

features

An Intellectual of the Movement: An Interview with Cary Nelson

Marc Bousquet

MB: Paula Rabinowitz praises your new book, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (Routledge, 2001), by calling you an ‘angry critic.’ Do you agree with this characterization? What is gained by being an angry critic?

CN: Anger is certainly one of the key emotions fueling recovery projects. I feel anger at the suppression of the historical record, sorrow at the loss of such rich texts and contexts, and a kind of exaltation in the presence of the poems themselves. I think other people recovering work by women, minority, and progressive writers share that mix of emotions. The anger is anger at injustice done, a familiar enough stimulus on the Left, and one that helps underwrite the passion, advocacy, and eloquence you owe a forgotten poem.

Whether or not you express that anger depends on whether you want to record the historical, cultural, and disciplinary process of forgetfulness (or outright dismissal) and recovery. Do you insist on reminding people--who prefer to forget, or who never knew (young students especially)--that English professors did not much write about Langston Hughes, let alone Edwin Rolfe, for decades? Or do you write about them as if there was no history of reception behind your present discourse?

MB: It's clear that you see a connection between what we teach, what we don't teach, and exploitation, both in and out of the academy.

CN: Well, I think that some literary texts have been devalued because of their subject matter, because they take on issues that historically many reasonably comfortable academics aren't prepared to address. Aspects of our literary history have been either marginalized or suppressed on the basis of subject matter. All over the world there are traditions of working class literature that for the most part, for a long period of time, were not part of the canon of valued works, not taught in classrooms, never mentioned in literary histories and just dropped out of awareness. And I asked myself, if we had been teaching poetry about working class people's

lives and poetry about labor as a regular part of our discipline for the last fifty years, would we be as likely to be agents of exploitation as we are? It seems to be that our special failure to take up that part of our literary history and value it and advocate it and sell it to our students and admire it before our students and write about it has facilitated the proletarianizing of higher education. English and the foreign languages have been the cluster of disciplines in the leadership for devaluing academic labor and at the same time we've devalued, historically devalued, the poetry and fictions of ordinary working people. These things would seem to be connected.

MB: Paradoxically, these are the disciplines that project themselves as having the most radical politics.

CN: Well, they're the core disciplines for union activists on many campuses. I think that has more to do with our history of exploitation than anything honorable in our disciplinary past. Still I think that the kinds of idealization that are promoted in literary studies are also readily transferable to practical political causes. Literary study can enhance political commitment and it can enhance the need for a just workplace and democratic processes.

MB: So the humanities provide so many graduate employee union activists not because they read Marx, but because their labor serves as a radicalizing experience.

CN: I think that that's partly it, but it's also partly because the discipline gives you some theoretical mechanisms to make sense of that exploitation. Whether it's seeking to do that or not, it gives you some tools and an historical understanding which has an application to daily life.

MB: You've written extensively about the university's exploitation of flex labor, especially graduate students. When did you first begin to see these questions as a matter of political urgency?

CN: It grew out of my experiences with my graduate students. I became quite committed to their careers, not only because I'm committed to them personally but also because I believe in the work they are doing. I want these folks to have careers so they can continue the work they are doing. The emotional toll taken by long years on the market is unbelievable. At times I felt more like a heart-lung machine than an adviser. It became clear that advocacy for individual students was not going to fix a systemic problem, so I decided to work on the system as well.

In the decade and more since I made that decision my view of the prospects for higher education has grown steadily more bleak. And my views have gradually become more radical, though from time to time I've felt others saw things in a still more unvarnished light. I've certainly thought

that about you--in your "waste product" essay, for example. So the contact with others writing about these issues pushes me further in the direction of radical reform.

A decade ago, to give another example, I wasn't thinking about these issues in the context of globalization. Once one does, the value of reform in a representative industry becomes more urgent.

MB: Many graduate students feel that the labor system can (and should) be repaired by the faculty, not by students.

CN: Well, the careerist humanities faculty member is in some ways a version of the capitalist entrepreneur. Self interest rules. What's happened in the discipline is that uncompromised self interest can be seen as heroic. Some of the heroes of the discipline are people who don't care in reality for much of anyone else other than themselves. They are discursive heroes with no pressure to exemplify their values in their daily life in any way whatsoever. It comes with the moment when faculty members are encouraged and eventually required to abandon all else but their own careers and to think of nothing else but their own careers.

MB: So what of the widespread impression regarding politics and the professoriate? Under the labor system of the past thirty years, has the university become chock-full of 'tenured radicals'?

CN: Oh, heavens no. Heavens no. First of all, there have always been a certain number of deeply conservative faculty members, in the humanities as well as anywhere else on campus. At best a very weak liberalism characterizes the university faculty as a whole--certainly not real political radicalism. I think university radicalism is very much a muted phenomenon even amongst those who do their best.

MB: What led you into the academy?

CN: Like many students, I never much thought about being a professor. My commitment was to the study of literature; everything else fell into place with a bit of luck, hard work, and the nearly inexorable link between subject matter and career. I became committed to literature in high school, writing 30-page typed papers on Kafka and Faulkner, among other writers. For four years in college I took very little other than literature courses.

MB: Antioch required you to work six months out of every year, didn't it?

CN: Some of my jobs were great, others intolerable, but I learned about work and learned more about myself in the process. I loved being an assistant teacher in a fifth-grade class in Harlem for five months, but then I

was fired--or transferred out of the school system--because I and another assistant teacher protested the school's corporal punishment practices. I was sent to the AMSTERDAM NEWS for my last month. At the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, I and other student employees encouraged the federal prisoners on the top floor to protest the medical experiments being done on them. That was my first Antioch job, and I received what became a regular evaluation: "If you weren't leaving in a month, we'd fire you."

MB: You were disciplined for protesting the corporal punishments characteristically administered to students at that time. This was 1967 or so?

CN: It would have been 1964/ 65. There was a guy that you sent the kids to if you were a full time teacher with a note requesting a spanking with a paddle. You sent the student with a note that gave some indication of the severity of the spanking that you were looking for.

MB: Did he get bonus pay for this?

CN: (LAUGHS) I don't know what the financial arrangements were.

MB: It was its own reward.

CN: The kids would routinely get a spanking with a paddle which was bad enough, but there was another punishment that really upset me and two other undergraduates who were in a teaching intern role as I was. One of the others was from Antioch and another was from Goddard College in Vermont. They had these trash cans in the center of the hallways which were about four feet high, metal trash cans, and standard punishment for one of these fourth or fifth graders was to stand them up inside the trash can (which came to a foot or two over their head), put the trash can in the middle of the hallway, and then other students were expected to kick it and bang on it, and whack on the trash can every time they went out to recess or went to the bathroom. Kids would spend some hours in these trash cans getting smashed and banged repeatedly. That plus the paddling is what the three of us really were not happy about.

MB: What did you do?

CN: We made a series of protests to the principal and we also did to parents but among the ironies were that the disciplinarian, a Mr. Pointer if my thirty some year old memory is accurate, became a hero of the union movement. The other irony was that the parents were furious at us for protesting corporal punishment. They felt it was what was needed to keep their children in line. The parents were in favor of it: both the administration and the parents wanted us out and we were gotten rid of.

MB: You have talked about feeling fortunate that you were able to get hired at the university and be paid a salary to teach anti-war poetry. Do you feel that particular kind of opportunity or contradiction is closing?

CN: Well, I think that the tenured faculty can still do it. I have a lot less confidence that part timers can get away with that sort of thing. When I worked in Harlem that summer we were basically employees of an anti-poverty agency funded by Lyndon Johnson. I took some of the anti-poverty money that Lyndon Johnson provided and rented buses to take the kids to an anti-Vietnam demonstration in Washington. Capitalist bureaucracies are full of opportunities for taking the money that comes from the man and spending it on something else. Surveillance has not so far been good enough in America to police all instances of that kind of thing. We may now face a terrible terrible test of that relative freedom which postdates McCarthyism. It was not there in the 1950s. Even tenured faculty did not have the freedom to teach anti-McCarthy poetry in their classrooms and protest the powers of the state. If you did that you lost your tenure. Tenure was no protection against being fired in that moment in time. So, within living memory we can remember when we didn't have that critical freedom to teach against the state. And the test of that freedom and its potential loss could come tomorrow or next week.

MB: It's already come at the University of South Florida where Sami Al-Arian was dismissed simply for costing the university too much to defend his speech rights.

CN: Right. It was largely extra-curricular speaking and activities that put him at risk. The case still isn't resolved. As we talk, he is on paid leave rather than unpaid leave, happily. The university had announced that it was going to put him on unpaid leave, but it was partly the pressure from the AAUP that prevented that. As luck would have it, one of my friends at the University of South Florida was at the hearing room with the board of trustees when Al-Arian's case was up for consideration. Al-Arian himself was barred from being on campus, so he couldn't be at the hearing.

MB: He couldn't defend himself.

CN: Right. Really quite bizarre.

MB: Did he even have a representative in the room?

CN: He did have faculty representatives that argued his case, I think quite eloquently.

MB: Still, it's rather star chamberish.

CN: His right to be there and speak on his own behalf and question his

accusers was abrogated. That right is one of the fundamental tenets of due process in the AAUP's model.

MB: It may even be in the Magna Carta.

CN: (LAUGHS) One of the faculty members called me on his cell phone from the hearing room as it was going on, and I got on to the web and notified the AAUP's executive committee and Washington office that this was a case we had to be concerned about. The AAUP really has a tradition of waiting until something gets decided, then coming in to react to everything that's happened. This would be getting involved before everything was decided. But happily within a day or two they realized that this had to be dealt with immediately. The AAUP made it clear to the campus that fundamental issues of academic freedom were involved, that this would be for the AAUP a case of national concern. A decision is supposed to come down this fall.

MB: Will you publish findings or haven't you reached that stage?

CN: It will come out in *Academe*. I think the AAUP realizes that we don't know what is going to happen next week or next month and that if there are another series of attacks in the United States this country is likely willingly, cheerfully, enthusiastically, and wholeheartedly to turn toward the right, and people will willingly set aside whatever relative partial and compromised freedoms they have. At that point imagine a part timer in a conservative town who speaks out against the number of detainees that the FBI is holding, gets the local newspaper editor pissed off at him, and becomes the object of citizen complaints.

MB: Part timers already enjoy many fewer academic freedoms than the full time faculty. Many don't get to choose what they teach, and they are quite commonly fired without due process. Perhaps what you're talking about is the shock and the outrage and the horror of the tenured that their own academic freedoms are at risk--that they might be restricted to the severely curtailed freedoms of the term faculty.

CN: I think almost every administrator in the country feels that when some public trouble accumulates around a part timer the solution is to get rid of the part timer. That's just the simple way of dealing with it. A parent complains, someone complains, they're out. So I think part timers live in constant anxiety about their livelihoods and clearly student complaints have infinitely more potential power over part timers than they do over a tenured faculty member. So part timers are vulnerable from administrative annoyance, parental pique, student vengefulness. They're simply vulnerable to multiple vectors of assault and many of them compensate heavily for it. It's widely acknowledged.

MB: What do you mean, 'compensate heavily'?

CN: It's widely acknowledged within the part timer community that they simply don't take some intellectual risks. It might lose them their jobs. It's widely acknowledged in the part timer community that they participate in as much grade inflation as they possible can, hardly a capital sin, but nonetheless the mark of a diminished degree of autonomy and self respect. This is what happens when you can't evaluate a student's work honestly, but you have to evaluate it in such a way that nothing threatens your next paycheck. One of the things that's been interesting about the political organizing of part timers is that it has given them some additional power to speak openly and honestly about their own situations. The part timers are the canaries that we are sending down to the mines of academic freedom, and their intellectual demise will warn the rest of us that the gases are filling the mines.

MB: Mary Burgan is very interested in AAUP becoming more invested in the issues of term faculty. This has not always been an uncontested position in AAUP. The other faculty unions have likewise been extremely slow to address the working conditions of the people working alongside of them. Why do you think the faculty have been so slow to see the academic freedom and working conditions of part timers, adjuncts, and term workers as related to their own?

CN: Tenured faculty clung to the illusion of an apprenticeship until grad students made enough noise to shatter that illusion. Many senior members of the AAUP came from campuses where there weren't significant part time contingents, where the term teaching was done by graduate students, and clung to the apprenticeship model for twenty years after the apprenticeship model was bankrupt. If you were on a campus like UIUC, where there were few part timers other than grad students, you could, if you wanted to, believe that the grad students were training to be faculty members and would indeed become faculty members. You delude yourself about that for as long as you can. People chose to delude themselves about it because to cease deluding yourself is to admit your own complicity. On an urban campus like CUNY where there have been part timers in large numbers for a much longer period of time--where they had union membership available to them and there was already some form of faculty solidarity in the form of the union--where you have a forum in which equality is supposed to be talked about, the unions just had blinders on toward the part timers.

The part timers themselves were frightened and cooperated in the institutional mechanisms by which they were rendered invisible, so that a tenured faculty member could teach in the English department for years and never meet any of the large number of part timers on the staff, never learn

their names, never recognize their faces. They live in separate worlds. The mechanisms by which those worlds are kept separate are vigorously and intricately applied by the departments. You don't give part timers offices in the building. You don't post their names, and you don't bring them into faculty meetings, and they teach in spaces that are separate from where regular faculty members teach. A lot was done to just make them invisible on campuses where they exist in significant numbers.

MB: You're describing an elaborate system that resembles a kind of apartheid.

CN: I think it's very much experienced that way by the part timers themselves, and to them I think the system of apartheid is very much apparent in their daily lives. But it's also set up so that senior faculty never notice the poor that live in their midst. And the apartheid is also a structured blindness, a blindness that's available to tenured faculty who choose not to see. They could choose to investigate. They could choose to find out about the other people who work on campus, but by and large they choose not to.

MB: Is that structural blindness still in place or is it eroding?

CN: It's certainly eroding fast in the AAUP. In the time that I've been active in the AAUP, we've added part timers to our national council and issued a significant statement on part timers, now being revised and amended in a more radical form. We have made some efforts to organize part timers. We've organized successfully at Emerson College outside Boston. We just organized grad students at Rhode Island, where the AAUP faculty chapter on its own initiative organized the graduate students. I was very happy about that case because it seems to me something that full time faculty should do if they have a union on campus. They should reach out to graduate students and part timers and become activists to help organize them to be members of the union, voting members of the union. At CUNY, of course, Barbara Bowen's leadership, with the New Caucus, Stanley Aronowitz and many others, including my own former student Larry Hanley (now editor of *Academe*), has completely changed the priority of part timer issues in bargaining. They made that front and center. We may have reached a watershed moment in this whole thing.

MB: A watershed?

CN: I think the tactics have to change. You and I both were at the Campus Equity Week meeting at Chicago last year. It was basically part timers there. How many tenured faculty members chose to show up at those events? Very very few. And that was the case all over the country, that Campus Equity Week was equity being talked about by part timers amongst themselves. Equity needs to be a conversation between part time

and full time faculty.

MB: What you're saying is that the community of interest problem is alive and well.

CN: Indeed, and I don't think polite discourse will solve it.

MB: What will?

CN: Let me give you a model. This past March--in a wonderful example of nonviolent civil disobedience--the graduate students of Illinois took over the main administration building.

MB: This is after having won several rounds in court and the university's continuing refusal to engage in collective bargaining.

CN: The grad students several years ago won a secret ballot showing that 67% of the teaching assistants wished to have a union. The graduate student union organizers were representing the majority interests of graduate students, graduate employees on campus, and over the years they met with absolute stonewalling from the administration--the refusal even to talk, let alone negotiate. They also met with the incredibly difficult task not only of educating each new crop of graduate students but also the much more difficult burden of trying to maintain the majority of graduate students in a state of activism and readiness for action. And that really is very hard, as graduate students cycle in and out of the program.

MB: So they changed their approach.

CN: They made a fundamental decision this spring, a complete reversal of tactics. Based on the knowledge that they represented the majority of graduate students, instead of asking themselves how can we keep that majority of graduate students ready to act, they asked themselves: 'What can we accomplish with 60 people who are ready to act right now? What can we do with 60 people who will take chances and who will do whatever is necessary?'

So employing precisely 60 people, they took over the administration building. They planned this for several weeks. The building was an example of the paranoid architecture on some American campuses in the wake of the Vietnam War when architects have been hired to construct spaces that are supposedly take-over proof. It was constructed with only two outer doors, one in front and one in back. It was designed with an internal cylinder utilizing reinforced doors on each floor leading to suites and offices, making it possible to lock away intruders from water fountains, bathrooms, and telephones. If the university had found a way to deprive the central cylinder of oxygen they would have done it.

MB: The concept is that anybody taking it over will be forced out in short order.

CN: There's a button, a panic button that locks the two steel doors on each floor all the way up from the first floor to the sixth. The idea is that your protesters are then locked in a column in which they have no ready access to anything that they need.

MB: Like the Andromeda Strain.

CN: So what the grad students did was study the building. They discovered several things. One, that the building was routinely unlocked at 6:30 am, but the security people did not arrive until an hour later. They also discovered that all of the internal doors were openable from the office side where the bathrooms were. If those were locked from the inside when the panic button went off, people couldn't get out of the building and their lives would be in danger. So the trick was between 6:30 and 7:30 am to get someone in each of the bathrooms. On the day of the occupation they sent students in one or two at a time with cell phones. As each one got into a bathroom, they activated his or her cell phone, said, "Hi. It's Jim. I'm in." "Hi. It's Sally. I'm in." Then, just prior to 7:30, forty graduate students come in, fill both entry ways, enter all the offices, occupy the building as a whole. They issue the demand that their union be recognized. All the administrators are locked out of work, and the hours go by. What they thought would happen is that they'd all be arrested. That is what the administration threatened doing immediately, but instead they backed down and for the first time in eight years negotiated with them after 12 hours of occupation.

MB: Eight years of stonewalling turned around in half a day.

CN: The police who were expected to be ready to pummel the graduate students have their own union. As unionists, they were perfectly cheerful about the graduate student union and were joking, talking and laughing. The lesson is, on campuses that have had long enough to begin to deal fairly with their employees and have chosen not to do so, I think the time for quiet negotiation has come to an end.

MB: Meaning?

CN: It's time to interrupt business as usual on these campuses across the country. I think it's time to start asking, in the way of nonviolent action, what can a core of activists who represent the interests of a larger number of people on a given campus begin to do?

MB: Would you say that these tactics are forced upon graduate employees by the intransigence of the university employer?

CN: We have had eight years of intransigence. I suppose in the geologic time of the Earth that doesn't count for much, but I can tell you that not a single graduate student who was an activist eight years ago is still here. It's a long haul in human terms. I think that enough has been done all around the country to alert faculty and administrators to the plight of part timers. It's time for part timers to start occupying buildings and making daily life difficult for their campus administration. I think it's time to insist on fair labor practices and it's time to do it by these forms of direct action. It has to be carefully planned. One of the things the graduate students knew they absolutely had to have here was control of those bathrooms. I don't think that they could have done it without some facilities. They didn't want to do anything that could count as property damage or be publicized as property damage. They had a minute by minute schedule for what they were going to do. They had training in how to deal with the police. It was very important to them to establish a friendly, cheerful collaborative relationship with the police rather than an antagonistic relationship and so that was practiced beforehand. It was talked through, and it was successful.

MB: When you talk about careful planning, you're really talking about the care with which the graduate employees were trying to guard themselves against the predatory interpretations of their actions by the university employer. The action you are describing is in fact enormously peaceful, but they had to take special care to avoid having their action misrepresented with a kind of discursive violence by the employer.

CN: One hapless administrator took the approach that 'those graduate students were basically just terrorists. They occupied a building. Imagine how frightened those poor secretaries must have been to get to work and see their building occupied by terrorists.'

MB: That sounds patronizing.

CN: Well, yes, the secretaries have their own union and are not totally unfamiliar with the need to confront an intransigent employer. But certainly there were administrators ready to put that kind of negative spin on it, but the graduate students denied them a surface to get that kind of discursive purchase.

MB: It sounds to me that you feel that a significant degree of the intellectual leadership of the academic labor movement more generally belongs to the students comprising the graduate employee union movement.

CN: Well, for one thing, they've had several advantages over the part timers. They are pretty well protected from summary dismissal. Short of tenure, graduate students generally have a lot of built-in institutional protections against being fired out of hand, which part timers simply do not have. Grad students see one another collectively much more often. They

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tend, even if the offices aren't great, to be in a given space more regularly. They have social as well as intellectual activities, classrooms that bring them together. They've been much better positioned to be able to organize than part timers are, and their lives are less stressful. You do in New York and LA have grad students doing the freeway flyer thing. But many students have had a marginal leisure in which to theorize and plan activism and take advantage of it, and I think that the part timers can now learn from the graduate students' successful union drive and take on that harder task.

MB: It also sounds like the tenured faculty and the many unions of the tenured faculty have a few things to learn from the graduate employee.

CN: Well, without more faculty activism, higher education is on the way out as anything that exhibits any of the intellectual characteristics that we now value. Regarding the relentless casualization of the academic workforce: figures just came out a few weeks ago that show since the mid 1990s 55% of all new faculty hires on American campuses have been casual labor. Twenty years ago it was well under that. It's clear that the tenured faculty as we know it is a dwindling percentage of the campus workforce, and I think will prove to be a dwindling number of people as well and that without job security, there is no academic freedom. That has been basic AAUP principle and I have to believe that it's true. What ensures your freedom to speak is the difficulty of firing you. That's the bottom line. And without that, education just won't be what it needs to be in terms of educating people to be critical citizens in a democracy. And more and more meanwhile we are looking at administrations with very different values. The administrator who gets up and is an eloquent spokesperson for university values is increasingly a rare bird. It's not that they're non-existent. They do exist, but one can spend many years waiting for that sort of administrator to arrive on one's own campus. And administrators as a group are more and more devoted to exploiting their workforce.

MB: Let's talk about a campus where the faculty have been active on these issues. The Cal State system has won a radical reversal of the trend toward hiring full-time faculty off the tenure track. Their most recent contract calls for increasing tenure track hires by 20% each year.

CN: I admire the leaders of the California Faculty Association. I have spent some time with them. Their meetings are very spirited. They understand the economics of higher education. There are no blinders on them. They are smart. They're articulate. They have been shifting increasingly toward direct action and community activism. Just within the last year, they forced a series of petitions with twenty thousand signatures on the board of trustees for the California State University system. They clamored their way into the meeting and got their petitions handed over, and marched in the street outside with a very large puppet of the chancellor

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of the California system in effigy.

When the chancellor went off to New York they called friends there and arranged for them to arrive with picket signs where the chancellor was. They began to make the chancellor of the whole system yield. He was safe from their clamorous protest nowhere that he went. His life was just going to be interrupted all the time by part timers and full timers who believed that the part time faculty deserved a better deal. And they won some real benefits.

MB: In addition to expanding the hiring in the tenure stream, the CFA won greater job security for the non-tenure track lecturers with the longest service.

CN: There is often genuine solidarity there between union activists who are full time and part time. The California Faculty Association has joined the part timers and full timers in cheerful and creative activism. One thing about faculty is that they are relatively smart folks and when they actually devote themselves to clever planning for public activism they can come up with something effective. When they finally signed the contract, the first thing the chancellor said in California was, “Does this mean that the puppets will finally be gone?” (LAUGHS)

The puppets had gotten under his skin. It’s not like you'd think that was a tactic that could be politically successful, but it had an emotional impact on the chancellor, enough that he was ready to move on. He was ready to see an end to the protest. The solidarity that the California Faculty Association has promoted--not perfectly, not without difficulties, not without a long learning curve--makes for a better workplace and a better academic community.

MB: At least a couple of the reports on this story, in the Chronicle and elsewhere, have tried to spin it as a negative reflection on organized academic labor, as if the union’s victory in forcing the university to increase tenure-track hires made the union responsible for the university’s subsequent decision to release some non-tenure track lecturers. The university could easily have made room for the new tenure track hires by reducing the teaching load of its graduate students, or the size of its grad programs, or through normal attrition. There are a lot of ways to increase tenure track hiring without “firing” anyone, aren’t there?

CN: My own position on translating part time to full time positions has always been you never do it at a rate that exceeds normal attrition. So that you are simply never taking a job away from anybody. And in most situations at this point in the United States the potential for translating those jobs at a rate faster than normal attrition would be literally revolutionary and utopian. It would be economically unimaginable.



MB: In reality, the attrition rate for full time lecturers is approximately 33% a year.

CN: Exactly. As long as you are doing it at less than the attrition rate, you're not taking anyone's job away.

MB: There's a critical mass of cooperation: between the full-timers' union, and the part-timers' associations, the very active graduate employee union movement, not to mention the active involvement of the community at large.

CN: At California you meet state legislators who come and talk at these rallies. That's political solidarity. Members of the legislature have come and protested and marched in front of the board of trustees.

MB: Let's talk about NYU. NYU has a kind of complex system of representation that is emerging right now. They have an established AAUP chapter for the tenured faculty, a non-bargaining chapter. They have UAW for the graduate employees, bargaining, and another UAW affiliate for the term faculty, also bargaining, after a fairly hotly contested election, in which the major alternative wasn't "no union," but the AFT.

CN: A year ago, the feeling was that there was an interesting opportunity at NYU for some kind of productive collaboration between the AAUP and a union with wide experience in representing workers either inside or outside of academia. Whether that collaboration will actually happen is a question that I can't answer at this point.

MB: Doesn't the issue of collaboration between bargaining units composed of three groups of people essentially doing the same work come up as a result of the patchwork state-by-state labor law?

CN: The private university in this case is bringing other issues into play. And yes, labor law is supposed to be designed to facilitate employee wishes. That was the principle behind it but, lo and behold, it doesn't always work that way. I think that it will be interesting to see what happens. It's a situation to watch.

MB: Your literary scholarship has focused mostly on poetry. Why have you made that particular choice?

CN: Poetry has had a very long cultural history, as prayer, as chant, as curse, as the song of the subject and the song of the chorus. Nothing poetry has become was foreordained. History might have gone differently. But as things have worked out poetry's inscaped language registers a culture's idealizations and its traumas with unique compression and power. There's nothing else quite like it. Save for technology and science, poetry

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embodies all you need to know on earth.

MB: How did you get interested in the Spanish Civil War as a research topic?

CN: If you're interested in the 1930s, then, to some degree you are interested in Spain. It is the great international story for the Left in that decade and ever since then the surviving veterans have had substantial cultural capital on the Left. It's also a remarkable place to think about the meaning and limits of individual agency within political movements and in relation to world politics. Some on the right insist the 40,000 international volunteers who came to help the Spanish Republic were nothing more than Stalin's dupes. Some on the Left, including me, argue their motives and actions have relative autonomy.

The Spanish Civil War also presents an astonishing convergence of art and politics, a site where artists contributed worldwide and where all the arts acquire a powerful relationality. But my own interest came conventionally for an English professor--by way of Edwin Rolfe's poetry. He served in the Lincoln Battalion and became its poet laureate. I went to Spain with photocopies of his diaries, retraced his footsteps, and eventually conducted over 3,000 interviews with his friends, family members, and contemporaries.



MB: Have you met many members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade?

CN: Yes, most of the surviving members, though many of them have died since I began this work in the late 1980s. I've written a couple of obituaries for the first time and will no doubt write others. So there's some sadness that I really met this generation of the 1930s in its twilight years, though mostly I am grateful to have known a group of men and women who carried their political commitments through most of the century. Not everyone ages gracefully, to be sure, and people in their 80s can be extremely demanding, but I've had the great pleasure of spending many many hours with veterans of 1930s politics and 1950s witch hunts who possess remarkable intelligence, energy, insight, and courage. Overall, they are a tremendous inspiration. I count myself very lucky to have started these Spanish Civil War projects in time to talk with so many who were there. Over and over again I met people in their seventies who could run me ragged, who kept going all day long with unfailing energy and whose understanding of current politics and events was sharp and utterly unclouded by sentiment. And it's most often not my peers but these veterans of twentieth century history who unsparingly tell me whether I've got things right in my own work.

MB: *Revolutionary Memory* has more than fifty illustrations drawn from your personal collection. Each of the items practically represents an entire

category of neglected radical creative expression: IWW poetry cards, working-class and battlefield manuscripts, pamphlets from John Reed clubs, illustrations from scores of radical magazines.

What happened to this rich history of political poetry so that it was largely ignored? How do we come to 'forget' such an enormous zone of our political and cultural heritage?

CN: A lot of the active forgetting took place during the McCarthy period. That's when the canon of modern literature was solidified; it was done during a period of fear when the academy willingly collaborated in the project of McCarthyism. Some English professors were essentially extensions of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. The modern literary canon was codified on the basis of political anxiety. It's also true that once that happens it happens on multiple levels. It means that work is no longer mentioned in literary histories. It means that work is no longer in print and in bookstores. It means that work is no longer in anthologies and not written about in scholarship. Then the next generation just never reads or hears anything about alternative literatures.

In the late 40s and early 50s you still get occasional mentions of America's long leftist literary traditions accompanied by dismissals but eventually the dismissals no longer take place, and the mentions never take place. A whole historical narrative is constructed in which certain things no longer have a place.

Like others working to expand the canon, my experience over the last twenty years has been of repeatedly discovering continents on earth that you didn't know were there before. Each time it happens to me I experience the same astonishment and incredulity. How could I not have known about this? I have a PhD. I thought I studied this period. How could I not have known about all these things that were part of that historical moment? There are whole discursive registers that are just absent from the active historical memory.

MB: Can any of this forgetting be attributed to the relationship between the new left and the old left, or the relationship between the academy and the new social movements?

CN: In the 60s and early 70s the campus left including myself involved in Vietnam protests was largely ignorant of the historical and literary-historical traditions to which it was indebted unbeknownst to itself, and whose heritage we should have been celebrating at the same time. I taught anti-Vietnam poetry during that time, but I didn't know that it might have been helpful to teach the anti-imperialist poetry about the Spanish American war in those same classes. I didn't know there was any. I knew that poems were being written in 1969 about Vietnam, but I didn't know that anti-

THE POLICE WHO WERE EXPECTED TO BE READY TO PUMMEL THE GRADUATE STUDENTS HAVE THEIR OWN UNION. AS UNIONISTS, THEY WERE PERFECTLY CHEERFUL ABOUT THE GRADUATE STUDENT UNION AND WERE JOKING, TALKING AND LAUGHING.

imperialist and anti-racist poems had been written at the turn of the century and that they spoke to Vietnam quite directly. To recognize those historical continuities, to recognize the role of literary-ness in resisting imperialism, to recognize that it had a history in our own country utterly changes your sense of your relationship to those continuities, to that past, to your discipline, and I think most of us were clueless about it. Of course the old left was struggling to keep alive its own traditions that were already under assault, and already being not just forgotten but actively suppressed.

MB: Increasingly you are working with forms widely dismissed as ephemeral.

CN: Preserving ephemera is another matter; someone has to treasure them and recognize the value of the material form itself. American New Criticism tended to value texts but not the variety of material forms in which they were issued. To me nothing is more exciting than learning that a particular poem was distributed at a particular meeting on a given day. Even librarians can be slow to learn the value of ephemera. *Revolutionary Memory* reproduces the first page of a condensed version of the poem "On Guard for Spain," marked for a 1937 wartime performance in Britain. It's the only known surviving copy so annotated and amended. By law the dealer who offered it to me had to give the British Museum first refusal. I assumed they would buy it in a second, since the performances of it have been addressed both in published accounts at the time and in recent scholarship. But they turned it down, so I eagerly sent my check. Of course I buy these things not to own them but rather to put them into circulation, to disseminate them again or for the first time.

MB: So often we hear from disciplinary ideologues--in English, or history, and so forth--this peculiar misinformation that cultural studies is all about episodes of *Baywatch*. And there has been a presentist orientation to much cultural studies work. Can there be a historical cultural studies? What is the relationship between the archive and the present?

CN: I have been advocating a historically based cultural studies for over a decade. The relationship between the archive and the present is direct and powerful. In a collection of Spanish Civil War letters I edited with Jeff Hendricks, we published for the first time Canute Frankson's 1937 letters from Spain. He writes in detail about his experiences of racism in America and about the interracial solidarity he found in the International Brigades. Publishing Frankson's letters was not only to give a public voice to a Black American who never had one in his own lifetime but also to offer lessons and attitudes for the present day.

A historically based cultural studies means asking what political and social meanings texts had; it means interrogating the material conditions under

My own position on translating part time to full time positions has always been you never do it at a rate that exceeds normal attrition. So that you are simply never taking a job away from anybody.

which they were produced and seeking to understand their reception; it means teasing out the relational constitution of any one cultural domain; it means comparing and contrasting conditions across the world; it means testing the past against the present and considering such comparisons a necessary part of the scholarly project. I take it as a general principle that we cannot understand the present without bringing to bear on it a series of temporal, spatial, and discursive displacements. A historically based cultural studies is thus a necessary component of a critically reflexive contemporary life.

MB: I wanted to ask you about grad school. This is '67 when you are entering grad school, and you said that you walked in and there were the other grad students, all men, eight guys dressed like *Men in Black*.

CN: Exactly.

MB: Black suits and white shirts--

CN: The faculty were the aliens.

MB: (LAUGHS). So the grad students wore suits and carried briefcases. Do you feel that the graduate student population was less radicalized than the undergraduates at that time?

CN: I don't know if my department was typical, but it was certainly a much more conservative group of quote, students, unquote than I had ever encountered as an undergraduate at Antioch. And the department itself was too. Once a month, someone was brought in from outside to give a talk. They were all excruciatingly boring. All grad students had to come to talks, and attendance was actually taken. The only thing that saved me was that in a kind of pathetic anglophilic gesture, sherry was served before each talk. I had two graduate student non-drinking friends, and we sat together. When I finished mine, the guy on the right gave me his glass of sherry, and when I finished that, the guy on the left side gave me his too. By that means I was able to get through these events.

MB: Melville goes to graduate school--they shared their rations of grog with you. (LAUGHS) I wanted to talk to you about the concept of a 'generation.' Do you feel that the notion of 'a generation' or 'age group' can be used to cover over struggles within groups, within a cohort?

CN: I suppose that's true. Although Antioch was the most left-wing college in the country, there were certainly conservative members of the student body. But they did stand out as, you know, anomalous beings. And whatever differences there were among the students pale so much before the antagonism of the dominant culture. It's not easy to imagine if you didn't live through either the fifties or the sixties. The FBI was hostile.

STUDENTS CAN ACCEPT AND REJECT THEIR LIMITED COMPLICITY IN PURCHASING ATHLETIC SHOES MORE EASILY THAN THEY CAN THEIR COMPLICITY IN LOW TUITION BASED ON EXPLOITING CONTINGENT TEACHERS.

The Secret Service was hostile. The military was hostile to the left. These large government forces were just barely held in check by the law. You could be wrestled to the ground and threatened by a Secret Service agent, as I was when I was part of a small group that interrupted a Lyndon Johnson speech. He told me that he'd like to get me behind bars where he could knock the shit out of me.

Even just having a beard was practically an incitement to riot in some contexts. I used to drive home from Antioch with people and en route to Philadelphia, we drove through some small Pennsylvania towns. And just for one or two of us to walk into a bar with long hair and a beard meant that people would be screaming at the top of their lungs within twenty seconds of our walking in the door. In the face of those parts of the American populace that were still living in the age of the dinosaurs, a few disputes on the left at Antioch seemed like small beans. So I think that the sixties with the story of a counterculture, the story of living in opposition to a dominant culture with a very very different value system really is the story of the way we lived.

MB: So what's the relationship of the eight men in black you described in your first grad school seminar to that counter culture? Were they part of the 'generation'?

CN: I was in a state of shock first of all because these seemed like young businessmen, not students. Frankly, my reaction was, 'the less that I show up here, the better off I will be.' I pretty much never showed up on campus unless I was taking a course. I wasn't teaching. I showed up on campus two afternoons a week for seminars and visits to the library. I went to Washington for Vietnam demonstrations, but was not often seen on campus.

MB: What are the consequences, both good and bad, as a result of your being an activist on labor questions within the university?

CN: Well, the previous Chancellor here at Illinois repeatedly let me know that he regretted that he had no obvious way that he could get rid of me. What I think is surprising about that is that the issue of academic labor has actually been my only major area of disagreement with the administration here in thirty years. It's the only issue where I have been on the front lines making a nuisance of myself. But the corporate university wants complete loyalty across the board. It wants yes men and yes women.

Yet academic labor isn't the only issue which is sufficient to earn you persona non grata status on the American campus. I've run into people from other campuses who have taken one stand on one issue as a faculty member in opposing the administration and who have become persona non grata thereafter. It didn't use to be that way. Principled opposition had a

place on the American campus, but I think increasingly the corporatized university wants corporate people. They want unstinting loyalty. They don't want disagreement. Most especially, they don't want disagreement over policy. And once you disagree over any kind of issue, you're on the out. The faculty member they want to be on committees, to have a role in governance, is someone who will value the ego enhancement of serving on the committee, of having a role in governance, being consulted, someone who wants that as part of their identity and will cooperate as a result. They look for people who won't rock the boat.

That kind of corporatized mentality is one of the things destroying higher education. Before my union activism on behalf of graduate students, I was regularly serving on campus committees. No more. The administration compiled lists of union activists, faculty and graduate students, to make sure that they were never appointed to committees. It wasn't just me. They had lists of people. You're a union activist, you don't get appointed to any kind of governance role, at least not by the administration.

MB: But even if you've been frustrated by the university central administration, you've been fairly well treated within your college and unit, where you've been awarded a named chair. And you're widely respected in the profession, on and off your home campus.

CN: I've had strong support from my department and the college of arts and sciences. But the real benefits are solidarity and community and feeling you're doing the right thing.

MB: How would you relate your on-campus experiences to your work on MLA's executive council?

CN: The MLA executive council mostly draws privileged people into its orbit, and it mostly calls on people to serve who have relatively little experience of anything other than privilege. It draws people who, I would guess, think something like, "How wonderful of me to devote this effort to the association!" For example, you would think that someone serving on the main governing body of a disciplinary organization would regularly read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to get the news about higher education. And yet, it's abundantly clear that many of the people on the council don't bother. I don't think it would serve much point in urging them to do so. They don't think they need to learn anything.

MB: How has that affected you?

CN: You know I was the second graduate caucus candidate. Kirsten Christensen was the first. She was on there for a year before I got on, and it was an extremely unpleasant year. I know she typically went home to the hotel and cried. When they weren't nasty to her, they were

condescending. When they weren't condescending, they were contemptuous. I mean, they behaved abysmally toward her on every occasion, and never gave a real hearing to any proposal that she made. When I got on, there were two of us which made a big difference because we could at least decompress with one another and talk over how loathesomely most of the people there had behaved.

There were always a few progressive people on the council. Most often, they weren't enough numerically to carry the day. Frequently, they happened to be very shy so they wouldn't speak up on any issue. So there we were trying to do a series of progressive things for academic labor, being fought tooth and nail by a series of over-privileged reactionaries about whom I feel no warmth. The May meeting was actually the first decent meeting. Bob Scholes was back on board. He really knows a lot about the profession, understands it. Michael Berube was there. And Greenblatt was the first independent-minded MLA president.

MB: The issue of family life is a vexed one for many younger faculty. Can you say a bit more about life as a member of a couple with dual academic careers? You've been with Paula Treichler for pretty much the whole of your two careers, haven't you?

CN: We met in New York in 1966, a year after Paula graduated from Antioch. We went to the same undergraduate school, but we didn't know each other there. I was in New York for a few months during my last year there. Paula was thinking of going to graduate school. She had worked in New York for a year after Antioch and was then getting ready to go to graduate school. I had no idea of doing anything other than immediately going to graduate school. I saw no other place for myself in the world, so we then applied to several schools together, and we both got aid at the University of Rochester, which might not necessarily have been our first choice, but each of us got an NDEA fellowship. It was sort of a done deal. It proved a good place, I think, for both of us. They left me alone which was what I mostly needed, and so we've been together for thirty-six years. Something like that.

MB: Did you get jobs together as well?

CN: Paula was on the last year of her NEH fellowship, so she worked on her dissertation for the first year that I was here. Those were the days before there was anything like couple hiring. There was absolutely no mechanism for even thinking about it.

MB: Were you married at that time?

CN: No. That wouldn't have made a difference one way or another. There just was no concept of trying to make any kind of accommodation

for anyone. I remember that it was only a couple of years before that the husband of one of my colleagues got a job in the Philosophy Department. When she wrote to the English Department and asked if there were there any opportunities for her, the department wrote back, 'Sorry, we don't hire women.'

The late 1960s was a different world in academia, fortunately a world we left behind. The spousal connection was clearly only a liability, so she applied for jobs without mentioning me. Paula ended up first with a job in an experimental undergraduate unit where the classes were held in the dorm. Then she moved on to be Dean of Students at the medical school and was doing a lot of publishing at the same time. She co-authored *The Feminist Dictionary*, which was a big project, and co-authored the MLA's book-length guidelines on non-sexist language and co-edited a book, one of the early volumes of feminist scholarship from the 1970s and eventually got tenured here. She now is the head of the Institute for Communications Research.

MB: You have interests in common.

CN: Yeah. Absolutely. The last decade or so she has been working on AIDS, and of course did this big wonderful book called *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* and is now doing research on the history of condoms for a book. It's been really a lucky part of my life. Mutual intellectual respect has been at the core of the relationship. We read each other's work. We are pretty harsh critics of each other's work. There are a lot of sentences in my book that are better for Paula's interventions, and there are a lot of sentences in her stuff that are better for my interventions. I think we've been very fortunate to be able to share each other's intellectual lives. You know we were coeditors along with Larry Grossberg of the big cultural studies book. The three of us organized the conference together, so there have been overlaps, especially in the cultural studies areas. So I've been very lucky.

MB: One of the things I wanted to talk about are some of the ways that undergraduates can be seen to share some of the experiences that have been radicalizing graduate employees. Undergraduates are working more and more at so many institutions. To me, it does seem increasingly like the term 'student' just names a term of flexible labor.

CN: Your argument about undergraduate labor is a very elegant and convincing one. I certainly found it persuasive. You know I came from an undergraduate school where everyone worked, but we didn't work and go to school at the same time. We had our work months and our school months, and never the 'twain did meet. The odds that students really can devote themselves to an intellectual problem are more or less nil when the

work component for undergraduates approaches thirty or forty hours a week. It's not uncommon to find undergraduates trying to pull down full time jobs or nearly full time jobs at the same time as they're engaging in their education. It's just not a way to really grow intellectually. This is one of the many ways the poor receive a lower-quality educational opportunity.

MB: If you could arrange the ideal undergraduate education, the ideal undergraduate relationship to the world of work, would it be based on your experience at Antioch?

CN: The job program at Antioch was critical in exposing people to multiple settings and showing them the nature of work. The small size was also a benefit. When I went to Antioch there were 750 students on campus at any given time. That meant there were 1500 students enrolled, because half the college was working while the other half was in school. Then, they switched and half of them went out on a job and the other half came back to campus. I don't know anyone who has been through some version of the small liberal arts college education who would ever opt for anything else as an ideal. In a graduate program what you really have is sort of the small liberal arts experience again, encapsulated within a large institution. We have 120 graduate students in English. They all know one another. They all take classes together. They all teach together. They all talk about their teaching with one another, and so they're a community. The place Paula taught her first year, Allen Hall Unit I, also offered human community, a living learning community. Every time I've seen that kind of education on a small scale, it seemed to me preferable to the anonymity of large scale industrial education.

Students who are really entrepreneurial as undergraduates can break through and get faculty members to know them well and to have relationships with them. But I think it's a small percentage that do that. So why wouldn't many of them drop out? It's completely alienating. They're anonymous. No one knows them. Most of their classes are too large. At Antioch, I only took two classes in four years with thirty or more people in them. The rest of them were all seminars. Everything was conversational. I would never recommend an undergraduate come here to Illinois, if they could go to a place where they were more likely to be treated as human beings. My experience is based upon a certain kind of very personal education. Once you've had that, I don't think you would opt for any of these monstrously large campuses as an undergraduate.

MB: Currently more than half of high-school graduates in the U.S. seek some form of higher education. Are you asking that all of them receive the kind of education you're describing?

CN: If you devote enough of the nation's economic resources to education, you can give everybody that sort of experience. Of course it has to start earlier on. It has to start with much more intimate elementary and secondary education, much smaller classes, more resources, more cultural activities, more multicultural experience. A tremendous amount of the nation's resources should be shifted from the military industrial complex to education. You wouldn't need so many prisons then. I'm a believer that education can change people.

MB: In his review of *The Knowledge Factory* for *The Nation*, David Kirp stooped to calling Stanley Aronowitz an 'Ayn Rand of the curriculum' for proposing a program of intellectual study against what Aronowitz dubs 'higher training, not higher education.' This recalls Riesman's claim that the turn to a managed university and the construction of a 'consumer' relationship between the university and students was a revolution that ended 'faculty hegemony' and installed new student agency on campus after 1972. Is that true? Do students have more agency on campus now?

CN: I should start by saying that I am a believer in the notion of a liberal education and strongly opposed to higher education that's reduced to job training. A student empowered to be the consumer of technical training alone is not a free agent but rather a corporate dupe. He or she has been coopted by an ideology that trades critical citizenship for a salary. One of the best things our more financially independent schools could do is refuse to approve instrumentalized programs and refuse to award degrees without ethical and cultural breadth.

Student agency is not a historically independent capacity; it's the product of social forces. The faculty has the right to reject forms of agency it finds corrupt. A sense of self constructed for students by Dow Chemical is hardly a democratic victory over faculty hegemony. Corporate hegemony can install a simulacra of agency in its young recruits, but not the power for genuine resistance.

MB: What would you rather see?

CN: My notion is that no one should get a vocational degree without being subjected to the arts, being subjected to some ethics courses. I'm really not interested in a vocational degree that never leads a degree recipient to question the morality of global industries. I don't think you should train people just to be technicians without also training them to think, because I think that American education ought to be training citizens for democracy, to be citizens, to participate in public life. There should be enough faculty hegemony to say, if you want the job training, you've got to do some of this stuff as well. It comes with the package.

MB: You're saying that you and Aronowitz are more like Jefferson than

Ayn Rand.

CN: Something like that. (LAUGHS) It doesn't mean that I oppose programs that focus on job training. I just think there should be other components to them.

MB: So vocationalism isn't just a "false" power for students; it's a mode of actually disempowering them?

CN: Well, they're being disempowered not so much while they're in school. What matters is that they are being disempowered as citizens for the rest of their lives. Their capacity to contribute in a more complex way in society is being diminished by that sort of education.

MB: You have talked about poetry's long cultural history. Do you have any comments about the future of poetry?

CN: I think seeing into the future is very hard. If you look back long enough, poetry is something like a very cyclic phenomenon culturally. It occupies a different percentage of the available cultural space at different times. I think that in times of historical crisis it comes more front and center in public life. A wider range of people have to call on it for what it can offer them. In very comfortable times, people don't seem to need it quite so much. So, I don't think poetry has one future in America. I think it will have multiple different futures in different cultural contexts. I don't think there's necessarily any cultural continuity between them. I was at poetry readings during the Vietnam War with ten thousand people there. I don't know how you could get ten thousand people at a poetry reading in America at the present moment. Until recently, you could do it in the Soviet Union oddly enough. In some of the revolutionary movements, in Latin America for example, poetry has had tremendous public power. I think that poetry's place in the United States will depend upon American history and what happens to us and what we do to ourselves. But do I think there will be times when ten thousand people will go to a poetry reading again? Yes. I have no doubt whatsoever. I just don't guarantee how soon that'll be.

MB: Can you tell us something about the modern poetry web site you run?

CN: MAPS (<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps>) is one of the largest period web sites in literary studies. It was elegantly designed by Matthew Hurt, a recent PhD in 19th-20th century American literature and now has over 20,000 pages on line. Both of us took a web course from the novelist Richard Powers. The web site serves as a supplement to my modern poetry anthology and as a general resource for people interested in the subject. There are scores of historical links. Because the site gives students and faculty easy access to the relevant scholarship, it is quite democratizing.

Since we are only putting short excerpts on line, we also hope to stimulate interest in the books themselves and to encourage book sales. For the last year we've also been putting up original essays--we've published about a hundred. So MAPS has evolved into an on line journal, an important one because it has the only detailed criticism available on a number of noncanonical poets, including women, multicultural poets, and poets on the Left. It's clear that disseminating radical poetry is not enough. You have to help people read and think about unfamiliar texts. MAPS is an unbelievably efficient way of doing that. It also makes for great classes because students and faculty are all so much better informed about the poems and the appropriate historical context.

MB: Do you want to say a little bit about the collection on activism and the academy that you are completing with Steve Watt?

CN: It's a mixture of activities that we've been involved in on our individual campuses or through the MLA or through the AAUP. Steve has an essay, for example, on the strike at Syracuse where he spent some time on the campus to find out about it and interview people. It's by no means a comprehensive account of academic activism, but it's an attempt to show by a certain number of case studies how people have made a difference in the last decade or so. And, we're both believers that a difference can be made. One of the most difficult things is for a single person to make a difference on an individual campus. I think that is close to impossible. But if people act collectively they can make things happen and can stop other things from happening.

MB: You have expressed your frustrations with the MLA executive council. It has been a mixed experience for you. You are retiring this year from your term of service there. If you were given another term under different circumstances, say a more progressive council and staff, what would you like to accomplish?

CN: The MLA has a significant budget. In any given year, it is possible to find a couple hundred grand to free up to do anything you please with. I think if ten senior members of the profession were actually working together to try to figure out how English and foreign language departments could become more just workplaces, and if the whole MLA executive council--instead of fighting that possibility tooth and nail as if it were worse than the bubonic plague--if they were willing to work together, they might find ways to spend money that would improve employment in the field of English and the languages. For one thing, I would like to see the MLA singling out those departments that followed ethical guidelines and those departments that don't follow them. I would like to see the MLA take on the job of investigating employment in individual departments in its disciplines.

MB: How would you respond to Phyllis Franklin who throughout her extraordinarily long term as MLA executive director consistently maintained that that sort of thing, and I'm quoting her, was 'really AAUP's job'?

CN: Well I think that, collectively speaking, the AAUP by its very nature has no disciplinary knowledge. It's everybody in higher education. It really can't ask itself how English departments should function or how French departments should function. It can formulate principles that cut across disciplines and then look at individual cases of misconduct that rise to a level of national importance in a focused and intensive way, but I think if you are going to talk about the disciplinary workplace, that has to really be done by disciplinary organizations that know their constituents and know their needs and know their pressures. As higher education becomes a more and more exploited environment, the disciplinary organizations are going to have to take responsibility for the behavior of their members. Those organizations have to take a different kind of responsibility than they have in the past. I think they all will eventually do so, because I don't think they really have any choice. I think they will evolve in that way. And that's what we're slowly seeing happen to the MLA, although it's screaming and kicking every step of the way.

MB: AAUP is likewise moving to broaden its constituency.

CN: It's often been difficult for AAUP traditionalists who are devoted to protecting the integrity of tenure to realize that with the changing academic workforce, protecting the academic freedom of the only three tenured faculty members left on Earth is probably not the only priority. So the AAUP over the last six or seven years has been gradually taking positions on the rights other campus groups should have. We issued a statement on graduate students and we just published a statement on academic professionals, and the statement on academic professionals actually includes AAUP's language of enforcement, that it will begin to take cases in this area. I think if the right case came along that gave us the chance to defend a graduate student's academic freedom, we would pursue it. So there has been a slow but nonetheless pretty inexorable movement toward embracing the larger campus community of employees, rather than just tenured faculty.

MB: But it's been contested.

CN: There's been a continuing debate in the AAUP. Some people are really frightened about watering the commitment down by extending it over too many people. Others like me think there's no choice. That's the reality of the workplace and you have to deal with it and respond to it. There's no point in pretending we are going to go back to something we had thirty

years ago that we just don't have anymore, so although the AAUP has not moved as quickly with these things as I might have wished, it has moved, at least it's moving to do them.

MB: The social movements used to be articulated to a red thread of economic justice that at least in some cases was also a class consciousness. Can the demands of young people for economic justice for themselves be part of rearticulating the individual movement demands into a new mass movement?

CN: If people demand economic justice for themselves as a matter of principle the connections with other workers in the same and other industries are not difficult to recognize. But mass movements grow out of historical conditions that require them and provide the conditions of possibility. Certainly the living wage campaigns are providing the conceptual underpinning for a metropolitan, regional, national, and eventually global movement. In fact it is easier to reach students on campus with a campaign about sweatshop labor elsewhere first, and only then confront them with the economic structures of exploitation that make their own education possible. Students can accept and reject their limited complicity in purchasing athletic shoes more easily than they can their complicity in low tuition based on exploiting contingent teachers. So there's an interesting interchange between local and international consciousness raising and activism. It's not a matter of moving serially from the local to the global but rather a series of uneven linkages and recognitions. The potential for overlapping and intensified workplace justice campaigns is one of the few things about which I'm genuinely hopeful.

MB: We've covered so much today. Just to wrap up: you have referred to challenges that higher education is going to face in the next few years. How should we be gearing up to respond to the challenges of corporatization and casualization and of economic justice?

CN: We need to begin thinking of ourselves as communities on a given campus, and that community as a whole needs to wrest control of institutional mission and priorities from the small groups of businessmen who seem to be controlling it increasingly. I think that on a given campus it can be done. If people are organized and work together, they can regain (or for the first time have) collective control over the mission of the institution.

Barring that, being a college professor is going to be a genuine lower class life. It's going to be the kind of life where you cannot afford to send your own children to college. It will offer minimal job security, extremely low income, and increasingly less intellectual freedom. It's going to shift from being Aronowitz's 'last good job in America' to one other lousy job in

America. And it seems, from the vantage point of someone who has had a pretty good ride in higher education, a huge loss.

The world's only superpower should be training its citizens to be critical members of democracy. You don't want a vast power that's willing to use that power across the world to have citizens that can't think and talk and intervene in public life. That's really dangerous.

This interview is based on recorded conversation and an exchange of email between December 2001 and August 2002. Warm thanks to Stacy Taylor, doctoral student at the University of Louisville, for transcription services.

Marc Bousquet served as founding editor and co-general editor of *WORKPLACE: A Journal for Academic Labor* from fall 1997 through spring 2002. His writing on workplace and related issues can be found in recent or forthcoming numbers of *Social Text*, *College English*, *JAC*, *minnesota review*, and *Works and Days*.



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