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Composing in a Global-Local Context: Careers, Mobility, Skills

Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner

Reviews of composition pedagogies commonly treat those pedagogies aimed explicitly at addressing students' career concerns—commonly identified as *instrumentalist* or *pragmatic* pedagogies—as discrete from, in opposition to, and in competition with pedagogies explicitly aimed at addressing concerns to build a better world for all—commonly identified as *critical* pedagogies. This treatment obtains in critiques of as well as arguments for both pedagogies. Critiques of critical pedagogies include charges that they don't really teach writing, ignore the pragmatic needs and interests of the very students they claim to serve, and impose their own ideological agendas on students poorly positioned to counter them (see, for instance, Fulkerson 659–66; Hairston; Smith; Spellmeyer). Those advocating critical pedagogies charge others with supporting status quo ideologies accommodating the demands of an unjust social order (Berlin; Chase; Fitts and France; Shor). As Richard Miller has observed, the choice is typically presented in stark terms: “When you teach composition, are you working for the system or against it?” (25). Or as Carol Severino puts it, “Is the purpose of a composition course to help students fit into society or to convince them to change it?” (74).

The debate has thus settled at an impasse as familiar as it is futile: accommodate unjust social relations or consign students to economic deprivation; address students' and teachers' immediate concerns with individual financial security and career, on the

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one hand, or, on the other, their concerns with making the world a better place for all. But in this essay, we argue that for teachers of composition to respond effectively to either, we must in fact find ways to respond to both. Specifically, we argue that the two sets of concerns, immediate and global, may each be understood and addressed productively only by articulating the mutually constitutive relationship between them.

Articulating such relationships is profoundly difficult in light of current pressures and effects that go by the name *globalization*. But the current global economic crisis makes doing so all the more urgent. In what follows, we first review current debate to identify the inadequacy of the terms in which it is conducted at this particular historical juncture, highlighting the need to attend to students' efforts to respond to competing accounts of *career opportunity and security*, *mobility*, and *marketable skills* associated with the different economic regimes of *fordist* and *fast* capitalism: their efforts to address the simultaneous presence of and pressures from both these regimes at the intersection of the global and the local. We then identify strategies for pedagogies that engage teachers and students in composing career mobility and security with and against the grain of both regimes.

BACKGROUND: CRITICAL VERSUS PRAGMATIC, AND ABOUT WHAT?

The deliberate articulation of what terms such as *financial and career security* might mean for us and for our students is increasingly urgent in light of the recent global economic downturn. But in the debate between critical and pragmatic pedagogies, the meanings of such terms are largely taken as self-evident, and thus something the pursuit of which teachers must perforce either accommodate or demystify. This is despite the fact that, like all words, the meanings of these have always been subject to contestation in response to changing and variable conditions and positions. For example, the notion of a "career" that progresses "step by step through the corridors of one or two institutions" is seen by critics like Richard Sennett as now "withering" under "flexible capitalism" (Sennett, *Corrosion* 22). Thus the constitution of the sometimes derided "careerism" of students is unstable, as is the role of composition instruction in either accommodating or contesting it. Clearly, to ignore students' financial concerns is unconscionable, particularly in light of the growing privatization of the costs of education. However, to assume we already know what individual students might mean by the words they use to voice those concerns, and that they've had the chance to fully probe and articulate what they might mean by such terms, is equally unconscionable. Further, the uncertain character of the careers possibly available to students inevitably complicates teachers' attempts either to accommodate or resist students' pursuit of them.

Recent accounts of first-generation college students illustrate the ambiguity and ambivalence of the meaning of a career, and the relationship of students' academic

work to their careers as well as to their lives, goals, and values. While many of these students may hope the work in their first-year writing courses will help to advance their job opportunities and security, they do so under the highly unpromising conditions of a staggering global economic recession and an unclear relationship between their employment prospects and their composition work. Tony Scott notes, “Job insecurity is now very consciously linked with enrollment and goals in higher education” (4). He describes first-year composition students who have already developed lengthy employment histories at what he terms the “wide, low-paying, low-security bottom of the fast-capitalist economy,” in which “advancement” is capped and, at any rate, comes with more work but little extra pay or benefits (1). For one of these students, a restaurant worker, school represents not so much a way to help him pursue a career in restaurant work but, rather, to improve his self-esteem because “school gives him the feeling that he is moving forward, not wholly defined by the work that he continues to do for twenty-five or more hours a week” (2–3). Thus school is for this student an alternative to, rather than a step toward, pursuit of employment prospects. Yet it is an alternative that, thanks to education’s privatization, requires continued engagement in those prospects, unpromising as they are.

Johnathon Mauk describes students ranging from “overworked eighteen-year-olds to underpaid middle-aged parents” who “seemed to be racing relentlessly away from the college,” which they perceived as “something to get *through*. [. . .] into an ongoing race through time” (371–72). Centrifugal forces drive these students not just toward some career pathway, but toward immediate needs—spouses, children, current job demands. Louise, a student described in Russel Durst’s *Collision Course*, sees her coursework as a step toward gaining admission to nursing school, but also in competition with “her responsibilities at home,” and a step which she waited years to take while her husband, working full time, completed his coursework toward an associate’s degree (24–25).

These accounts indicate that a significant number of our students are coming or returning to school bearing stories of themselves and those close to them having to reckon with the threat of the current recession, outsourcing, and shifts from manufacturing to service-industry employment. Their investment in higher education is materially, intellectually, emotionally, and viscerally costly and risky: it’s not clear how, when, or whether that investment will “pay off,” and what economic, emotional, or intellectual form the “return” will take. Thus, the nature of what teachers might imagine they will be working with students to resist, accommodate, oppose, or even pursue alternatives to is historically specific, and so cannot be determined in advance. Instead, it is a matter that requires both student and teacher investigation and articulation in and through writing.

If we cannot assume a self-evident and unified notion of financial and career security toward which our work with students might lead, or which it might resist,

first-year writing can serve as a space and occasion for teachers and students to explore questions like the following:

- What kinds of working life and what particular aspects of such a career pattern might we see as no longer feasible or desirable?
- What kinds might be possible and desirable?
- How might individual students best go about composing a sustainable work life, given the specific, multiple, and often conflicting affiliations, commitments, and alignments they have had, are interested in sustaining, and hope to establish, and in light of the specific historical and social conditions of their life, their education, and their literacy practices?

Such a project, however, requires an ability to listen, as well as respond, to students.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF LISTENING TO STUDENTS

A number of writers have attested to the difficulty of listening to less powerful groups, including students labeled as nontraditional, as well as the vital need to do so (see, for example, Lu, “Professing”; Royster; Shaughnessy). Perhaps most obviously, there is a gap between what teachers might “hear” students to be saying and what the students might be trying to articulate that poses a challenge for advocates of critical and instrumentalist pedagogies alike. Furthermore, as several writers have argued, students’ “official” scripts about their educational and career goals don’t necessarily represent the often more complex goals they have (Horner, *Terms*; Miller; Seitz). What students claim they want, need, and believe may be what they believe dominant culture requires that they claim, or what they believe their instructor will reward them for claiming, or only what they are fluent in articulating; it is unlikely to represent all that they may want, need, or believe. Even an individual student’s desires, needs, and beliefs are, after all, always in flux, complex and often conflicted, never monolithic, uniform, and set. Articulating these thus requires extensive processes of writing and rewriting extending beyond the filling of a form or the writing of a single text.

While the difficulty of listening to students would obtain under all circumstances, there is a further difficulty we face at this particular historical juncture in listening to students and their statements about career concerns. We have in mind here the difficulty posed by what has been termed the *shift* in the economic and geopolitical landscape of the last three decades associated with globalization and its effects on our lives. And we have in mind the difficulty posed by our trained fluency in analyses of the social, political, and economic contexts of teaching and writing pertinent to the periods between the World Wars and during the Cold War period.

There has been enormous scholarly literature detailing global geopolitical, economic, and cultural shifts, including the global spread and significance of neolib-

eral, fast capitalism and its attendant ideology of market fundamentalism dominated by the interests of the “developed” worlds (see, for example, Appadurai; Bauman, *Globalization*; Beck; Castells; Ellwood; Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson; Giddens; Harvey; Ong; Tsing). In one way or another, this body of literature cautions readers to approach such shifts as uneven and unstable. However, these cautions must contend with longstanding predispositions to interpret words such as *shift*, *change*, and *spread* as revealing a linear and seamless “progression” of discrete stages—for instance, treating an “older” economic stage of fordist capitalism and an “industrial economy” as something to be entirely replaced by a “later” stage of fast capitalism and a “post-industrial service economy,” and treating such a shift as inevitable if not already completed.

Responses to this linear, monolithic economic determinist model of global historical and social change debate the primacy of the global over the local or the local over the global: whether, for example, to frame analyses of the local in terms of a master narrative of globalization, or to treat local conditions and concerns as both primary and as relatively discrete from narratives of globalization. Those advocating the former overlook the instability of neoliberal market economies within particular areas, as well as the uneven geographic spread of these (for example, in Milwaukee versus Louisville versus Des Moines versus Seattle versus Bangkok versus Dublin versus Mumbai). Those advocating the latter gloss over changes in the dominance of particular coexisting sectors of the economy (for example, manufacturing, finance, insurance, real estate, service, agriculture, shipping). Highlighting the specificity of the local scene of students’ learning and writing—the conceptual, emotional, material landscapes students bring to a classroom in a particular geographical location—they neglect the ways in which such landscapes might themselves constitute responses to (global) shifts in economic conditions.

In either case, analyses of students’ writings and the design of curricula tend to imply a unified meaning for terms such as *career*, *marketable skills* or *job security* drawn either from fordist models (in which a majority of us have had more training and fluency) or fast-capitalist models (see, for example, New London Group). But treating the meanings of these words as singular ignores the ways in which local and global forces and conditions intersect. For, as Ulrich Beck has argued, “[F]rom now on nothing which happens on our planet is only a limited local event; all inventions, victories and catastrophes affect the whole world, and we must reorient and reorganize our lives and actions, our organizations, and institutions, along a ‘local-global’ axis” (11). We face the collective challenges of attending to the contingent and mutually informing processes of globalizing and localizing, and developing research and pedagogy that test the viability of such global-local (“glocal”) perspectives for addressing the specificity of individual students’ financial and career concerns.

Thus, rather than being trapped in the debate of imagining ourselves as having to either meet or change students' financial and career concerns in our teaching, or of having to choose between working *for* or *on* students—or between a critical or instrumentalist pedagogy—we need to work *with* students on revising our and their understanding(s) of the meaning of our and their career concerns and desires, and the global-local contexts within which these arise, and in response to and on which these operate.¹ We need to recognize the diverse, often competing economies and economic sectors in which we and they are involved and the challenge we and our students face of making sense of the immediate and broader situation in which we live, the relationship between these, and our current and possible future relationships to both. For example, it's not immediately clear either to us or to the many students we teach at the University of Louisville what the current or possible future relationship might be between any "skills" they might acquire in our courses, the work they currently perform for United Parcel Service to fund their college education, the kind of jobs that will be available to them on graduation, and the kind of future work and world they would like to participate in creating. And of course, that uncertainty has been reinforced by the current economic downturn, adding to the urgency of taking on this kind of work.

KEY TERMS FOR INQUIRY: CAREER, MOBILITY, MARKETABLE SKILLS

One possible starting point for making sense of our financial and career concerns along a global-local axis is to examine the contested meanings of three related terms key in debates on how to best make sense of and address students' explicit concerns about their financial and career security: *career*, *mobility*, and *marketable skills*. The local, place- and historically specific stories of career, mobility, and marketable skills of individual students with particular personal and family histories can be treated as a critical resource for identifying global forces, their effects on individual and collective lives, and ways of responding to and even shaping these in return.

To illustrate, we turn to the student representations of their career concerns reported in Janet Bean's "Manufacturing Emotions: Tactical Resistance in the Narratives of Working-Class Students," and to Bean's analysis of these. Most of Bean's students are residents of the Akron, Ohio, area, the "former rubber capital of the world" subsequently dubbed by *Newsweek* in 2001 as one of the top ten "new tech cities" (qtd. in Bean 102). Akron, Bean observes, made the "successful" shift from manufacturing to high tech, "replacing blue-collar jobs with white-collar jobs in research and development," a shift attributed in part to the University of Akron (102). Bean's students, mostly first generation, write of the sacrifices their parents have made to sustain their education, of scholarships garnered through hard work

in high school classrooms and on athletic fields, and of tuition dollars earned from jobs at Target, OfficeMax, or Subway (102).

These accounts suggest, at the least, students' ambivalence toward work and education. On the one hand, Bean argues, their writings indicate that they "believe in hard work and merit-based rewards; they want to get a college education and make their parents proud; they want more prestigious jobs and entrance into the middle class" (108). In other words, it appears that they subscribe fully to master narratives such as upward social mobility and meritocracy (102). On the other hand, however, in "affirming obligation and gratitude to their parents, in announcing and solidifying class and family identification, in expressing nostalgia and a sense of loss," these students also "employ tactics that challenge the dominant ideology of social mobility even as they make use of it" (111). Bean cautions that "because these tactics necessarily operate within the space of a powerful other, the act of resistance is always complicit with hegemonic discourse" (111). However, the "*trajectory* of their narratives is evasive and disruptive; even as they remain within the structures of the dominant discourse, they are not fully contained by it" (111).

Bean's analysis of her students' accounts shifts our attention to the chafing of master narratives as they encounter local forces. For example, Greg, one of Bean's students, writes that he has "far more respect for the blue-collar worker" like his father "than for the white-collar worker who makes twice as much money." Yet, Greg notes, "Ironically, I am going to school to become one of those white collar executive types who ultimately puts people like [my] father out of work" (109). What drives him, Greg says, is the image of seeing his father "on the couch with his back out of place, saying, 'Work with your brain, son, not with your back'" (109). In response, Greg testifies, "I will remember those words for the rest of my life, and someday I will be very successful because of them" (109). While this might seem to rehearse a narrative of simple nostalgia for the past mixed with meritocratic aspirations, Greg is in fact quite ambivalent about the kind of "success" he expects college to lead to: "I hate the idea of becoming part of the system that I hate so much, but if I don't roll with it, it'll roll right over me" (109).

Bryan, another of Bean's students, reports witnessing men in his family face uncertainty in their jobs with the Ohio Valley steel mills. He expresses disbelief "that a company that needed so many workers at one time would hire my grandfather at the age of 15 write out of the 10th grade, and now hasn't hired a new employee in over 20 years. [. . .] Wouldn't it be nice," he writes, "to be able to find jobs like that today [that pay enough to support a wife and five children]?" (110). But even as Bryan writes himself into the narrative of upward social mobility, he makes it clear that the price of success—measured in the devastation of community and family—is too high, expressing in his reaction a mix of foreboding and loyalty to the area:

All I can do though is pray that by the time the mills do go under and the 50,000 plus people lose their jobs that I no longer live in the [Ohio] Valley even though I will always consider it my home no matter how bad things get their. (Qtd. in Bean 111)

The teacher learning to listen to what Thomas McLaughlin terms the “critical language grounded in local concerns” by which “vernacular theory” is practiced (5–6; qtd. in Bean 111) faces the question of how to go about working with students like Bryan and Greg through the composing of career aspirations and ambivalence toward such aspirations in their writing. While both writers make clear that they imagine a career elsewhere, removed from that of their fathers and grandfathers in social status, institutional structure, and geographical location, they remain vague about the kind of work—“white collar,” “executive types” (Bean 109)—they hope to succeed in getting. If, as Bean cogently points out, the local concerns expressed in these student writings are informed by not only personal and family history, involving a mobility from working class to middle class managerial, but also social-historical changes involving a shift from industrial to new tech jobs in research and development, then the students’ ambivalence toward upward mobility—nostalgia, anger, obligation—needs to be addressed in light of the different, often conflicting meanings the fordist and fast-capitalist regimes ascribe to terms such as *mobility*, *career*, and *marketable skills* and their uneven coexistence on the local-global scenes of work. For example, if, as Greg puts it, “I hate the idea of becoming part of the system that I hate so much, but if I don’t roll with it, it’ll roll right over me” (Bean 109), we need to consider the ways in which his hatred and fear toward the system might be seen as an active response to the competition and uneven power relations between the two notions of *the* system promoted by both regimes and their actual, uneven realizations on the global and local levels. And we need to find ways to mobilize such ambivalence as a critical resource for (1) enacting learning and writing that works not only with but also against both sets of hegemonic meanings, and (2) composing life plans and trajectories that revise the models of *career* and *financial success* forwarded in either of these regimes.

One challenge facing those of us interested in moving in these directions is the need to overcome our trained predisposition to address students’ writing from the perspective of a single economic template, whether through assigning readings that oversimplify the scene of students’ writing, or through habits of “hearing” students’ written (and oral) responses to our assignments and assigned readings in ways that overlook the global and local contexts of their financial and career concerns.² A host of works from a range of disciplinary perspectives have called such trained predispositions into question by delineating the differences and intersections between two dominant notions of career: a residual notion associated with fordist economies and the idea of the “company man,” and an emergent notion associated with *new capitalism*

and the idea of the “portfolio man” (see, for example, *Consuming and Globalization*, Bauman; Gee; Ross; Sennett).

The image of a company man assumes *stability* and *development*—continuity and vertical ascent. It posits the trajectory of a person, following secondary and any postsecondary education, being hired for a stable position by a single employer at what will be a permanent place of employment and, after retirement, receiving a secure, generous pension. The notion of mobility aligned with this notion of career is restricted primarily to “moves up” the institution’s hierarchical structure of responsibility and rewards. Beyond mastery of a set of quantified marketable skills, the requisite to the success of a company man would be self-discipline in the form of self-denial and delayed gratification; loyalty to the company; and commitment to one’s work and work routines. The rewards for such hard work, loyalty, and commitment would be eventual career promotion; long-term financial security (including pension and health benefits); and regular pay raises.

Certain aspects of the fate of company men—their robotic role in the hierarchically structured workplace and alienation from family life—have been under consistent attack since the 1950s. Aversion to such confining aspects of a fordist career is most explicitly manifest in the culture of Silicon Valley and Alley start-up companies, with their rejection of nine-to-five workday schedules and embrace of floor plans adopted from the “artisan” work models of earlier times, which blur the distinction between work stations, recreation, and lounges (Ross). However, features of the image of the company man retain a firm hold on the popular imagination (transmitted through the habitus of home, neighborhood, and schooling), especially in terms of security in employment and benefits, although often as the symbol of the “good old days” viable only in pockets of some regions, sectors of employment, and populations. The relevance of such a hegemonic discourse for the scenes of both Bryan’s and Greg’s writing is illustrated by the ambivalence they compose toward the work ethic promoted by the image of the company man, as they recognize the human costs of the security in employment and benefits it promises. As Greg observes of his father, “he has been breaking his back in a factory job for nearly twenty-five years now, and the idea of his son following in his footsteps is a sickening thought to him” (qtd. in Bean 107).

In contrast to this fordist notion of a long-term, stable career, the career motto for neoliberal market economies is “no long term” (Sennett, *Corrosion* 22). As an AT&T executive puts it, “[W]e have to promote the whole concept of the work force being contingent. [. . .] ‘Jobs’ are being replaced by ‘projects’ and ‘fields of work’” (Andrews, “Don’t,” qtd. in Sennett, *Corrosion* 22). Neoliberal market economies prefer employees “with no previous bonds, commitments or emotional attachments, and shunning new ones”; workers “ready to take on any task that comes by and prepared to instantly readjust and refocus their own inclinations”; and, “not least,” willing to

“leave the company when they are no longer needed, without complaint or litigation” (Bauman, *Consuming* 10; compare to Sennett, *Culture* 96–97). In mainstream media representations, success in this kind of career is imagined in terms of the level of *extra-territorial mobility* achieved: the ability of the few across the world to constantly move, untied by emotion or responsibility to any one territory, identity, or career—except the career of remaking oneself and staying “on the move.”³ The glamour of the extra-territorially mobile elite is endlessly on display in the mass media through its representations of the “lifestyle” of the rich and famous (including globe-trotting academics able to carry their tenure from institution to institution and across national borders in pursuit of “cutting-edge” knowledge projects). At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of job seekers are consigned to a fate of constantly migrating from position to position, ever retooling their skill sets according to the vagaries of an illusive “market.”

The image of an extra-territorially mobile portfolio man is enabled by and enables the “careering” of neoliberal market fundamentalism. The marketable skill for such a neoliberal market economy is *flexibility*: both institutions and individuals are expected to be flexible, risk-taking, nimble, detached, superficial, mobile and in motion, and focused on the short term (Sennett, *Corrosion* 9–10, 47–63, 110). However, flexibility does not mean the same thing for the supply and demand sides of labor. Companies aim for “flexible specialization”—identifying, filling, and then abandoning market niches as consumer demand shifts (*Corrosion* 51). Such flexibility also involves a “flattening” of corporate hierarchies into a “network” of fragments and nodes (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear; Sennett, *Corrosion* 55–56).

This flattening does not, of course, eliminate or even alter power relations so much as it makes them “more convoluted” than the traditional “pyramid” structure (*Corrosion* 57). As Zygmunt Bauman explains, the flexibility required on the demand side is different from the flexibility on the supply side of the labor market:

Flexibility of the demand side means freedom to move wherever greener pastures beckon, leaving the refuse and waste spattered around the last camp for the left-behind locals to clean up; above all, it means freedom to disregard all considerations except such as ‘make economic sense’. What looks, however, like flexibility on the demand side, rebounds on all those cast on the supply side as hard, cruel, impregnable and unassailable fate: jobs come and go, they vanish as soon as they appeared, they are cut in pieces and withdrawn without notice while the rules of the hiring/firing game change without warning and there is little the job-holders and job-seekers may do to stop the see-saw. (*Globalization* 104–05)

Of course, this is not how flexibility is marketed to workers. Instead, it is dressed up as “reengineering,” teamwork, empowerment, cooperation, and quality—as in TQM (Total Quality Management) and BPR (Business Process Reengineering). On the one hand, demands on workers’ flexibility to do more tasks and use more skills

“increase[s] the pace and intensity of work” without “increased wages or improved working conditions” (Greenbaum 81). On the other hand, the linkage of flexibility with *cooperation* and *empowerment* easily lends itself to arguments against unions as uncooperative, not “team players” (Kraft 29; see also Sennett, *Corrosion* 112–14). Worse yet, the extra-territorial mobility of capital robs individual locales, lives, and lines of work of any vestige of stability:

[S]kills keep being devalued and superseded by new and improved skills, the assets one is proud of and cherishes now become obsolete in no time, exquisite neighbourhoods become shoddy and vulgar, partnerships are formed merely until further notice, values worth pursuing and ends worth investing come and go. (Bauman, *Globalization* 97)

Consequently, most workers feel compelled to make shifts in their careers by making not vertical, ascendant moves, but rather, “ambiguously lateral moves” (Sennett, *Corrosion* 85). This is true not only of the unskilled but the highly skilled. The compulsion is not to move up but to keep in motion. In a “winner-take-all market,” many are engaging in “lifelong learning” or pursuing some kind of certification, because to avoid taking the risk of “grabbing for it” would be to consign oneself ahead of time not simply to losing, but to being a passive loser and worse (see Sennett, *Corrosion* 88–90).

Thus, mobility—a crucial class marker in capitalist economy—often connotes powerful but competing sets of meanings, images, and responses, in a variety of ratios and degree of tensions for differently situated teachers and students. On the one hand, one’s own and one’s loved ones’ lived experience of the rigidity and monotony of work routines under fordist regimes often accentuates, paradoxically, the appeal of (extra-territorial) mobility, and drives efforts to master the flexibility demanded of the (job) seeker-consumer. On the other hand, the remainder of a fordist market in people’s immediate locales, and stories of the stability and security once enjoyed by their elders (in union or white-collar jobs), in contradistinction to neoliberal capital’s capricious “flexibility,” make possible the lingering appeal of pursuing “vertical mobility” through lifelong commitment to a vocation. That is, aspirations to achieve the extra-territorial mobility of global elites are accompanied by (1) the fear of remaining localized (bound not only to locales and people one cares deeply about, but also to the consequences visited upon these locales and people by the capricious flexibility of capital); and (2) a longing for work that values long-term commitment to an area of expertise and one’s colleagues while also providing secure income, stable benefits, and rights to negotiate how one tackles one’s work (an improved version of the fordist company man or union worker, mixed with nostalgia for the “independent” craftsman of preindustrial times).⁴ We see this mix of fear and aspiration toward the local and toward extra-territorial mobility in Bryan’s prayer that “by the time the mills do go under and the 50,000 plus people lose their jobs that I no longer live in

the [Ohio] Valley even though I will always consider it my home no matter how bad things get their” (qtd. in Bean 111).

If students like Bryan are to aspire for jobs “making enough money to support a wife and five kids,” as Bryan’s elders were able to do when working in the mills, and if students like Greg are to plan work lives that “roll with” the system so that “it” will not “roll right over” them (Bean 110, 109), then they and their teachers must find ways to deal with the different meanings of *mobility* endorsed by fordist and flexible capitalist regimes. On one hand, there is a need to respond to the uneasy coexistence of least two sets of economic systems endorsing different sets of meanings concerning concepts such as *career*, *mobility*, and *marketable skills* on the global-local scenes of our work. On the other hand, we need to be vigilant toward the tendency to project any neat, linear, monolithic progression of a clear, complete, sharp break from an older to a newer economy, culture, and attendant sensibilities. We should not lose sight of the uneven character of the spread of any hegemonic force across the globe, and of the resistance it encounters in particular regions, professions, and scenes of individual students’ learning and writing. As Sennett cautions, for example, although “the new language of flexibility implies that routine is dying [. . .] most labor remains inscribed within the circle of Fordism” and its “Taylorization” of labor into routine tasks (*Corrosion* 44). As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing reminds us, universalizing projects such as neoliberal economic fundamentalism cannot be put in motion without “friction”: universals are limited by the practical necessity of having to “travel across differences and are *charged and changed* by their travels” (8; emphasis added). And as Bean and her students’ texts remind us, in spite of Akron’s new status as a “new tech” center, affiliations and identifications with a different set of values and practices, ambivalent as those might be, are operative on the scenes of students’ work; they supply a wealth of words, images, feelings, and convictions gleaned from actual relations and interactions from students’ day-to-day lives that can be mobilized to rewrite notions of career or mobility forwarded in both regimes.

COMPOSING CAREERS ALONG A GLOBAL-LOCAL AXIS

We have been arguing that in the current United States, career plans, worries, and decisions for college teachers and students are often made, experienced, and taken up in response to at least two sets of hegemonic dispositions, both constantly charged and changed as they travel across differently situated teachers and students. The challenges that we and our students face when trying to make sense of our career plans, worries, and decisions cannot be separate from the question of how to make sense of the specific, complex thoughts, feelings, images, and visceral responses we each have toward the “new” and “older” work orders, and about the dire consequences such work orders have imposed on the general population at particular historical

junctures (see Harvey 13; Giddens 25). Facing these challenges will necessarily involve making sense of globalization in *friction*, in terms of how the ideology of neoliberal economic fundamentalism, for example, is charged and changed on the ground (Tsing)—“in the small and concrete, in the spatially particular, in one’s own life, in cultural symbols that all bear the signature of the ‘glocal’” (Beck 49; see also 42–52, 74). Rather than study “globalization from above,” composition teachers and students can use writing to think through “the implications of globalization for the daily—and nightly—practices of households, diverse local workplaces, and organizations, face-to-face communities, and non-elite embodied and socially embedded actors” (Singh, Kenway, and Apple 7). We can pursue ways of writing what Beck terms “inclusive distinctions” that treat situations that “fall between” dichotomized categories (such as global versus local, fordist versus post-fordist, and economic versus geopolitical versus cultural interests) as “not an exception but the rule” (51).

For instance, students and teachers can identify points of intersection and gaps between various official meanings given to the terms *career*, *mobility*, and *marketable skills*, and alternative meanings that individual students might ascribe to these terms in specific instances of reading and writing and living, in the context of those needs, desires, and beliefs associated with specific locales (such as school, neighborhood, rural, or metropolitan areas) close and dear to them. They might, for example, imagine ways of pursuing careers shaped by long-term commitments, not to individual firms (which may offer no reciprocal commitment) but to particular collectives. Here they might explore the notion of *career* not only as a nominalized “course or progress through life,” but also as a verb signifying “to turn this way and that” or “move swiftly over” (*OED*). Students and teachers might try thinking of their own careers not only in terms of choosing a vocation, but also in terms of a course of decisions and actions shaped by, as well as shaping, the constraints of economic globalizing. Likewise, they might imagine their careers’ requiring certain kinds of flexibility: not just those demanded by fast capitalism, but a flexibility to *career*—in the sense of “turning this way and that” swiftly—in response to possible economic, ecological, geopolitical, and cultural instability and volatility.

Pedagogies that ask teachers and students to write about the specific charges and changes they all can and, indeed, always do make hegemonic forces undergo might well lead some to articulate life plans and actions that go against the grain of either fordist or fast capitalism (or both). These pedagogies might be understood as instancing the old-style “politicizing” of composition of which critical pedagogies have been accused: at best an interference with the task assigned to composition of providing students with the marketable skills most of them explicitly come to college to acquire. To this, we offer two answers. First, the promise to provide students with marketable skills is itself not just politically problematic in treating education purely in terms of job preparation—as defenders of critical pedagogy might argue—but

practically problematic as well. We refer here not only to the issue of whether any “general writing skills” might or can “transfer” to the work of writing conducted outside the first-year composition course. That possibility has been under serious challenge for some time now by both scholarship in situated learning and the “new academic literacies” scholarship (see, for example, Lea and Street; Petraglia). We also refer to the question of the sustainability of such a promise. Given the scope and speed of changes and the degree of instability at all levels of life in recent years—environmental, geopolitical, social, cultural, and economic—it’s unclear what skills might and might not be marketable at any given time or place, nor is it certain that those that were would long remain so.

Second, and conversely, literacy skills for studying global forces from “below”—in terms of inclusive distinctions and how they are charged and changed as they travel across differences—are the kind of *life* skills all (job) seeker-consumers do need to survive and thrive. This is the case because they enable the articulation of active, critical, creative responses to the pressures exerted by a winner-take-all market, responses articulated in the different situations facing and projected by individual teachers and students. These skills represent a form of literacy that, while not precluding those teacher and student investments in a fuller identification with the needs, desires, and beliefs of extra-territorially mobile global elites, for example, nevertheless allows for the possibility of ambivalence toward such hegemonic interpellation.

By de-linking education to particular kinds of employment, studying globalizing forces from below can help teachers and students develop literacy skills for “handl[ing] uncertainties and paradoxes” with “dialogical attentiveness and the courage to disagree” (Beck 138). This can help us to articulate needs and possibilities of mutual responsibility and commitment when engaging in scenes of conflict: forming a “realistic basis for the connections between people of unequal power or with different interests” (Sennett, *Corrosion* 142–43; see also Coser; Gutman and Thompson). For example, students and teachers might investigate the tensions activated by competing notions of the goals and processes for “teamwork” and “collaboration” embedded in the mission statements of corporate, nonprofit, academic, and community-based institutions vital to their current lives. The goal of such study would be not to dispense with or embrace, but to redefine these terms by composing reasons for why and how specific notions of them might or might not be fully pursued by individual students when planning their careers.

The challenge here, familiar to teachers, would be how to engage students (and themselves) in such work rather than its simulacrum. Here the uneven spread and mixed character of globalizing can be of use: there is a reality to the questions facing us that resists glossing.⁵ This is not to place the burden of solving the problems attendant on globalizing (however defined), or even of glossing those problems, on the shoulders of first-year college composition students. Nor is it to insist on a

particular theme or issue for students to work on as the most “current.” First, there are any number of points of departure for undertaking such work. Second, insofar as the local is an “aspect of the global” (Beck 48), and global movement occurs only at and through the friction of the local (Tsing), any one aspect of experience and concern—including those we are accustomed to perceiving as “personal” and “private,” as well as those commonly identified as matters of “public” interest—can serve as a starting point for global-local articulation. Students are positioned from their specific locations with angles from which to articulate global-local relations, and to chart and revise courses of action engaging these that might be useful both to themselves and to others.

To take up such work with our students, however, also means complicating notions of the *local* and *location* that confine our attention to immediately tangible and face-to-face situations. For instance, many in composition and rhetoric, ourselves included, have developed a fluency in using the metaphors of insider versus outsider, or center versus periphery, to represent our felt sense of ease at or distance from a physical location—such as the number of street blocks traversed up a hill or across the railroad track, and the time required to commute between buildings and between home and school or work (see, for example, Tassoni). Furthermore, we’ve learned to think of social relations and actions in terms of physical bodies and body parts: community as “face-to-face,” friendship as “arm-in-arm,” solidarity as “shoulder-to-shoulder,” and change as “step-by-step” (Luke 123; qtd. in Bauman, *Globalization* 16–17).

Clearly, it is cogent to attend to the physicality of social-historical locations, relations, and actions: the reality of tangible borders separating nation-states, neighborhoods, or public and private properties, and mobility across them, is still a central stratifying mechanism in the current United States and around the world. Furthermore, as indicated by the writings of students like those discussed above, long-term commitments to the dominant values of some immediately tangible location and group of people—church, family, neighborhood, workplace (often perceived as under siege)—continue to be a priority for significant numbers of teachers and students.⁶ However, given the increasing value of extra-territorial mobility in the present-day social imaginary, we need to question whether attention to the physicality of social-historical locations, relations, and actions is by itself sufficient. For neither teachers nor students are immune to pressures to aspire to the extra-territorial mobility of the global elite. To the extent that institutions are no longer interested in “long-term” commitment to employees and do not expect the same from them, and to the extent that students are increasingly reliant on and subject to the whims of flexible—that is, contingent—employment to pay their way through school, as Scott’s accounts of his students suggest, pedagogies that aim to take a local-global approach to individual financial and career concerns can no longer rely solely on the

physicality of social location and interaction as a focus or as a way of accounting for one's aspirations. As Bauman notes, in the regime of flexible capital, to be localized territorially "feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison—all the more humiliating for the obtrusive sight of the [global elites'] freedom to move. [. . .] The locality in the new world of high speed [communication] is not what the locality used to be at a time when information moved only together with the bodies of its carriers" (*Globalization* 23–24).

Thus, if we are to treat students' concerns about financial security and career success as among the primary motivations for their writing and learning, the text (written and social) of reading and writing needs to include a sense of the destabilizing connotations of *locality*, *local populations*, and *local community* in a regime of flexibility, as well as teachers' and students' attachment to and/or discomfort with the shared way of life binding these in a fordist regime. The discipline's grappling with the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas of insiders and outsiders to, say, the academic or home community also needs to be informed by attention to the operation of the hegemonic value of extra-territorial mobility on the ground—in the day-to-day thoughts, feelings, actions, and interactions of actual teachers and students. Students and teachers may be emotionally attached to the idea of seeking to enter or participate in the building of a localized community, but both may also imaginatively aspire to achieve the extra-territorial mobility valued in the discourse of the flexible regime (see Bauman, *Consuming* 12–13).

Denying students' aspirations for extra-territorial mobility could render purely reactive the tactic of nostalgia Bryan composes in his writing. This would preclude the possibility of students' putting such tactics to use in weighing how they might respond to the valuing of extra-territorial mobility in a job market dominated by the flexible regime of fast capitalism. Conversely, neglecting students' attachment to the local would collude in what Ignacio Ramonet refers to as *la pensée unique* and Beck refers to as *globalism*—the assumption that there is no alternative to the global hegemony of neoliberal market fundamentalism (Ramonet; Beck 9; see also Halimi). This would mire a student like Greg in the notion that if he does not "roll with the [system], it'll roll right over me." Further, it would undercut the possibility of treating his hatred of "the idea of becoming part of the system" (Bean 109) as a resource motivating pursuit of ways to intervene against the disenfranchisement of people like himself, and his family and friends, effected by the extra-territorial mobility of global capital.

Keeping sight of the tension between one's attitude toward tangible and extra-territorial mobility can also help students and teachers examine the ways in which they themselves are subject not only to the disciplinary power of the fordist *panopticon*, in which the few watch the many, but also to the power of the neoliberal economy's *synopticon*, in which the many strive to be among those few considered

sufficiently credit-worthy to merit attention and “notice” (see Bauman, *Globalization* 48–53; *Consuming* 4–6). For example, we might consider discrepancies between the still-dominant view of the goal of education as preparing students to enter a stable workforce and (1) the decreasing need for such a workforce, (2) the emerging use of education as a means of securing one’s place in the synopticon’s databases of the credit-worthy, and (3) the training students receive in “the skills and usages of borrowing money and living on credit” (Bauman, *Consuming* 79)—training suddenly in question as a consequence of the global credit crisis.

Composition teachers’ own immersion in the tensions raised by such discrepancies can serve as a resource rather than a mere barrier in how we imagine and pursue our work in composition: a resource on which to draw in thinking through our career aspirations, plans, and decisions, and in shaping the professional training offered in graduate programs. There is, of course, a history of debate on the very idea of composition’s professionalization. Often, that debate is framed in terms of the kind and place of work that might be privileged—a commitment to teaching or research at a Research I school or a two-year college, or inside or outside departments of English—or in terms of strategies by which to improve working conditions—through collective bargaining or finding ways to argue persuasively for tenure and promotion, for example.⁷ But here we point to a different, if intersecting, feature of professionalization, the ways in which the profession itself serves as the point of intersection for a number of quite different kinds of career trajectories:

- careers closely paralleling imagined fordist careers of stable, secure (tenured) employment at a single institution, with only gradual, and limited, vertical mobility through self-discipline and delayed gratification (and few resources or rewards for pursuing extra-territorial mobility);
- careers marked by the globetrotting, elite status of professionals with CVs substantiating the national and international “demands” for their knowledge and expertise, and thus, for their ability to enhance the national and international “presence” of individual departments and institutions through affiliation with these professionals’ extra-territorially mobile knowledge capital;
- contingent careers (and careering) of instructors on the receiving end of institutional demands for flexibility and cooperation, who are all too familiar with the absence of any reciprocal long-term commitment from institutions;
- graduate careers aimed at avoiding some of these career patterns and getting on one of the other “tracks”;
- undergraduate careers not expected to end in academic work; ambivalently aspiring to the extra-territorial and/or escalator models of mobility.

The discrepancies between these various career trajectories make any invocation of “the profession” and “careers” problematic. At the same time, acknowledging the problematic, fractured character of careers in (and outside) the profession is a useful

point of departure for working with our students to develop global-local perspectives on, and strategies for addressing, the work of composition and the various possible meanings we might give to “professing” it. Rather than assume a stability to what we or our students want (or need) and our ability to achieve it ourselves or give it to them (whatever the politics of doing so); and rather than assume, as an alternative, a globalist world order with (by definition) only *la pensée unique* available to which we and our students must perforce accommodate ourselves and our thinking, we can join our students in thinking through the tensions and various possibilities of what we all might need, desire, and pursue in our work and in our composition.

The collapse of the global credit market and economy at the time of our drafting of this essay makes such a pedagogy all the more urgent and, simultaneously, viable. As shown by the manifest appeal of President Obama’s “Yes We Can” campaign, the economic crisis, in concert with growing and irrefutable signs of global warming, has led not simply to putting the ideology of neoliberal market fundamentalism to serious challenge. It has also reawakened a desire for alternatives to both fast and fordist economic models, and led people to recognize ways in which, as Beck has put it, “Our own life is the locus of the glocal” economically, intellectually, physically, viscerally (74). Coming to terms with that locus demands redefining the meaning of what we and our students must learn to be critical and pragmatic about, and the direction in which, together, we must career.

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NOTES

1. For a very different kind of response, see Garay and Bernhardt, and especially Bernhardt and Farmer.

2. For an example of such curriculum design and its effect on how students address their financial concerns, see Lu, “Class Matters.”

3. For a detailed discussion of extra-territorial mobility, see Bauman, *Globalization* 18–26.

4. For an analysis of this complex of aspirations among those in the dot-com industry, see Andrew Ross’s *No-Collar*.

5. Here we see ourselves arguing for something aligned with the call by Richard E. Miller and Michael J. Cripps for first-year composition courses that challenge students “to use their writing to engage with a set of problems that belong to no one discipline” (131).

6. See, for example, David Seitz’s accounts of his working-class students’ commitments (216–18).

7. See, for example, Bousquet; Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola; France, Lalicker, and Teutsch; Gorzelsky; Grabill et al.; Gunner; Harris; Horner, “Redefining”; Murphy; O’Neill; Sled; Trimbur.

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