

Preface

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This volume of *Works and Days* is an especially personal one for me. To say the least, I find it impossible to separate my own professional coming-of-age from the history of SCE that is imaginatively and critically reflected upon by the contributors to this volume. I have made so many friends, collaborated with so many colleagues, and shared so many conversations with so many of the participants in SCE events that, like any life-sustaining relationship, it is hard to separate what Victor Vitanza calls the front story from the back story, or the hyper-story from the hypo-story. Reading over the essays that follow has been for me a kind of re-memory of events, and even conversations, some of which took place twenty-five years ago or more, and yet here they are being recounted and recolored by those with whom I sometimes shared those events.

And it all began for me in the back seat of a red VW Rabbit driven by my colleague, Brian Caraher, and beside him, Victor Vitanza, as we travelled from Eastern Illinois University, where we were all recently minted assistant professors on our way to Indiana University for the first of the IU conferences referred to by several of the contributors. If you weren't there, you will hear a bit about the conference from what follows (with Victor's "back story" leaving out the details of my back seat car ride: of course, that's the point of exchanging differences in the way we read the past). But for the three of us, I should cut to the chase: we returned from Indiana with our lives changed for the better. In my mind, the last sentence is not an hyperbole. Several things would indeed change for us, perhaps most notably that we had a whole set of new friends with whom we would continue to collaborate over the coming years. As Victor puts it, "It was a spectacular conference, a spectacle in itself [. . .] There was so much life, living, going on in that crowd."

As it turned out, we were not all that different in terms of our professional situation than the founders of the SCE and many of the participants at the conference itself. Those facts of professional positioning made a difference: the founders of SCE were themselves then assistant professors and graduate students. So many of my fellow graduate students who sought jobs in the late 1970s ended up as intellectual migrant workers, shifting amongbetween various temporary positions, many of them leaving the profession altogether. Those of us who, perchance, had found some foothold in a tenure track could hardly be expected to feel all that secure in our neophyte positions.

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Yet this was the heyday of the rise of Big Theory and Cultural Studies. The profession of English studies would never be the same because it was a time of enormous intellectual expansion wedded to a time of enormous material contraction.

Allow me just a bit of big-picture historicizing before I come back to the professional and the personal. Most of us had, that is, been graduate students during the 1970s when the academic job market began its collapse. The period of higher education's dramatic post-World War II expansion rapidly shifted to the mode of contraction. In the founding years of SCE, between 1977 and 1980, Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of China, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the UK, and Ronald Reagan became U.S. President. Speaking in historical short-hand, these powerful individuals were among the leaders who quite rapidly altered the geopolitical and economic landscape of the globe. The Keynesian versions of managed capitalism and welfare state regulations quickly began unravelling at the hands of neoliberal de-regulation and privatization. Milton Friedman's version of Capitalism and Freedom (1956) took over, and thus began perhaps the most massive maldistribution of wealth the modern world has ever seen. Capitalism, for sure; economic freedom for a micro-percentage of the world's population.

The history of SCE, that is, was framed by the larger history of neoliberal capitalism: privatization, deregulation, and structural adjustment. It is therefore not a minor matter that the SCE founded itself on the grounds of a not-for-profit organization. As both Leroy Searle and Jim Sosnoski points out, this status was crucial to the efforts to resist private competition within the academic star system and to recognize the essential need for collaboration. The ethos of altering the protocols of exchange was intended to allow for the inclusion of others, other publics even—academic citizens whose voices were often not recognized under traditional academic protocols. As you will see in this volume, I was not the only academic who found more of an hospitable home here than in many of the other academic scenes around the country then.

Of course, that there may have been as many experimental failures as successes stands out in this volume. And who among us could possibly deny that the not-for-profit so often gets (and got) rescripted right into the academic star system of symbolic, for-profit, capital so necessary to private career-building as the global political economy shrunk the domains of the public commons everywhere, from water supply, to health care, to land management, to higher education. When economic anxiety and job insecurity become the norm for most workers, where's the justice in that? Which brings us back to the founding moment.

As Leroy Searle points out, SCE was founded with the most basic of all commitments: social justice. Theory's past, as well as its future, must always be a question of justice if only because there is so much injustice all around. And what, after all, is the point of theory if we can't engage it to help explain how things got to be so bad so that we might work to make them better? SCE contributed back then, and continues to contribute, to that project, no matter how uneven its results might sometimes be.

But if the efforts of the collaborators to this volume recount various assessments of the past, I will side so far as I can with Vincent Leitch who argues that we should choose to see the glass-half-full since the impact of theory is now a legacy that reaches into all levels of exchange in higher education. SCE played its part in that legacy, and this volume reflects the first phase of its work. We are not done, and the second, equally dramatic, phase of SCE under the directorship of Martha Woodmansee at Case Western Reserve University now comes to an end, and the third phase begins under the new leadership of Jeffrey Di Leo at the University of Houston-Victoria. A vibrant tradition of exchange continues even as it morphs into new venues.

I will end this retrospective preface on a personal note. First, I am deeply grateful to all the contributors to for their many fine efforts both to recount and account for the early history of SCE. But above all, my life-long friendship with Jim Sosnoski and Patty Harkin goes beyond words or indebtedness, so I won't say any more other than to encourage any one picking up this volume to read on to see a bit of what the past was like for some and a few visions for what the future might be like for us all.



William Wordsworth (1770–1850)