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Crystal Bartolovich
Syracuse University

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"In this life, we want nothing but Facts . . ." ¹

Crystal Bartolovich

Crystal Bartolovich is an Assistant Professor of English and Textual Studies at Syracuse University, where she teaches cultural studies and seventeenth-century English literature. She has published numerous essays on early modern and contemporary culture, and she is currently working on a book manuscript, "Boundary Disputes," which takes up the problem of "space" in the early modern period.

I must confess that when first asked, in 1996, to participate in a MLA special session on the Yale strikes, I was doubtful that those strikes (as important as I think they are in numerous ways) had anything whatsoever to do with literary criticism. However, while reading the Fall 1996 *MLA Newsletter* I changed my mind as call after call for more stringent "fact-finding" procedures in the resolution process passed before my eyes. There are more references to the need for "facts" in the "President's Column" and the "Comments" of the executive council members in that publication than even Mr. Gradgrind could shake a stick at. This obsession with the "facts" piqued my curiosity from both a theoretical and a political perspective. For one thing, such a firm, uncritical faith in "the facts" seems at odds with the usual positions taken by humanists on these matters. Whether because they ally themselves with the Dickensian view that "the facts" can't get at everything (which is why we *need* poetry, ethics, and humanistic thought in the first place), or because they have kept up with the most cutting-edge work in critical theory, which suggests that the processes of meaning-production call into question any simple division of labor between "fact-finding" and "interpretation," few literary critics these days would accept that "fact" bears any simple relationship to "truth," or that either of these categories can be separated from problems of interpretation. Remarkably, however, nowhere in the *Newsletter* does anyone raise the possibility that we might be dealing primarily with a problem of *interpretation* in the various controversies and disruptions

that have ensued in the wake of the Yale strikes, and of Resolution 6 in particular. Pursuing the reasons for this curious neglect might tell us something, it seems to me, about how the Yale strikes — to which most of this concern over “the facts” has been directed — shed some light on problems in literary criticism (and vice versa).

As a starting place, I can cite one of the MLA’s own publications: *Redrawing the Boundaries*.² An article on “Cultural Criticism” in that volume suggests that

[t]heory . . . has become a name for the reflective or second-order discourse that breaks out when a community’s previously unspoken assumptions are no longer taken for granted. These assumptions then become objects of explicit formulation and debate — very likely because the confines of the community are breached. Literary theory emerges when critics and teachers of literature no longer share agreements on the meaning of terms like literature, meaning, text, author, criticism, reading, aesthetic value, history, teaching, discipline and department — and, of course, culture. (Graff and Robbins 428)

When there is agreement about the “keywords” used in a specific discourse community, the definitions of these terms appear to be “common sense” or “the facts.” Disagreement, on the other hand, exposes a certain ambiguity about determining “the facts,” and reminds us that what we see is irreducibly dependent on our frames of reference.

Resolution 6 — I do not think anyone would dispute — has brought to the fore numerous disagreements: about the mission of the MLA, the organization of the university, the relationship of graduate students to universities, and the legitimacy of unions in an academic context. To read the *Fall Newsletter*, however, you would think that the only issues it raises concern the mechanics of the resolution process: the difficulty of ascertaining “facts,” and the ethics of censure. I do not wish to belittle these concerns; what does trouble me, however, is that they seem to have entirely overshadowed the substantive issues of Resolution 6. What we should be seeing in the Resolution 6 dilemma, it seems to me, is not *primarily* a problem with the resolution process, but rather a breakdown in fundamental assumptions, a disagreement about values and basic definitions. “Union,” “University,” “MLA” and “academic community” have become “community-breaching” concepts, in Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins’ terms. However, examination of disputes around these “keywords” has been rather peremptorily laid aside as the MLA officers direct us to the presumably more important work of “getting the facts” — or, more accurately, talking about the importance of getting the facts (which takes us even further away from the important issues raised by Resolution 6).

To refresh your memory, here are a few examples of comments from the Executive Council on the resolution process as they appear in the *Fall 1996 Newsletter*:

— “I have serious doubts about the appropriateness of resolutions censuring individuals or institutions, since these imply quasi-judicial *fact-finding* procedures that the MLA is not equipped to conduct” (15; emphasis added)

— "I'd propose that all resolutions citing by name a specific person or educational institution be sent directly to a standing committee on *fact-finding*" (emphasis added).

— "*Fact-finding* takes time, and as scholars and in the interest of fairness, we owe it to ourselves to take that time before risking that divisiveness" (14; emphasis added).

— "Emergency resolutions seldom afford adequate opportunity for *checking facts* or soliciting other opinions and should therefore be abandoned in their present form" (16; emphasis added).

— "When a resolution includes complicated and controversial issues, it is difficult to *amass enough information* to foster judicious decisions" (14; emphasis added).

The headnote that introduces these comments helpfully points out that they were generated in response to "questions about emergency resolutions and resolutions that censure institutions or individuals [that] came up after the 1995 convention."

The 1995 convention was, of course, the very one at which Resolution 6, an "emergency resolution" censuring the administration (individuals) of a particular institution (Yale), came onto the floor. Although Resolution 6 is not explicitly mentioned in the comments by executive council members from which the above-cited quotations are drawn, the repeated references to "emergency resolution" and "censure" keeps pulling it in as a subtext — but not in order to consider any of its substantive issues; the council appears to see such resolutions only as dangers to be avoided. Indeed, aside from a repression of "Yale" while talking of it constantly, what all of the writers for the executive council seem to share is a fear that (1) because of resolutions like 6, the MLA is vulnerable to lawsuits if its resolution process is not changed, and (2) a proper defense against such legal challenge is to institute a committee (between the delegate assembly and the membership) to facilitate the collection and "checking" of "facts" in proposed resolutions. This is not so simple a proposition as it sounds in the abstract, as I will argue below, nor are its difficulties primarily ones of "amassing" and "checking" as the executive council implies — but first, back to the "facts" at hand.

An obsession with "the facts" — similar to that found in the executive council members' comments cited above — also manifests itself in the three letters from Yale senior faculty that accompanied the printed texts of the 1995 resolutions, circulated to the membership after the MLA that year. In the first of these letters, Annabel Patterson establishes this theme in her opening sentence, which claims that she will reveal "the facts that lie behind the graduate students' inflammatory rhetoric" in Resolution 6. Likewise, Margaret Homans contends that Resolution 6 is "factually erroneous, slanderous and personally motivated," while Linda Peterson and Ruth Yeazell critique the Delegate Assembly for passing the resolution before "ascertaining the facts." Homans additionally calls for the emendation of the MLA constitution to prevent the passage of such "groundless" resolutions in the future. I draw attention to this particular theme in these letters because we find it repeated so emphatically not only in the comments of the executive council that I quote above but also, even more forcefully and explicitly, in Sandra Gilbert's analysis of the Yale situation.³

In her “President’s Column” in the Fall 1996 *Newsletter*, Gilbert presents numerous objections from the membership to the passage of Resolution 6 on evidential, political, and other grounds, including the claims that the accused were given insufficient opportunity to defend themselves, that the membership who voted in favor of the resolution improperly leapt to the conclusion that the complainant was right, and — the unkindest cut of all — that the presentation of facts in the case of Resolution 6 on the part of its proposers was so shoddy that it “betrays the ordinary standards of scholarship.” The bulk of Gilbert’s column is given over to the reported speech and writing of those MLA members who think that the resolution process in general, and Resolution 6 in particular, are silly at best, and perhaps even evil and destructive of our professional practice. Lurking behind all of these comments (reinforced by the constant repetition of this theme in the executive council members’ comments), is the assertion that “the facts” were never properly established in the case of Resolution 6, a view that Gilbert herself admits to holding: “I too am deeply disturbed by the same questions about standards of evidence that have troubled others who had procedural objections to the Yale resolution.” This announcement is followed by a paragraph in which she details in the most incriminating way possible the ostensible bad behavior of proponents of Resolution 6 at the delegate assembly meeting. The story — for her column — ends there.

However, in the real world, as opposed to the “made for *MLA Newsletter* version,” the story does not end there. Gilbert fails to mention the eight pages of dissenting letters from Yale faculty and administrators (cited above) which went out with the first mailing on the 1995 resolutions, a forum that gave these members of the Yale community ample opportunity — an opportunity denied to the “complainants,” it should be added — to present, at length, both a defense and “the facts” as they saw them, to the membership as a whole. Additionally, no mention is made by Gilbert that, in spite of the attempt by these Yale faculty to discredit the resolution — which one would presume was through the best possible case that they could devise — the membership who voted was not convinced by their “facts.”

One possible explanation for why these two niggling little matters are left out of Gilbert’s account is that if this longer story is told, it becomes rather more difficult to describe the Resolution 6 dilemma in terms of a crisis over “facts” and “standards of evidence.” Although they claim to be bringing the flaming sword of “the facts” to cut through to the truth obscured by the “rhetoric” of Resolution 6, the letters from the Yale senior faculty actually offer little evidence of disagreement about any significant “facts” whatsoever. If one does not assume from the get-go that unions are inappropriate at Yale, or in general, the letters actually *corroborate* Resolution 6 by indicating that the striking graduate instructors were motivated by an attempt to have their elected union recognized by the administration, that they had made many other attempts through less drastic means to gain this recognition, and, most importantly, that threats of firing and other repercussions were directed at these instructors.⁴ These are the crucial “facts,” the very ones that the National Labor Relations Board found easily determinable, and upon which they based their decision that the Yale administration behaved improperly.⁵ However, instead

of focusing on the problem of interpretation raised by these issues — real differences about the relationship of graduate students to universities, the status of academic labor, and the value of unions for academic organizing — the presentation of the resolution dilemma in the Fall *Newsletter* seems to claim that the 3,828 members of the MLA who voted for Resolution 6 must be poor scholars, swayed by “passion,” who did not have the best interests of the profession, the MLA or “scholarship” in mind.

In order to see if there is any merit to such a view, let us examine the actual sites of disagreement as the letters of the Yale anti-union faculty indicate them. (1) The letter writers contend that the graduate instructors’ union is illegitimate and therefore cannot serve as an appropriate motivation to action; Resolution 6 contends that the union is legitimate and is being thwarted unfairly by the Yale administration. (2) The letter writers aver that conditions at Yale are not so bad that they warrant a union in any case; Resolution 6 asserts the right of the graduate instructors to make their own decisions on this score. (3) The letter writers argue that threats of firing and academic blacklisting do not constitute inappropriate responses to what they see as unwarranted and inappropriate actions on the part of the graduate instructors; Resolution 6 sees these threats as union-busting “academic reprisals” in the sense that they disrupt the possibility of “academic community” in any but the terms of the Yale administration (about which more below). These disagreements, I think it is rather easy to see, arise not at the level of “the facts” (in spite of the claims of the letter writers), but rather at the level of *interpretation*.

Let us assume for a moment, then, that an MLA “fact-finding” committee *had* been in place and that Resolution 6 had been referred to it. On what exactly would they have ruled? On the simple “facts” (that graduate instructors did not hand in their grades; that they were threatened with disciplinary action and loss of jobs), there was *no* disagreement between the claims of Resolution 6 and those of the Yale senior faculty who wrote their letters attempting to undermine it. Indeed, a letter (from senior Yale administrators) threatening the striking student-instructors with the loss of their jobs is actually included (as an attachment) with the materials sent out by the Yale senior faculty. Given this mass of “evidence,” what would a “fact-finding” committee decide? Whether or not unions were appropriate organizing agents for graduate instructors? Whether or not grade strikes were appropriate activities? Whether or not the Yale strikers’ grievances were “real”? I for one would be extremely unhappy with the insertion of an MLA committee between the membership and the Delegate Assembly on these matters of interpretation — which would constitute a profoundly undemocratic move. Before we shift to any such system, then, we should be clear about its potential implications, especially given the tendency the MLA leadership has shown to displace so very problematically issues of “interpretation” into issues of “fact” in the case of Resolution 6.

That so many of the anti-union commentators on the strike have failed to notice this odd equivocation between interpretive problems and “factual” ones seems to stem from a fantasy that if only “the facts” were known, then the Yale administrators obviously would have been exonerated and the graduate instructors exposed as ungrateful, spoiled children who were acting up. Instead of

admitting the possibility that conflicting visions of the relations of students to universities are at stake here — and, in “fact,” that the world might look like a quite different place from the empyrean height of the Karl Young Chair and the more earthy plane of graduate life, even graduate life at Yale⁶ — many MLA officers seem to assume that those who voted in favor of Resolution 6 must have misunderstood, been deluded by, or blinded themselves to, the “actual” situation. This astonishes and dismays me, not only because my vote (and that of many others whom I know personally, and with whom I discussed these issues at length) was highly informed and thoughtful, and I am insulted by the implication that such a vote necessarily indicates shoddy scholarship and “prejudice,” but also — more importantly — because I think that in the displacement of a question of “interpretation” into a question of “the facts,” one of the most important issues of the Yale strikes for the MLA is being occluded — namely, that the visions of “scholarly community” that underlie the various positions taken are radically different. On the one hand, the Yale senior faculty seem to assume that “academic community” is something that we already have, a given, and that a union is, thus, a threat to the very “ideals and standards” upon which that community is based. On the other hand, the striking graduate instructors seem to be suggesting that we need to rethink “academic community” altogether.

As I read the letters from the senior Yale faculty — which I did, very carefully, many, many times *before* I voted — I was struck by their reliance on a certain vision of “academic community” as opposed to “corporate community” or a wage relation. The senior administration at Yale, for example, described its rationale for refusal to recognize the union as “educational reasons,” emphasizing the difference between the university and other payers of wages. In other words, the university community is special and fragile and unions contaminate it. Margaret Homans puts it this way: “it is not possible for Yale students — in training, after all, to occupy professional positions — to constitute the proletarianized body they claim to be.” What both of these commentators take pains to assert is that the university in general — and Yale in particular — is a qualitatively different sort of space than a corporation and that its internal relations *cannot*, then, be ones of exploitation but must, rather, be ones in which its members will, in time, be able to work things out in “an atmosphere of mutual respect.” Annabel Patterson, after pointing out — emphatically — early in her letter that unions are not conducive to “an appropriate relationship between students and faculty in a non-profit organization” concludes her letter with the observation that the faculty “regret that graduate student anxieties, especially about their future in a constrained job market, have led to such alienation” and offers the assurance that the Yale faculty “continues to work hard to improve morale and communication, and to persuade students that the teaching profession has ideals and standards which can never be identical with those in an industry or corporation.” It is easy to sympathize with such assertions; the myth of “academic community” is one of the most powerful ideologies in the academy — and it *is* attractive: a fantasy of the space outside of capitalism where scholars think deep thoughts and organize their mutual relations with receptive and supportive colleagues in an “atmosphere of mutual respect” with

no exploitation or pettiness anywhere in sight.⁷ However, if we attempt to examine this myth outside the sentimental haze produced by hooding ceremonies and their appeal to the "ancient and universal community of scholars," we can begin to ask questions of power that paint a different landscape than the idyllic scene of the grove of academe (now disrupted, alas, by those unruly and indecorous graduate students) that the senior faculty from the putative Garden of Yale attempt to conjure up.

To consider these questions of power, it might be helpful to recall that people can (and necessarily do) occupy multiple subject positions at the same time. It is possible to be "a student" and "an employee" simultaneously, and for the interests of each of these roles to conflict with the other, depending upon the structuring relations. For example, if we change the above formulation to "a woman" and "an employee," it probably would be relatively easier for most readers to see what I am getting at. Although as an "employee" a woman may be "well-paid" and have "good-benefits" as these are understood under conditions of capitalism, she might at the same time be treated in a patronizing or unprofessional ways by male colleagues who rationalize their behavior by appeals to certain male and female "roles" in the social order. Or, alternatively, an employer might claim he is treating a female employee "well" even while paying her less than men who perform comparable tasks, on all sorts of grounds that now seem questionable to most people but not so very long ago seemed perfectly "natural."⁸

With this in mind, going back to my example of students who are also employees, I want to open up the possibility of imagining that what might *appear* to be treating "students" well, according to a certain set of traditional hierarchical (even quasi-"feudal") assumptions (for instance, that graduate students are bound to the senior faculty by ties of duty and should rely on them to manage their relations with the administration rather than act as agents on their own behalf), might well leave them exploited as "employees," especially under current conditions in which so-called "apprenticeship" leads so infrequently to tenure-track employment. At Yale in 1994-5, for example, the combined placement record of 10 humanities departments was only 27%, which must have left many students — not to mention the 73% of candidates who remained unplaced — doubtful, if not rueful, that they were "in training . . . to occupy professional positions" (as Margaret Homans asserts) since painfully few of these positions seemed to exist (Young 184). In any case, surely the senior faculty at Yale can't really believe that they are simply doing graduate assistants an "educational" favor by hiring them to grade papers for the large lecture classes, and that the department and the university benefit not at all from this arrangement? Only according to the logic of a Tom Sawyer tricking his friends into whitewashing the fence for him can we be expected to go along with such a ruse.

Of course it is important to be able to point out the ways in which the university is not exploitative in the same way that a factory is, but it is also helpful to be able to see the ways in which it *is* like a factory, if one is interested in creating a real alternative to capital, to whose needs the university, as well as factories, are subsumed. Willy-nilly, universities *are* increasingly taking on the

practices and discourses of corporate capital. Jeff Williams recently catalogued many instances of this trend, noting in particular an administrative fascination with “productivity” in publications from the *New York Times* to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. One of my own former employers, Carnegie Mellon University, has even been praised by *Business Week* magazine as exemplary in its move toward corporate-style management: “Managing a university as if it were a business seems to pay off. . . . Research money pours into [Carnegie Mellon’s] computer science department. Industry pays for fully half of the engineering department, with each professor bringing in an average of \$215,000 a year in outside research money” (Baker 116). In 1994 alone, Carnegie Mellon received over a million and a half dollars in royalties for its technological and other inventions. Lest you think that this performance was singular, I hasten to add that thirty universities earned even more that year in this way — including Yale.⁹

Indeed, in spite of the confident assertions of the senior faculty in English that Richard Levin is one of them, and that he does not see Yale as a corporation, the president’s actual practice suggests otherwise. A recent *Business Week* article reports that “Levin has for several years mulled what many of his peers have considered for their colleges — running the place like a business. ‘We have to manage this institution efficiently,’ he says, ‘we cannot do everything under the sun’” (Jackson 102). Only faculty and alumni resistance, the article goes on to claim — not a devotion to the singularity of academic community attributed to him by Annabel Patterson, et al. — have limited Levin’s efforts to downsize Yale as rapidly as he would like. Meanwhile, numerous other institutions are downsizing at a more or less rapid pace, increasing their use of part-time and graduate student instructional labor with alacrity, as well as increasing teaching loads and course enrollment numbers.¹⁰ Hence, Evan Watkins has observed recently that though “the analogy [between a factory and a university] doesn’t yield a point-by-point comparison, . . . there seems to me good reason to suspect that the dominance of a capitalist mode of production has involved structurally comparable transformations of ‘intellectual’ work as well, such that it would be no more possible to imagine a university English department as Samuel Johnson’s study writ large than to imagine a factory as a giant artisan’s workshop” (14). Watkins’ point is that while it might not be accurate, strictly speaking, to analyze English teachers as proletarians (a view he vehemently rejects), it might be important to wonder how the structure of the university as a workplace changes as capital restructures, and what impact these changes have on English — and other — teachers.

One of the changes that occurs in such a situation is that “academic community” comes to signify differently as the vast majority of its members find themselves in an unanticipated position relative both to the institutions in which they work and to each other. Stanley Aronowitz has chronicled the declining power of faculty organizations relative to administrative staffs backed by boards of trustees over the past two decades as universities modeled themselves more on corporate and less on communal models. He observes: “Nearly all institutions of higher education maintain the formal apparatus of faculty sovereignty. . . . But in both public and private university sectors, power to make decisions has slowly shifted to administrators who now retain final determina-

tion of nearly all university issues" (91). Aronowitz, rightly I think, sees this as an assault on academic freedom — not in the sense of an *individual's* freedom to think, research and write as he or she sees fit, but rather in terms of "the rights of the faculty as a collectivity to retain sovereignty over the educational process" (91). This important reminder that "academic freedom" is an issue for a *community* and not just for individuals is salutary. At a time when, especially for humanists, the university is changing radically, we find ourselves in a position to rethink not just what the university should be but to whom it belongs: questions that crises such as recent labor unrest at Yale bring to the fore dramatically.

These questions of "belonging" confront the next (potential) generation of scholars most immediately and painfully. When less than half of the advertised jobs in English — according to the MLA's own data — are tenure-track in any given year, it is not surprising that graduate students are unwilling to suffer their graduate years in silence.¹¹ For many of them, unions have come to represent a chance at belonging, after all, to an "academic community" of which they too have dreamed but which seems increasingly elusive. To anyone who thinks that unionization is, of itself, the death of that community, and that unions, like the resolution process, *incite* divisiveness, this must seem misguided at best. But I would like to put forth another reading: that neither unions nor the MLA's resolution process *cause* divisiveness; they are, rather, symptoms of divides that are already here. To fail to recognize this is to continue to see an imperiled (but pure) community where there is actually already (to borrow from Graff and Robbins) a breach. For this reason, I found it disturbing that Sandra Gilbert refers (in the Fall *MLA Newsletter*) to the "sides" of the dispute in the Yale strikes as "the union" and "Yale," with the unfortunate implication that the striking graduate instructors — most of whom had been at Yale longer than at least one of the letter writers among the full-time faculty — are not part of Yale. For the graduate instructors, however, the union is not a declaration of independence from an actually existing academic community called "Yale." It is rather an assertion of rights to some meaningful powers of self-determination in a community-to-be called Yale to which they contribute their labor, pedagogic, scholarly, and political.

Hegemony theory offers us a way to analyze this situation in a more helpful manner than accusing dissenters of inciting divisiveness (see note 3). It directs us to examine the dynamic among competing group interests and consider why the "consent" of subordinated groups (such as, in this case, graduate students) to the rule of the dominant academic ideology of "community" has broken down (which is another way of saying that "the confines of the community are breached"). Seen from this perspective, the function of the call for "fact" collecting on the part of the senior faculty at Yale emerges as an attempt to "define the situation" in such a way that it can be resolved on terms most favorable to them, at a moment when dominant ideology is in crisis. Ideology works by naturalizing a partial view as universal and necessary: as "fact." Hence, the senior faculty at Yale want to try to make it seem to be a "fact" that unions are inappropriate organizing vehicles for university teachers, that graduate instructors are simply "students" and not in any sense "employees," and that

the university is somehow outside of capitalism. Other definitions of the situation are, of course, possible. Graduate student unions disrupt the balance of power in the universities, including the power of the senior faculty to “define the situation.” Rather than relying on their advisors to see that they are looked after when departmental largess is handed out, or assuming that the very senior faculty who benefit from the pleasures of graduate teaching — and a decrease in their own work load provided by graduate assistants and instructors — can be relied upon to advocate student interests at all times, graduate students are increasingly taking matters into their own hands. In doing so they “define the situation” of graduate study and employment rather differently than their senior colleagues. If the MLA senior staff and officers could manage for a moment to think of the ensuing disagreements as a struggle among competing “definitions of the situation” rather than a stark black and white of “facts” (a position so unnuanced that they would be unlikely to bring it to their study of literature), they might be able to see how they have simply taken on in their discourse of “facts” the “definition of the situation” of one side in the Yale dispute. A more balanced perspective would prompt them to bring the interpretive skills and appreciation of complexity gleaned from their professional practice to bear as forcefully upon this social text as upon literary ones.

Of course if it is so, as I am suggesting, that the positions of the senior faculty at Yale who wrote the letters, and those of the senior MLA staff as well, are “interested” rather than neutral “fact” amassing, then what of the striking students: are their positions “interested” too? Surely, yes. It is here that the question of “justice” — and some recognition of the ways in which different relations to concrete, material conditions of existence can lead to quite different “definitions of the situation” — must come into play. One of the striking students has described a moment of recognition and politicization in his graduate career when, as a young and doubtful-of-unions newcomer to Yale, he had listened to the narrative of an older graduate student who, because he had a wife and child who needed to be included in his health plan, ended up being forced to give “roughly half of his income back to Yale for health care” coverage. Coming up against the hard realities of graduate life for himself and his peers caused him to conclude that “there really are issues of justice here. GESO [union] has the moral high ground; it’s not *just* Yale [the corporation] trying to do what’s in their interest and we’re trying to do what’s in our interest” (quoted in Robin and Stephens 60; emphasis added). This sorting out of “interest” in a materialist analysis proceeds by way of examining the relative structural positions of the speakers. In this instance, we might well ask whether it might not be possible that graduate students are in a better position than the senior faculty at Yale to see the “facts” that matter and the interpretations that matter *for justice* in the case of Resolution 6.

So what is to be done? I propose foremost that we think about what “academic community,” as we wish to have it, means in explicit terms, without assuming that “academic community” is some timeless, obvious and perfect thing that we already have, that has somehow suddenly become threatened by unruly graduate students and pesky unions. Community is, rather, what we must imagine and work *for*, with clear-eyed analysis of the complex material

conditions in which we all (at present, unequally) work. Moving the debate in this direction will push the emphasis from the local divisiveness that unions supposedly generate to the long-term possibilities for an academic community that is democratic and broad-based in ways we might not yet be able to comprehend fully. This is not to say that there is — pluralistically — room for everyone; the Annabel Pattersons of the world, who confuse the capitulation of graduate students to administrative interests with “mutual respect,” are, it must be said, not very promising candidates. In the meantime, we cannot give in to a fear of taking stands because powerful groups (such as the Yale administration) might be unhappy about it and threaten lawsuits (which would be possible no matter how many “facts” are collected so long as fundamental disagreements about how to interpret them are in force). Dismissing the perspective of an opponent as due to “passion” rather than “reason,” “rhetoric” rather than “fact,” and “prejudice” as opposed to objectivity — as the senior Yale faculty and MLA officers have attempted to do — stops the debate to be sure. But at what cost? Surely it is not impertinent at this juncture to consider the power relations that have structured the MLA’s representation of what counts as “fact” and what does not, what counts as “reasonable” and what does not, what counts as “neutral” and what does not, in the case of Resolution 6.

This said, let me be perfectly clear about what I am *not* saying. I am not suggesting that “evidence” is unimportant and that resolutions should be free-for-alls in which anyone can say anything whatsoever and that the membership should simply go along. Resolutions should be carefully scrutinized by the membership, and as much information should be circulated concerning them as is possible. The recently-instituted revision to the resolution process — which provides a forum for members to comment on the resolutions prior to voting — is very helpful. Given that safeguards such as this are already in place, however, what I *am* suggesting is that a situation in which a resolution composed of out-and-out lies would be proposed strikes me as extremely unlikely; establishing the “facts” is not so much of an issue as the executive council and president of the MLA are claiming.

The vague and obsessive focus upon “the facts” seems to function as a distraction, a red herring, more than anything else, especially since Resolution 6, the motivating case for “reform” of the resolution process (in ways that renders it less democratic), does not really fit the “lack of facts” thesis when examined carefully. MLA members are sophisticated readers of text, and those who actually vote on resolutions have numerous means to become well-informed on the issues under discussion (which in these days of the computerized databases and e-mail is easier than ever before). I myself read the (anti-union) comments on Yale’s official web page and every article in major US papers written on Yale and strikes since 1984 to get a sense of its administration’s past behavior in labor disputes (not very nice). I also saw a great deal of diverse and thoughtful material written on the strikes, including a widely circulated letter penned by Yale senior faculty who *supported* the striking instructors (a view not explicitly represented in MLA publications at all). Given a highly literate, engaged, and research-skilled membership, I think a case of outright fraud in a resolution extremely unlikely, and its passage even less likely.

What is likely, however, is that numerous issues will arise that will be contentious, and in which each side's position might well look outrageous, unfair, and impossible to the other. The NLRB's list of faculty and administrators at Yale who threatened students during the strike is unlikely to convince those faculty that they acted improperly if they do not accept the students' right to organize and strike, however incriminating the list might look to those readers who see the strike differently. On the other hand, the declaration of Yale's PR department on its webpage that "Yale is a good employer!" with its list of aspects of life at Yale that support this contention to its own satisfaction, is unlikely to convince unsatisfied workers (or their supporters), whether they are in the library, the classroom, or the kitchen. The point here is not that there are no "facts" but rather that no amassing of "facts" — without attention to the underlying issues through which we "see" them — is going to get us very far in the debate over how to conduct the resolution process.

So I think it is lamentable that the important issues raised by Resolution 6 (about the status of graduate students in the universities, their labor, the restructuring of universities, the possibilities of new ways of imagining "academic community") have been displaced onto an argument about how the resolution process should be conducted — an argument that seems to keep us from looking at the issues of the resolution as we go around and around about the process of generating them. (This is not to say that these issues are not being discussed by MLA officers, or in forums the MLA provides; I am simply suggesting that it is unfortunate that Resolution 6 has been excluded as a site for these discussions.) It is, of course, much easier to debate how we should make resolutions than to debate what they say, at least in the case of the really controversial ones; there are, surely, no simple answers to the issues raised by Resolution 6.

In "fact," I'm not entirely convinced myself that unions (as we know them) are the best way to achieve "academic community," or that grade strikes are the best possible strategy for academic unions to deploy. But I *am* convinced that my vote to censure the Yale administration was well-informed, thoughtful and in good faith; I still think that graduate students should have some rights of self-determination, and thus that the administration at Yale behaved badly to thwart their unionization efforts. This is, I maintain, a reasonable conclusion to come to from the "facts" available for review, as produced by both the university's administration and their supporters, as well as the critics. I am also convinced that Resolution 6 should have marked the beginning of an ongoing public discussion of these issues — not the end of "emergency resolutions." It is unfortunate that the interpretive grid provided by MLA officers suggests that a vote to censure Yale's administration was tantamount to a declaration of professional incompetence, and hence that no one need take the issues raised by Resolution 6 (other than the purely formal ones about the resolution process itself) seriously at all. Those *thousands* of us who voted (thoughtfully, carefully) "yes," deserve better. Those who voted (thoughtfully, carefully) "no" do too. In this life, all of us want a lot more than facts.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was part of the panel, "What does Literary Criticism have to do with the Yale Strikes?" at the 1996 MLA Convention. It was organized by the Division on Literary Criticism in order to consider the impact and meaning of the Yale Strikes¹² of 1995-6, and how their lessons might be useful to thinking through problems facing higher education today. To these ends, in this essay I was particularly concerned with the Fall 1996 *MLA Newsletter's* representations of Resolution 6 (censuring the Yale administration's behavior during a "grade strike" waged by graduate student instructors) and with how these representations seemed to foreclose the complex analysis of the situation necessary to gleaning any lasting lessons from that resolution. I attempt to open up the possibility for an ongoing conversation on some of its fundamental issues in these remarks.

1. The title is borrowed from Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens' *Hard Times*, a book that reminds us that there are more than "facts" in this world. I am grateful to Andrew Ross for asking me to participate in the MLA panel for which this paper was originally written, and to those colleagues, especially Tim Brennan, Lisa Frank, Keya Ganguly, Paula Geyh and Jeff Williams, who commented on it before and/or afterwards. Thanks also to Ivo Kamps, who solicited this essay for *Jx* when he got wind that it had (unsurprisingly) been turned down by *Profession*. In the rejection letter from *Profession*, Phyllis Franklin suggested that "more space than was needed" was given in this article to the critique of the MLA. I hope that other readers might see this as a matter of interpretation.

2. I chose to cite this text primarily because it is collected in an MLA publication; its position would thus presumably carry at least some weight and legitimacy with members of that organization, whether they agree with it or not. My own position on theoretical work, which I will develop through the argument of this essay, is actually closer to Stuart Hall's neo-Gramscian "ideology critique" which relies upon a complex theorization of hegemony. See, for example, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees."

3. I am not implying that this similarity necessarily points to "collusion" on the part of the MLA officers and the Yale faculty who wrote the letters complaining about Resolution 6 — ideology does not work that way for the most part. What interests me is that so many MLA officers — probably with the best of intentions — consciously or unconsciously bought into, and reproduced, the claims of the senior Yale faculty as "true" when these same claims appear to be patently "rhetorical" to other readers. Leaving open the possibility for the moment that the attempt to place all the "facts" on one side and all the "rhetoric" on the other in this dispute simply will not bear up to scrutiny, we must consider, then, the implications of the MLA officers' discursive alliance with the Yale senior faculty, as I attempt to do in this essay.

4. Linda Peterson and Ruth Yeazell note in their letter, for example, that "for a number of years now, some graduate students at Yale have been agitating in various ways in support of a union — meeting, pamphleteering, picketing,

even engaging in temporary ‘job actions.’” Annabel Patterson points out that a letter from senior administrators at Yale “explained to the part-time acting instructors that those who failed to turn in their grades [that is, participated in the grade strike] . . . would not be allowed to teach in the spring.”

5. The *New York Times* reported in November of 1996 that “lawyers for the National Labor Relations Board . . . plan to charge Yale University with acting illegally by punishing teaching assistants who staged a grade strike last December in a drive to unionize” (Greenhouse 6). The Board’s determination to pursue this course was based on the collecting of evidence of numerous threats by various members of the senior faculty and administration of Yale toward striking graduate assistants. Representatives of the administration never have denied the making of these threats; their position was rather that, as the *New York Times* article notes, “in the past, the board’s lawyers treated graduate assistants as students rather than employees” and thus that their treatment of the striking teachers was justified.

6. The thorny question of how to deal with the relatively elite status of Yale graduate students in relation to other graduate students (which they would hardly deny) raises itself here. One thing that is clear, however, is that no matter how privileged they may be in relation to graduate students in other sites, they are not privileged in relation to the senior faculty in their departments. Furthermore, I think that an important analogy can be drawn through an examination of labor history. It has often (though, of course, not exclusively) been the case that relatively well-off groups were organized before other groups (northern factories before southern ones; “Big Steel” before the small plants) — and that the organizations established by the somewhat more secure workers provided a structure for the more vulnerable groups to join, offering them an otherwise unavailable margin of protection. Without claiming that graduate students are exactly like steel workers (obviously not so), I think that one can claim that elite graduate students are in a position relative to more exploited graduate students which is analogous to Big Steel’s relationship to smaller plants earlier in the century. If it succeeds in unionizing the teaching staff at a major private university, GESO will have set an important precedent that will be helpful not only to graduate student organizing but also to the organizing of part-time faculty and even full-time faculty at private schools far less privileged than Yale. Hence, Margaret Homans misses the point in her observation that “it would be appropriate for students to unionize at those schools where teaching loads are much higher than at Yale and where reliance on graduate teaching is greater. Part-time and adjunct faculty with Ph.D.’s present an even more legitimate motive to unionize, although they are not part of the union movement at Yale. But it is not possible for Yale students — in training, after all, to occupy professional positions — to constitute the proletarianized body they claim to be.” The unionization of Yale students might well *enable* the unionization of the other groups Homans names. In any case, “students . . . at those schools where teaching loads are much higher than at Yale” are also in “training . . . to occupy professional positions” — so it is not entirely clear why it is proper for them to unionize but not Yale students on that ground alone. But more importantly, while Yale students are undoubtedly better off financially, in

work conditions, and even in future prospects than many of their graduate student colleagues at other schools, this by no means suggests that within the local power dynamic they have no legitimate grievances. In addition, the part-time workers with Ph.D.'s, who Homans admits are an exploited group at Yale, can certainly benefit from a graduate instructors' union, which, should it ever be recognized, would provide a site in which they could organize in relative safety from reprisals (such as being fired), fear of which no doubt contributes to their current non-participation in GESO.

7. Jameson's dialectic of ideology and utopia is pertinent here. At the conclusion of *The Political Unconscious*, he argues that even retrograde ideological positions can contain the germs of utopian hope, and thus that they should be read in such a way that "a functional method for describing cultural texts is articulated with an anticipatory one" (296). In other words, one might (and should) explore the work performed by particular texts toward reproducing the status quo, or a specific nexus of interests, while also recognizing the desire for a non-exploitative, democratic "collective-associational" future that might be expressed simultaneously with it (in concepts, to take the case in hand, such as "academic community"). Problems arise in assuming that the latter already exists in the guise of the former.

8. One of the main issues of the staff strikes at Yale in the mid-80s was, as a matter of fact, such gendered discrepancies in pay. Though hotly disputed at the time, the case for equal pay now seems practically incontrovertible, and the case against it preposterous (which does not, alas, mean that inequalities do not persist). On such a model, one wonders what the case against graduate student unions will look like in ten years time!

9. Data culled from the Association of University Technology Managers' survey of "Gross Royalties Received . . . for Fiscal year 1994" — part of its *Licensing Survey* for that year.

10. See Cary Nelson's much-cited article for *Social Text*, and the essays collected in *Higher Education Under Fire*, edited by Bérubé and Nelson.

11. If these figures are "disquieting" (as she puts it) to Sandra Gilbert, imagine what they must be like for those people more immediately affected. The passage in which she makes this admission bears quotation in all its grim detail: for the 1993-4 graduating Ph.D.s who got postsecondary academic jobs (75%) "only 45.6% of the jobs in English . . . were full-time tenure-track positions. The smaller percentage of tenure-track jobs is especially disquieting. . . . I remind myself that the placement survey is several years old and the number of advertised positions has dropped since then!" (4).

12. For an excellent general overview of the issues posed by the strike, see the essays collected by Cary Nelson in *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis*. The title of the MLA panel in which I participated refers to Yale strikes, not just the graduate instructors' strike, even though, because of the particular emphasis of Resolution 6, the graduate instructors have received most of the attention among MLA members. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that students were not the only group engaged in strike action recently at Yale; clerical workers, librarians and dining hall workers were striking as well. In joining a union, the graduate instructors have allied themselves with these workers

(and vice versa), as well as with a long history of labor struggle both at Yale and in the US. They have opened the possibility of forging an “academic community” that includes all university workers, professor and kitchen staff, librarian and secretary, as our colleagues in Britain have done in the General Strike of the universities in November 1996 (see *Guardian*, November 19, 1996). They have forged lateral alliances with other universities where students are unionized (or hope to be) rather than thinking of their own predicament or the predicament of others as isolated and isolatable. The problems that confront us are collective problems, requiring collective solutions. As capital and the university restructure themselves over time, we will find ourselves in the position of having to reassess assumptions, concepts and relations previously taken for granted. Unions might not be the only, or even, the best, solution to the problems we confront along the way, but at the current juncture they have provided a collective structuration for thinking and organizing that for too long has gone on in an atomized fashion.

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