*often-futile endeavor is very, very important creates barriers to collective action: we assume that others are succeeding in this task, and we don't want to reveal our feelings of frustration and failure. Luckily for us, Steve has no qualms about being the voice of doom and despair.*

*I am hesitant to position the "psychic rewards" of teaching, even as contingent labor, in direct opposition to material rewards. Since I am a student of Rhetoric and Composition, my experiences in the classroom feed directly into my research, and so may eventually translate into material rewards. Bousquet argues that "contingent labor should present the affect of enjoyment: she must seem transparently glad to work, as in the knowledge worker's mantra: 'I love what I'm doing!'" But I am glad to work, and I do (except, perhaps, during the last two weeks of each semester) love what I'm doing. Though I do find the "psychic rewards" of being a student and a teacher to be considerable, I don't think that one should have to make the choice between being fulfilled in one's work and, say, having one's teeth cleaned on a regular basis.*

*We have suggested that GTAs at universities whose student bodies come less often from the working-class might feel a greater sense of entitlement to livable working conditions. This makes sense—in the process of writing this I have asked myself several times if I really believe that all the hardships are worth the psychic rewards, or if I'm just the poster child for hegemonic control. I am uncomfortable with the idea that my sense of entitlement should be greater—while I don't feel that I am necessarily entitled to less than anyone else in a comparable position, I do feel that Americans in general have an inflated sense of entitlement, and it is precisely that inflated sense of entitlement that allows the structure of exploitation to continue.*

Like Jen, Matt welcomed his GTA position as an improvement in his working conditions. He suggests that this gratitude might lead GTAs to accept their subordinate position:

*A potential barrier to creating a space of hope within any given English department and its corresponding graduate program is the unconscious expectation of GTAs to be managed. That the expectation exists and that its existence tends to be below the level of consciousness suggest that either the process of graduate matriculation or the act of graduate teaching (or some collision of both) is preceded by a complex chain of enculturation events. It is easy to assume that all of a*

*student's previous educational experiences might have molded an unconscious will to conform—even as a result of an education claiming to value individuality. However, the possibility that the unconsciously managed ethos associated with graduate students bleeds over into the work those students do as teachers may not be as apparent.*

*For instance, I entered into my program of graduate study and my initial experiences as a teacher after a seven-year hiatus following my undergraduate education during which most of my work experience was blue-collar. For me, the process of matriculation and the gaining of an assistantship that would have me teaching first-year composition represented a profound ascension. I would no longer be a rough-handed carpenter; I would be a professional student. And more importantly, I would be a teacher. Not just any kind of teacher: a college teacher. It was this opportunity, more than any other, which formed in me an unconscious willingness to be managed. In fact, I arrived at our pre-semester workshop ready to receive guiding imperatives. I assumed that acquiescence to professors/managers was the safest way to hide my ineptitude as a teacher (don't rock the boat if you can't swim). But this was not just a facade meant to shield deviance. It was genuine conformity. My willingness to be managed was fueled by my gratitude toward the departmental powers awarding me the opportunity and my perceived ineptitude to negotiate the demands of a job for which I had no formal training—unless a seven-year old baccalaureate degree in English is considered appropriate training. Regardless of whether or not my experiences are generalizable to a distinct majority of GTAs, the problem created by the unconsciously managed persists. A space of hope is contingent upon collective action. A collective action requires either unified dissent within a certain cohort or, at least, complicit participation among cohort members. If a body of GTAs within a program does not consider itself worthy of the politics that qualify dissent, or does not unify in response to its situation, then the space of hope will not be created; or, rather, it might not be sustainable without the support of a program's majority. Furthermore, the inherent lack of awareness (in which GTAs do not see themselves as contingent laborers, but as grateful recipients of employment) fostered by the institutional nature of graduate study and teaching assistantships is the most elusive obstacle for the creation of this space. Unlike direct administrative opposition to GTA unionization or (as will be apparent in Chris's case) administrative subterfuge, the problem of the unconsciously managed can be more tenacious,*

*since it builds internal resistance to collective action. Also, in academe, prestige and recognition are the opiates of the masses, and for graduate students, the opportunity to be college teachers is often our first professional encounter with these intoxicating gifts.*

In short, the feelings of gratitude and pride in response to intellectual work and distinction has often made it difficult for some of us to imagine that graduate student labor called for collective action in the way that, say, the situation of factory workers might. Even the idea that a student labor movement could be articulated with a global labor movement (as Bousquet suggests in "The 'Informal Economy'") at times seemed suspect.

### **Analysis and Action: The Need for Collective Political Subjects**

Although members of our group expressed some suspicion or conflicted feelings toward the idea of their situation as exploitative, we were nonetheless able to identify trends that indicated the subordinate status of the GTA and that called for action of some kind. If, as Matt suggests, GTAs enter with an unconscious expectation to be managed, Abbey describes a series of actions that made her status as the managed quite clear:

*I once had a student who stopped attending class after the third week of the spring semester, and who never turned in any work. When he was in class, he didn't participate, so one day I held him after class to let him know that he needed to start doing his work and participating. He shrugged, but didn't say a word. At the end of the semester, I had to give him a WF grade, which indicates that the student stopped attending and counts as an F in the student's GPA. When I turned in my grades, I let the department know that I would be in town for the summer, and could be easily reached if necessary. The student who received the WF appealed his grade on the basis that he had constant migraines, and he was granted a retroactive withdrawal by a departmental administrator. At no point was I contacted to verify or provide any information and only received a note a few days later that the grade had been changed. I was furious.*

*The following year, another student, who was already on academic probation, didn't turn in much of her course work but continued to attend sporadically. I distinctly remember that at one point she came to tell me that her grandmother had died, and that was why she was having trouble. I told her that she could turn in all of her weekly writings, that she could make up her first paper, but that she would get a "C" for the course. Her response: "But I'm a pre-med student! I can't get a 'C!'"*

*I kept silent, knowing her probationary status, and said that she had the option of continuing to turn in no work and would receive an "F." She chose the latter option. In her grade appeal the following summer, she said that she had problems with depression, but mentioned nothing about her allegedly dead grandmother. Interesting! Again, I was not contacted, in spite of the fact that I was in town, and again the grade change was authorized. That a different administrator performed the same action indicates a disturbing pattern.*

*According to our graduate school's website, GTAs are "apprentices," but are to act as professionals. Ironically, these same guidelines do not forbid us from sleeping with students. "Psychic Income," perhaps? They do caution us against it, deeming it unethical and unprofessional, but perhaps cover themselves legally with the clause saying that we can be fired for "moral turpitude."*

*I do not want the privilege of sleeping with my students. I want respect as a professional and as a more-than-competent teacher. Grades are triple-checked for accuracy, and if I "err," it is always on the student's side. If the university chooses to cut financial corners by employing mass numbers of graduate students to teach the same workloads as tenure-track faculty, then they can at least respect our grading decisions, or at the very least consult us first before changing our grades for us. I wouldn't have authorized either grade change, and I resented that they had been performed behind my back.*

These administrative actions demonstrate the GTA's subordinate status: if a GTA ultimately has no final authority even over the grades that she gives, then she has little authority indeed.

As Abbey points out, GTAs at our institution are defined as "apprentices" rather than employees—a definition that has often been deployed to suppress GTA unionization at other institutions. Along with indicating their subordinate position, this definition also suggests their ineligibility for important employee benefits like health insurance. GTAs at our institution are eligible only for student health benefits, which means that almost all health care has to be sought exclusively at the student health center. Around the same time that we began to meet, Chris (along with Steve) began to take preliminary actions to address the limitations of the health care available to GTAs. Their experience, which Chris describes here, demonstrates the real need for collective action:

*I sensed that there was something wrong with my working conditions at the end of my first semester of teaching (never had I been so exhausted at the end of a semester). This suspicion was confirmed in a rather dra-*

*matic fashion when I became witness to the physical, mental and emotional sufferings of one of my colleagues (who also happened to be an office-mate and friend). Her situation was abominable: she was suffering from a severe medical problem not covered by our health care plan because of a technicality. It enraged, insulted, and scared me because I could have very easily been in that same situation.*

*The emotion, the anger, moved me—literally. Steve and I began calling various offices (insurance office, student health center, administrators, etc.), and I began interrogating administrators in attempts to get our colleague the help she desperately needed. However, our immediate actions saw no results (which, in retrospect, is not at all surprising). The system, I found, is purposely ineffective. I know this because, not only did I try to navigate it, but, in my consternation, I went to a very high-level administrator who confessed, rather candidly, that most of the sub-systems within the university (such as the graduate and undergraduate student councils, the health advisory board, etc.) are simply bureaucratic feel-goods and resume fillers that have less than little authority within the university (he cited, as an example, the ineffectiveness of the various votes and resolutions passed by the student governments in attempts to stop or slow the tuition increases the previous year).*

*This administrator was at least honest with me. The other five administrators I met with presented me with numerous excuses as well as an over-abundance of run-around and evasive rhetoric. Despite these obstacles, Steve and I were able to uncover some very useful (albeit disturbing) information. Here's a short list of what we found, along with what it means to GTAs at our university:*

*Section 2 of the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act (as well as a subsequent court ruling) specifically identifies all GTAs as students.*

*Our classification as **NOT** workers excludes us from retirement, unemployment and other state health care benefits (we can't even buy into a state plan).*

*Our university is self-insured: our university is the insurance provider and provides the system that validates or rejects claims.*

*Our university is the "health care" provider as well. The university hires the doctors that administer the health care and who may or may not write referrals if need be.*

*Teaching stipends for this state university range from \$974 - \$1,282 per month. The average GTA thus makes (after payment of university required fees) almost \$9,000 a year.*

*These are **below poverty level wages!** (\$16,350 is considered “very low income” for our county; \$9,800 is “30% of [the] median” income for our county.<sup>5</sup>) Private health care for GTAs (whose average age at our university is 35), as well as the children and spouses of GTAs, is often not an option.*

*All of this began with a toothache. If my colleague had never gotten sick, I might have never come to question the system I inhabit.*

*Since our efforts ultimately did nothing to alleviate the situation of our colleague, it’s easy to say that we accomplished nothing. That’s not to say, however, that we gained nothing. Some very valuable information was collected and some very valuable lessons learned. The most valuable lesson, I think, is that there needs to be a collective of GTAs pressuring the higher-ups for better conditions – one or two of us will simply not do. As is evidenced by my experiences with Steve, it is too easy for the system to shoo away a single, or even a few, gadflies. Also, for whatever reasons, most GTAs do not realize that there are a very large number of their colleagues who are unhappy with their circumstances, and an even larger number don’t know what to do about it. But this is changing.*

### **Actions and Ongoing Questions**

Things are beginning to change, as Chris suggests, because one of the things we have accomplished as a group is a coming to consciousness regarding the situation of contingent academic labor. As Kathi Weeks points out, however, consciousness is only one part of subjectivity, a dimension that may conflict with “desires, pleasures, interests, and will” (118). Consequently, “the development of a revolutionary consciousness is . . . a necessary but insufficient achievement; the complex process of becoming cannot be reduced to (although it is certainly not exclusive of) the process of becoming conscious” (118). While we have achieved consciousness, it hasn’t always been clear how to move from consciousness to action, especially given the conflicted interests and wills that emerged in our discussions.

In short, we have found action leading to change to be a difficult achievement. We have found the decisions that might bring change to be difficult, and we have found that unanimous political convictions can elude even a small group of like-minded individuals. Nevertheless, in the time since this article began taking shape, members of our group have used the collective consciousness achieved through our discussions to begin taking concrete actions.

For example, we have begun spreading the word, sharing conversations about labor and the affective aspects of our work in both formal and informal gatherings of GTAs. A sub-group of us, moreover, has initiated an educational campaign, circulating flyers and pamphlets among the GTAs in our department, as well as in other departments across campus. These informational flyers bring to light some of the less than ideal conditions of GTAs' labor situation. The feedback and resultant conversations in response to the pamphlets have been overwhelmingly positive. In the long term, we believe that distributing information will make possible further collective action in the future.

In addition, Abbey has successfully started a GTA mentoring program in our department, under the auspices of an existing organization, to help GTAs new to the department cope with the demands of being a first-year instructor. Abbey has been active in our department's Association of English Graduate Instructors and Students (AEGIS), a group founded several years ago by GTAs as a vehicle for successfully gaining greater representation on departmental committees and for providing professional development for GTAs. As the AEGIS secretary, Abbey used her position as an opportunity to call for volunteers to serve as mentors to new GTAs. One key to this program includes a set of guidelines for mentors, encouraging them to allow the new GTA to establish how much mentoring will take place, and also warning mentors against "reporting" on new GTAs to administrators, professors, and other graduate students. The trust established through these mentoring relationships should allow GTAs the right to ask questions and to make mistakes without fear of reprimand; it also provides a space for learning that is outside of direct managerial control. Moreover, establishing an ongoing peer mentoring system allows for "institutional memory," something which has been a concern lately with the larger numbers of shorter-term graduate students (enrolled in master's programs, for example) dominating the number of longer-term GTAs (those in PhD programs, or who complete both master's and doctoral programs here). Few graduate students in our department work here long enough to predict and plan for the future; passing down information and passing down a tradition of solidarity provides one way of working against this loss of collective continuity.

If one of the advantages of peer mentoring is that it offers support outside of managerial authority, it raises this question: what, then, is the role of the composition professional—in our case, Donna? Can composition management in fact have a role in the space of hope, where labor comes together as labor to imagine and enact alternative possibilities? Or are composition teachers and composition managers necessarily adversaries? Like many other composition professionals, Donna is ethically and politically committed to working to change the labor situation of GTAs and other contingent workers in writing programs. She considers an essential part of her work to be outside the program, raising the consciousness of composition professionals, who tend to conflate the roles of writing

teachers and writing program managers and thus fail to make improvement of working conditions a central concern. She has argued elsewhere that composition professionals, as a group, should work in solidarity with composition teachers rather than lord over them with professional imperatives (see Strickland). At the same time, she continues to struggle with the question of how to provide support and guidance to new GTAs in her department without falling into the trap of trying to manage their emotional relationship to teaching. To some extent, the answer must lie in dialogic education, the very topic of Jen's thesis. Dialogic teaching involves give and take, listening to the needs of students, and allowing the topics of discussion to emerge from their lived experiences. In the same way, all composition professionals should commit themselves to listening to actual teachers of writing, so that their interactions with teachers as well as their scholarship on teaching will respond to those needs rather than merely assert managerial control. Engaging in the sort of ongoing, informal discussions that characterized our group meetings offers one kind of opportunity for developing dialogic relationships.

Finally, we want to directly address the issue of unionization, which we have tended to skirt around in this article, even though the topic has never been far from our minds. During our group discussions, the informality of the setting allowed for many rambling side notes and tangential conversations, but even these centered around the themes of our emotional responses to our positions as GTAs and the question of the necessity and feasibility of collective political action, in the form of unionization or otherwise. Why did a discussion of one of these things almost inevitably lead to the other? Certainly the tense negotiations between the faculty union and administration and the barely-averted faculty strike at our institution during that time were contributing factors: unions were on the minds of everyone affiliated with the university. But given that the emotional responses most frequently cited were anxiety, frustration, and fear, how would collective action—especially in the form of unionization—assuage these emotions?

First, collective action in the form of unionization would allow us to negotiate for sufficient compensation—in other words, improved pay and benefits—to free up the emotional energy necessary to produce quality intellectual work while providing our students with the tools to do the same. Freedom from the scramble to ensure the satisfaction of basic needs—food, shelter, transportation, medical care—would allow us to focus on our academic and teaching work, which benefits both ourselves and the university.

In addition, the possibility of collective action in a form *other than* unionization offers a chance to build community among the graduate students, so that emotional reactions can be recognized as common responses to the position of the GTA, thus opening the door for discussion, problem solving, and action, rather than leading to further anxiety and isolation. As our discussions progressed, we came to realize that a well-developed and active community is a necessary prerequisite to action. A space of hope is both the



physical and ideological space in which a collective can grow and action for change can be imagined, making possible the necessary negotiation of the murky middle ground between individual angst and collective problem solving. The flux between shared and conflicted affect in our group points to the necessity of taking emotion seriously in any analysis of the managed university and in any effort to effect change: the process of problematizing working conditions is both prompted and complicated by affective responses and allegiances. This affective struggle, we submit, is a fundamental condition of possibility for the emergence of a space of hope, a space for constructing alternatives and taking action.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Our numbers varied each week and included others who contributed much to our conversation: our thanks especially to Barbara Eidlen, Abdel Mohammad, and John Wittman for their contributions. All members of this discussion group (with the exception of Donna) were employed as GTAs at the time of our meetings.

<sup>2</sup>See Vaughn's appendix for a list of graduate employee unions.

<sup>3</sup>Schell critically analyzes the affective relationship of women to their work as contingent academic laborers. Our own call to consider the varied affective positions of GTAs is meant to extend this work.

<sup>4</sup>See, however, Micciche's analysis of the prevailing emotion of disappointment in writing program administration.

<sup>5</sup>These statistics were found on The Department of Housing and Urban Development's website on 28 May 2003: <<http://www.huduser.org/Datasets/IL/FMR02/hud02il.pdf>>.

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**Part III:**

**Composition's  
New Class Hierarchy**