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the minnesota review

Marc Bousquet

"You Want Half of This?": An Interview with Jeffrey J. Williams

I can still remember the first time I received a copy of *minnesota review*, the 1995-1996 "Institutional Questions" issue. It arrived unsolicited, addressed to me care of my graduate school, with a brief note, compliments of the editor. I didn't realize it at the time, but this was a typical Williams move, using the journal as a calling card, cultivating people he found interesting, especially junior faculty and graduate students.

It might surprise some observers that Williams, most recognized for editing theorists and interviewing academostars, is more interested in, and spends more time on, the as-yet little known or unknowns still writing dissertations and first books, on activists, organizers, committed teachers, and burrs on the trousers of power. (If the academy were baseball, Williams would be a sports journalist who paid the bills by listening to Barry Bonds talk about himself but whose real love was sitting in the sun at a sparsely-attended double-A game in Toledo.)

There are a generation of people like me who owe serious debts of time and attention to Williams and his long stewardship of *mr*.

This short, fugitive fraction of an interview hardly covers that debt. Originally recorded for a series of clips for a YouTube channel, the raw footage runs just 22 minutes and is focused on academic labor, the topic of the [series](#) for which it was filmed. Unlike the unhurried and elegant conversations that Williams mastered and made his signature at *mr*, this video was shot on the run in a noisy airport café. It was the second attempt, the first take ruined by my failure to properly connect microphone and camera. I'd had to re-record half a dozen other interviews similarly bungled in the preceding couple of days; the only reason we had twenty minutes to talk was that each of our planes were boarding late.

Despite the narrow focus, the hurry, and the circumstances, the whole Williams comes across in the footage: his generosity of spirit; his devotion to the journal, the profession, and his comrades; his honesty and willingness to talk about things that most of us leave under the rug.

Nonetheless this lightly-edited and condensed transcript conceals at least one unsurprising truth, that he wasn't an easy interview subject: friends won't be surprised to learn of his efforts to direct the video from his side of the camera—using several of our precious airport-stolen minutes to tell me why I should have miked both of us and not just him, then stubbornly repeating each of my questions into the camera for the record. The video is packed with digressions and jokes, but also his motherly worrying that I'd miss my plane or not eat enough before flying over the Rockies, offering his plate, "You want half of this?" *minnesota review* managing editor Heather Steffen was present. The beginning of the raw footage sounds like a Mamet play:

Bousquet We're going straight to live, there's no fucking around here.

Williams We're going straight to live?

Bousquet We're recording everything you say now.

Williams So I think that you have to—you're still not heard on this?

Bousquet You're good, you're perfect.

Williams But are you—nobody can hear your questions.

Bousquet Actually, that's not true. I can turn up the gain and pick up my—

Williams Your questions.

Bousquet Yeah. We'll be fine. [Looks at notes.]

Williams You have to ask me a question.

Bousquet [To Steffen] He's ready for his close-up.

Williams C'mon Cecil, Cecil B. Bousquet.

Apart from the jokes, the digressions, and the directing, the heart of why Williams makes a difficult interview subject is the depth of his interest in other people—in the broadest possible sense, his willingness to turn over his time to others: not just the airtime of an interview, but his work time and his life time,

the time of his care, wisdom, and consideration.

Like many who are so interested in others, Williams is also a bit of a private person, so even some of the details he shares, such as his admiration for Orwell, invite some elaboration. For instance, Williams speaks of Orwell's socialism, his honesty, and his talent—but leaves unsaid what I find most evocative, that at about the same age that Williams served as a corrections officer in an upstate New York prison, for example, Orwell served in the Indian Imperial Police. It's hard not to credit this detail with at least some of Williams' ability to run a live wire between the campus and the prison, between education, the professoriate, and our willing production of unfreedom.

Bousquet You devoted an extraordinary amount of ink during the 1990s and the early part of this century to academic labor issues in various numbers of *mr.* What motivated that choice?

Williams It's somewhat predisposition on my part, but it's also simply that there's a social, a political charge to the magazine, and what are the politics that are the most immediate if you're in academe?

I always found it odd that academics frequently can talk about politics in foreign climes—they might know French politics in 1867 or Indian politics now—but they know nothing about the place where they are. And that's where they actually matter. I'm not against knowing those other kinds of politics, but academic labor seemed the most pressing issue. It's simply that it would be hard to be in this profession and not realize there was a serious problem.

I was fortunate enough to get a job. I didn't the first year I was on the market, but I did get a job. All of my friends were going through this too. You see all of your generation, the best minds of your generation, going through this travail after getting a PhD—how can you deal with this? You can talk about post-Fordism. Obviously this is an effect of that, in larger terms, but the more specific questions are the ones we live with, about the job system.

Bousquet Tell me how your predisposition shaped the choice to feature academic labor in the journal.

Williams It would be easy to say simply, it's because I had a working-class background. But that's a very mediated relation—some people might do the opposite, they might go running away from their background.

I know many people that went away to Ivies, to Chicago, or wherever, and they became anything but academic activists.

They start wearing tweed coats, and they start trying to act as if they are to the manner born. I went the opposite route. I have been in unions before, I grew up in that culture, so I was much more sympathetic to labor issues.

This is actually, finally, just a job. I think there are good things about seeing this profession as a vocation, but the bad thing is it gets sacralized, as if it were this magical thing, rather than a job. I am a professor at Carnegie Mellon. They do not own me, though sometimes they think they do. It's a job.

Bousquet Your current work is really fascinating. You're making the argument that student debt is not just "like" indenture but truly is a contemporary form of indenture. Perhaps you could talk about that in connection with your interest in academic labor.

Williams Student debt is part and parcel of academic labor. If you see it systematically, it affects teachers, and it affects graduate students. Our friend Katie Hogan wrote an essay called "Superserviceable Feminism" in *minnesota review* showing that it affects faculty—the service expectations are up, there's much more pressure. I can see that from my job; you can probably tell it from yours. As far as the graduate students, as you've written, they're screwed and then they're spewed out. The lucky ones get jobs, but still.

The one thing I think people have missed is talking about undergrads. It's part because these other problems are important, and we're living them. My complaint before was that people don't reflect on their own situation, but a swath of our profession, a group of us, have talked about academic labor. We haven't talked as much about students because that's not our position.

The statistics are stunning. In 1984 the average student debt was around \$2,000; in '94 it was about \$9,000. Ten years later it was about \$20,000. That doesn't count private debt, for which we don't have such reliable statistics. The other statistic that's really damning is that a quarter of people who graduate now have debt over \$30,000.

Bousquet Can you say something about the consequences of debt?

Williams It makes people have a different relation to their world. If you have a lot of debt, I think it affects you from the spiritual to the material. I say "spiritual" with irony, of course, but still we do live in a metaphysical as well as a physical realm. Debt affects what you feel like you can do in your life. It affects career chances and choices. Students know before they even come to college that they have to go to business school rather

than get a degree in poetry unless they have rich parents.

I think debt also affects how you see society. When I went to Stony Brook, it was relatively cheap. Five or ten years before when my sister went, fifteen years before when my uncle went, it was almost free: a couple hundred dollars, very cheap. I think then you see the state in a good relation to you—the state provides education, just like high school. That’s what the state should do. It’s good for everybody: you take advantage of all the talent that you have and you grow it. You fertilize it.

I’ve written about indenture and also about governability. The Trilateral Commission in the seventies had a report that said you have all these people getting college degrees, but only 25 percent of our jobs require college degrees. So they wrote that student numbers should be reduced, that people became ungovernable if they’re educated and then don’t get jobs and are unhappy. So I think with debt people become more governable. It’s like, you get with the program. You can’t protest not having health insurance if you’re working three jobs.

Bousquet In what sense have you experienced the pressure to be more governable in your own life?

Williams I think that maybe, because of a certain irascibility or a certain stubbornness (it’s true, when you have a little white in your hair you admit these characteristics in yourself), there’s no way those pressures would make me do the opposite of my inclination. But not everybody is as irascible as I am. When you see it inflicted on other people around you, the people you care about—I am allergic to that kind of injustice.

Bousquet You’re unusual in academic circles in that you combine left analysis with a labor sensibility. Holding left and labor together was particularly difficult in the latter part of the last century. How’d you manage it?

Williams I always hated seeing my father, as a working-class person, condescended to. I saw that; I still remember it, and that’s something I won’t forget, something that I would still fight, even now. It would piss me off, and I don’t get riled by all that much. So that was probably a factor.

Bousquet I wonder about your experience of starting out at an Ivy League college—seemingly moving smoothly up the “merit” ladder to Columbia—but then dropping out to work as a prison guard for family reasons. Does that experience shape your approach to academic work today?

Williams I was a scholarship boy from Long Island who went to Columbia, which I loved. I wanted to be a man of letters. But a

man of letters like George Orwell, who was a man of letters and a socialist and wrote very brilliantly about it. He was irascible and very honest, and wrote damn well. So I went to Columbia, and then I left.

For various family reasons, I needed to get a job. I didn't think it would go on nearly as long as it did, but I worked as a corrections officer. I thought it would be short term, and I thought it would be interesting. That definitely gave me a sense of unions. They went on strike once, and there was somebody who was a scab. They burnt the person's car, a brand-new car, burnt it in the parking lot.

I like the union feel. In some ways I liked working as a corrections officer better than I've ever liked working as an academic. Insofar as people didn't fuck you over, they didn't stab you in the back, they didn't do all these passive aggressive things. The pressure was pretty straight up and open, if there was aggression. People helped you out. It was just normal, not a big fancy thing; if people could help you, they did. It was a different feeling, being in a union like that. Everybody's in the struggle.

Part of it, too, was that I think I scrapped a lot. I would always pick up jobs. A lot of people I knew where I came from scrapped a lot. You weren't bothered by the kind of jobs you had to take. It's only now, in the past five years of my life, do I not have to do that.

Bousquet When you wrote about this, you said that in many ways the prison was more collegial than academia.

Williams In part it's the hypocrisy of academe. This is probably a digression, but people talk about mentorship, but having a mentor, it's not like somebody assigns it to you, it just happens. It has to be organic. I feel the same about enforced collegiality. I found the prison more organically collegial, which is not to lionize corrections officers.

To go back to scrapping for jobs, if you grow up like that, it's not bad, it's honorable, because you're trying to work to get ahead. You're always trying to improve things. Now I run a journal. You work, you scrap together to do it, and it seems to me that it's a good ethic. You feel you're moving something in a good direction, and you're doing it with other people.

I think that's why I'm more sympathetic, also, to academic labor. It seems to me there's something honorable to people trying to scrap, to make things better.

Bousquet We talked about the economic, systematic

relationship of faculty and student labor, but do you think that relationship suggests some possibilities for a practical politics?

Williams That's a hard one. Because of course the answer is yes. It calls for a political organization or a movement, an alliance between faculty and students. On the one hand, we should be unapologetic to people who think that because we write we're ineffectual, that we're effete aesthetes. We write, and we should be unapologetic about that.

On the other hand, there's a certain hubris in our business that, politically, we create the revolution because we write certain things. I think that's what I want to avoid. I don't have any big prescriptions. I do the writing I do, the work I do, whether it be on the journal, as a teacher, various other things—in a way it's narrow. I think you have to be humble and realistic about what the effect is.

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