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BUSINESS CARDS AND UNIONS¹

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A stray thought while reading this fascinating collection of essays: how to explain the disappearance of *Festschrift*? Has this category of publication been driven out by the financial pressures faced by all academic publishers? (Nothing very compelling or sexy about a loosely conceived collection of essays.) Has the simple attempt of colleagues to honor a distinguished scholar been rendered somehow politically suspect (as if the scholar was some sort of “star”)? Or has scholarship—just scholarship—now become a bankrupt ideal, a species of esoteric activity possible to engage in only by precious few at elite universities?

Certainly, it is with good reason that in their introduction, the editors caution as follows: “Neither a *Festschrift* nor a tribute, this book uses Nelson’s career as a focal point for a consideration of the politics of the academy” (3). If the first prospect would have been too narrow, the second might have been too embarrassing—never mind the imposing figure of Cary Nelson himself, who of course is still very much alive, as knowing about the profession as any man alive, and arguably less solicitous of any sort of personal celebration.

Nonetheless, something very close to a *Festschrift* shapes these pages. The subtitle of the book was—we are told—the title of a special conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The two co-editors teach there. Most of the contributors have either studied there or still teach there. Furthermore, many have either professionally collaborated with Nelson (most notably Stephen Watt) or have studied under him. More than once, a reader can be forgiven for having the impression of a group of people who have spoken to each other many times before.

The original Illinois conference was subtitled “A Tribute.” Such origins persist in the book, where several contributors go to some length to avoid seemingly to pay personal tribute to Nelson by instead remarking on how difficult he is (Paula Treichler receives a special acknowledgment by the editors for her “hard-earned skills in managing Cary”) or how variously

¹Review of Michael Rothberg and Peter Garrett, eds., *Cary Nelson and the Struggle for the University: Poetry, Politics, and the Profession* (Albany: SUNY P, 2009). 247 pp.

daunting. One of his former students confesses himself once “unnerved” by the Nelsonian presence (“and the stakes”). Another cites a friend in reply to a question about the man’s appearance: “He’s about six-feet, five-inches tall and looks like a cross between Karl Marx and Santa Claus.”

Like Marx, the student continues, Nelson’s words will prove of revolutionary import, and, like Santa, his “paternal benevolence...knows no bounds” (207). For a tribute, this is pretty good, and all of a piece with praiseworthy bits and pieces scattered throughout out these pages, such as the moment during his MLA job interview when Michael Bérubé recalls Nelson asking him whether general literary history could still be written. Exactly what sort of question was this?

Bérubé later learns that Nelson had just completed *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1989). Was his question merely an older scholar’s way of seeking a younger ally or something more prepossessing, more devious?

Bérubé doesn’t inquire further so much as venture forth with a few words about the “dialogue” (now that he realizes it) of his work with Nelson’s, before returning to the primal scene of that MLA interview, where Nelson offered the young Bérubé a cup of coffee. He took it. Nelson remarks in italics about the acceptance. Bérubé is immediately smitten with his humor—and the rest is history, not only literary history but personal history; Bérubé writes as a friend who admires Nelson’s professional savvy, moral outrage, and organizational skill. The essay, entitled “The Organizational Man,” is not very probing. But it strikes me as precisely the sort of broadly anecdotal essay that used to appear in Festschrift volumes, where one colleague is pleased to pay tribute to another (and the reader is pleased to be a member of the same profession as both).

Has one casualty of the struggle characterized in the title of this volume already been the loss of older, more venerable discursive styles? It appears so. Why imagine a Festschrift when the majority of any university’s faculty consists of adjuncts? Indeed, why write anything when logic as well as justice demands that adjuncts be unionized (and the departments in which they teach not be canceled)? And how pay tribute to anybody, not even such a well-known activist as Cary Nelson, without appearing idle or frivolous? *Struggle* is a reply to such questions.

The book comes in three parts. The first, “The Canon and the Politics of Poetry,” assesses Nelson’s career as a literary scholar, ranging from *The Incarnate World* (1973) through *Our Last First Poets* (1979), *Repression and Recovery*, the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), to his forthcoming *When Death Rhymed: Poem Cards and Poetry Panics of the Great Wars*. The editors characterize this body of work very nicely: “The unifying mode of Nelson’s career is a commitment to the radical democratization of American culture and a recognition of the progressive projects and energies that have been forgotten or repressed” (3).

The first essay in this section is one of the best in the book. Edward Brunner discusses Nelson's "archivist's sensibility" in terms of how it has opened up the archive not only to Spanish Civil War documents or the ten volumes in the American Poetry Recovery series edited by Nelson but to a broader idea of where the poem as a material object can take place. The original visual setting or designs elements actively enter into the poem, which is "returned to a thick-textured site," at once theoretically provocative, ethically charged, and historically resonant (17)

Walter Kalaidjian sees Nelson's work as less continuous than Brunner, the crucial break coming in *Repression and Recovery*, where poetic modernism is recast "as a discourse not just of literary canonicity but of repressed social desire" (34). Nonetheless, he joins Brunner in saluting Nelson's work as both a demonstration of and an inspiration to the work of recovering "the event of the traumatic past," whether in the person of such earlier figures as Edwin Rolfe or contemporary ones such as Rachael Blau DuPlessis or Anthony Hecht in Kalaidjian's own work.

In the remainder of this first section, Grant Farred ruminates on the basis of *Repression and Recovery* about the canon, or rather canonicity (its exclusions, its violence, its aporias), Karen Jackson Ford finds in Nelson's *Revolutionary Memory* (2001) much of the provocation for considering the collective spectacle of Japanese concentration camp haiku, and Michael Thurston uses Nelson in order to emphasize not merely a call for "paratextual reading" but the example of a quite specific and emphatically political tradition of "katabatic" cultural critique beginning in Pound's Hell Cantos and continuing in Sterling Brown, Louis Zukofsky, and Muriel Rukeyser.

At this point, we might pause (the book doesn't) and ask, "if Nelson had done no other work than his scholarship on the poetry of literary modernism, would he have merited a collection of essays such as this?" Most likely not. The *Struggle* referred to in the title has to do with politics beyond any one period or discipline. In this context, however, perhaps the finest service the book can do—and not only for readers who know Nelson only through his more overt, explicit political writing—is to give us a man whose professional life is all of a piece. Indeed, it could be argued (few do here) that the Nelson of *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (1999) and *Office Hours: Activism and Change in the Academy* (2004) follows inescapably from the Nelson of *Revolutionary Memory* or even *The Incarnate World*. As it is, the next two sections of *Struggle* give us perhaps the finest example in our profession of a career that has developed through continually extending the terms of its discussion.

This second part, "Corporatization and the Politics of the Academy," includes some of the most compelling essays. In "The Rise of the Global University," Andrew Ross, after comparing Nelson to I.F. Stone as a voice which has "caught the gist of speaking truth to power," sets the whole landscape of workplace relations in a global context, where liberal educational ideals clash with the pursuit of global market share by leading Anglophone

universities. His own experience in China has taught him “how easy it is, in practice, for our academic culture to meld with the normalizing assumptions and customs of corporate business culture” (171). Is this melding to be encouraged or resisted?

Ross isn't entirely sure. Never mind the trade liberalization agenda of the World Trade Organization. What about the similarity of offshore academic centers to free-trade industrial zones in the Middle East and elsewhere? The same corporate dynamics that produce adjuncts in the U.S. seem guaranteed to produce them or their counterparts in offshore global education. As the global university turns into the same thing as the international corporation, we would be well to study, Ross concludes, the migration of our own academic customs and mentalities for the same reasons that we have continued to study back home the importation of a business rationale among us.

He remarks at one point how talk of “the corporate university” can be a “lazy shorthand.” In “Everyday Life at the Corporate University,” Jane Jaffer strives to avoid this by arguing on the basis of her experience as director of Latina/o Studies at Penn State that such a program can function as a tactic rather than a strategy (to invoke Michel de Certeau's well-known distinction). “We should see...corporatization as an opportunity for intervention, one that cannot effectively happen from an imagined outside position” (144). Thus, from a cultural studies mandate of working from a precise institutional location (advocated by Nelson and Watt in *Office Hours*), even job training becomes an example of “cultural work.”

Trouble is, given such a generous conceptualization, what would not be an example of cultural work? Marc Bousquet, in his essay “Worlds to Win,” notes that Nelson is one of the few to unite a comprehension of the university as both commercialized and organized unto itself. He goes on to concentrate on the rise of management theory, whereby “the ranks of corporate executives and upper-class administrators are wholeheartedly cultural materialists to a greater extent than the faculty of most humanities departments” (99). This is the sort of irony conversant with Watt's contribution, “The Humanities, the University, and the Enemy Within,” which is full of sobering anecdotal moments during his years as chair of Indiana University's English department.

Biometrics as part of tenure evaluation? Candidate rebuttal of negative evaluations? “Hovering” parents appearing in the chair's office? Watt struggles to maintain a perspective whereby, for example, the hiring of writing specialists at Research One universities need not erode the department's integrity and can even foster inter-departmental relationships—a perspective, in other words, where “we either adopt to these changing conditions... or we suffer from increased marginalization and poverty” (138). That is to say, with Jaffer, adopt tactics. Although Watt doesn't use this word, Bousquet does, through quoting Nelson (writing of the California Faculty Association) and speaking about “the rising culture of the contingent” (109).

Is the striking difference in accent between the conclusions of Watt and Bousquet emblematic of some larger division among the contributors? Say not the struggle not available—and yet say so only with great difficulty, at least from the vantage point of the chair's desk? On the other hand, from the point of view a younger generation either yet to go on the job market or not yet safely distant from it, what does the struggle look like? In a final section, "Pedagogy and the Politics of Mentoring," a group of Nelson's former students, in effect, sort out tactics, as if the time for strategies was pretty much over.

Marsha Bryant, for example, mentions as part of her "poetics" of mentoring that every year she instructs her graduate seminar students to get business cards—for conferences, if for no other reason. At first, the students are "discomfited," until she explains how publication can result from an exchange of these cards. Well and good, until we step back a bit and ask what sort of "cultural work" may be going on here, apart from (or even through) "professionalization"? Is this card in itself an excellent example of how a business rational is shaping us? How can we be said to be "intervening" in it when in fact we are simply participating in it?

Another example. James Sullivan, lucky enough to have gotten a tenure-track job, writes that he serves on a Adjunct Advisory Committee. Some committee members see it as their role to work for small gains as well as to retain small adjunct privileges. "Struggles that are more than just marginal are not possible right now," Sullivan writes, "but to do less would offend my conscience" (204). This statement could stand for others in this section, if not the rest throughout. The struggle for the university at the present time has to be content with a marginal position, whether or not from a larger perspective (Watt's, for example) such marginalization looks like the problem rather than the solution.

A final example. Another of Nelson's students, Jeff Sychterz, teaches at the Naval Academy. As we might imagine, it's tough going. Sychterz strives to put Nelson's "recovery model" into practice, but he confesses himself pessimistic. Recently, as part of a move "to focus midshipmen training in a particularly instrumentalized model of the naval officer as technocrat," a board of senior officers recommended the replacement of freshmen "Introduction to Literature" courses with "Naval Writing" (214). The call went "unheeded." One wonders precisely why. Did Sychterz himself have some role? Probably not. Yet rather than emphasize the authority he does not have, he chooses to conclude with the authority he does enjoy in the classroom, as embodied in one particular student in whom the classic ideals of liberal education still fervently burn.

Who are we to object that Sychterz is just cheering himself up, in the way teachers have always done with the sterling instance of the one-student-who-makes-it-all-worthwhile? Teaching itself is not, or not merely, a tactic. It aims to make a strategic difference, just as Nelson's own teaching of Sychterz has made such a difference to him. Moreover, the specific example of Nelson's

teaching strives to set this difference inside of communal or collective action. Nobody in the collection is quite so eloquent about this last point as Nelson himself in an afterword, testifying how “the present book exists in part to celebrate the scholarship done by members of this extended community” and lamenting that “faith in self-sufficiency requires suppression of awareness of one’s subjection to disciplinary norms, but faculty seem skilled at such self-deception” (227).

I have suggested something of my own suspicion that a few of the contributions in this collection reveal this “skill,” whereby the very discourse of “intervention” makes possible new depths of (self) indulgence. Indeed, at our present moment, the decisive distinction between a strategy and a tactic may have simply become unreadable, as new rationales for management power (Bousquet studies the wildly successful one now available as a “Virtual U” computer simulation game) result in new ways to recuperate faculty powerlessness. But most of the contributors to *Struggle* either are or try to be more sanguine. The struggle for the university is not yet lost. There are still moves to be made, however we want to theorize them. And, most important, there remains collective action to be undertaken.

Perhaps the best way to regard this stimulating, wide-ranging book is as itself an instance of such action (and not merely in some contributions an advocacy of it). If so, Nelson, as an individual, sits uneasily at the center, since the great scholar of modernism and the president of the AAUP emerges as a man who embodies as no other all the ambitions, struggles, and achievements it is possible for an American professor to have in his career. In a happier era, he would have merited a Festschrift despite himself. As it is, at the present time, we can be grateful (as his colleagues are) for how variously and powerfully Cary Nelson stands for us all.

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