

With fewer fulltime faculty, service obligations mount and overwhelm. Focused on shrinking budgets, administration does not listen to faculty concerns. Those with fulltime jobs, all too aware of colleagues straining to make ends meet as contingent faculty, feel guilty for acknowledging their own struggles with academic labour. We are frustrated and want to take action. But there is uncertainty as to how to best approach such a complex problem, one that has structural roots in neoliberal governance policies but that feels all too personal to artists and scholars whose self-identity is entwined with their creative and scholarly work.

Thus the following year in Baltimore we change the prompt from “how’s work?” to “what’s working?” Our booth becomes a space to share strategies of success, brainstorm solutions, and offer suggestions for action. Some strategies seem small, but can have far-reaching effects: a standing desk and good sleep practices make big differences in energy levels. Co-teaching and syllabus sharing ease pedagogical burdens. Supporting contingent faculty and forming writing groups creates a sense of shared purpose and camaraderie. Other suggestions have broader reach. Take advantage of current scholarly trends to find interdisciplinary research support. Personally invite administrators to performance workshops and theatrical events to help them understand our field. Expand the professional development offerings of professional organizations to train faculty faced with increasing administrative tasks. The process reminds us how institutional structures discipline our bodies and expectations of behaviour, and prevent faculty mobilization. But how might casual coffees, walks around campus, town-hall forums or forum theatre, meetings in the gym or in the park, and open discussion of academic labour allow for creative thinking and problem solving?

From my two years volunteering with the Working Conditions Task Force, it is evident that theatre and performance scholars want to talk about working conditions and academic labour. But it is also clear that faculty and graduate students aren’t at all confident that their opinion matters or that their voices will be heard. Professional organizations like ASTR are listening to their members’ creative suggestions, and devising strategies for response. But these ideas go nowhere without support from institutions. Administration needs to ask faculty and graduate students “how’s work?” and learn from their answers. Faculty need to know that their administration is not only listening to them, but also learning from them.



Thinking a Public University

JENNY SALISBURY

[T]he discrepancy between thinking a public space and actually achieving it—or how to achieve it, with powerlessness in the presence of the sources of power, somehow able to change it—**that** remains the biggest question of any century.

—Herbert Blau

On Friday, March 27, 2015, a headline for *The Globe and Mail* announced, “[b]inding arbitration means U of T strike is over, but issues are not resolved” (Chiose). By the time the article

was published, I had been back in the classroom for a full day, exhausted from walking (dancing, marching, jumping, singing) on the picket line since March 2. As I write now, the strike, and the ideological and political discourse that surrounds it, remain an open question, especially as the results of binding arbitration are still over a month away. Whatever the result, the debate surrounding higher education, wealth, and the rise of neo-liberal corporate structures within our public institutions will linger.

In his comprehensive article “Who’s there?—Community of the Question,” Herbert Blau draws a line from the opening question of *Hamlet*, through to the contemporary online simulacra of digital performance, in order to ask, “what’s *not* theatre, if all the world’s a stage or life is a dream or an insubstantial pageant fading?” (12). If I approach the strike action we undertook in March 2015, I am brought to ask, along with Blau, who is “we”? Who was there, creating that action, thinking a solidarity, voicing a united position from a diverse field of individuals? Our experience of union solidarity embraced Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze’s view of nature: “a unity composed of difference, embodying at once solidarity, heterogeneity, and fecundity, that is, the production of new forms of existence” (Evans 1). For all of us implicated in the strike, we were compelled into a production of new forms, negotiating for space, for voice, for identity, and for solidarity.

I will not use this forum to wade into the issues, for if readers are interested, that immediate and necessary discussion continues in other spaces. What I examine here is who participated in the strike action, and how it approached public space. When scholars strike, it appears that we bring our disciplines with us, using the tools and structures of our scholarship to inform our public action. Political science and history students staged “teach ins”—sharing the history and significance of labour disputes, both in Canada and globally. Language scholars staged a multi-lingual solidarity rally, teaching us chants and cheers in Romantic, Slavic, and Asian languages. The Medievalists translated *Solidarity Forever* into Latin, and the Classicists, while reminding us that Greece is where democracy started,¹ led chants from Greek choruses, exclaiming our dismay at the present situation. Graduate students who were also parents led a stroller rally, with passionate speeches and songs about children and democratic action. The list is endless, as students brought their own research and knowledge to the task at hand. I was fortunate enough to be part of the Hype Squad, a dedicated group of performance students, joined by others from history, political science, linguistics, and English, who used performance, music, puppets, costumes and dance to change the energy and conversations at rallies and picket lines.

As Cami Rowe suggests in *The Politics of Protest and US Foreign Policy*, “[e]ven in the absence of such heightened meaning-making frames, performances at all levels impart moments of liminality wherein social norms can be negotiated and potentially transgressed” (13). Our protest interrupted the normative structures of public Universities, and asked if the current climate of academia was the way we wished to continue. Those of us on the picket lines imagined other ways universities could be, and we took the tools that we knew, that we study and teach, to bring that conversation into public discourse.

Today, when I walk across campus, the sidewalks are haunted. Traces of our labour dispute, our performative intervention, and our collaborative action, echo between the buildings. Like Carlson’s *Haunted Stage*, the University is also “a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions” (2). The memory

of this strike has become part of the body of the university. The diversity of our disciplines and research is mirrored in the diversity of our gathered scholarly body, and is mirrored again by the complexity of the individual within that public body. Returning to Blau, the idea of public itself is unstable: “As for the appearance of reality in the age of simulacra, dominated by the media, where there appears to be no reality except appearance, it’s hard to think of how in that psychic environment there is anything approximating a public” (8). Yet, we still craft and curate public spaces, despite their incomplete, unsatisfying existence. The project of thinking a public space, of thinking a public university, emphasizes the distance between that thinking and its creation. It also reveals their construction, authored by a community of the question—responding to “who’s there”?

Notes

- 1 One of the common chants on the picket lines was a simple call and response. Caller: Tell me what democracy looks like. Response: This is what democracy looks like. At the Classics rally, the chant became: Caller: Tell me where democracy started. Response: Greece is where democracy started.

Works Cited

- Blau, Herbert. “Who’s There? Community of the Question.” *Performing Arts Journal (PAJ)* 28.2 (May 2006): 1-12. Print.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre As Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002. Print.
- Chiose, Simona. “Binding arbitration means U of T strike is over, but issues are not resolved.” *The Globe and Mail*. 27 Mar. 2015. Web. 1 Jun. 2015.
- Evans, Fred. “Unnatural Participation: Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, and Environmental Ethics.” *Philosophy Today* 54 (2010): 142-52. Print.
- Rowe, Cami. *The Politics of Protest and US Foreign Policy: performative construction of the war on terror*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013. Print.