

Strickland, Donna. *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. 168 pages. \$35.00. 978-0893-3026-3. **Print.**

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Melissa Ianetta, in “Disciplinarity, Divorce, and the Displacement of Labor Issues: Rereading Histories of Composition and Literature,” enlists Jean-Francois Lyotard to argue that Composition and Literature’s disciplinary histories, like all histories, are comprised of two grand metanarratives. The first is a speculative narrative of progress in which the development of human life is based on the expansion of its knowledge. Ultimately, this totalizing narrative conforms all other claims and statements under this single narrative and tends to develop a seemingly stable notion of “disciplinary fixity” that ignores the “anxiety-inducing questions of labor and mutability” of all disciplines (63). On the other hand, the second narrative is emancipatory; here, knowledge represents a means of freedom and serves as an antidote to speculative narratives because it attempts to establish new frameworks for critical inquiry and represents challenges to perceived disciplinary stability. As a whole, our disciplinary histories have been enriched by many vigorous efforts to narrate these small, emancipatory histories that comprise the development of composition studies, and *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* similarly contributes to the emancipatory histories Ianetta advocates. Through an attempt to re-examine the history of composition, Donna Strickland aims to excavate and rescue the beleaguered concept of the managerial and reestablish a new narrative. At root, what is so wonderful about this work in historiography is what Strickland calls boundary work: pushing at the boundaries of what we think we know, opening new avenues of vision, helping us better see the topography of the field. In particular, Strickland’s boundary work represents the kind of emancipatory narrative that is crucial

in supporting teachers of writing, particularly in the current political environment in which teachers' labor is abstracted and devalued.

To establish this emancipatory narrative, Strickland articulates composition studies as fundamentally managerial, seeing the managerial as a vital and formative “imperative energizing the field throughout its history” (119). Nonetheless, Strickland sees the managerial as a forbidden concept that has been both marginalized and silenced. She points to a disjunction between the official schooling in composition pedagogy and rhetorical theory and the unofficial schooling in the management of composition teachers and programs, deeming this unspoken discourse as the “managerial unconsciousness” (3). For Strickland, this repressive impulse arises both from an affective association our field has for teaching and a concomitant rejection of the concept of management—a rejection grounded on negative connotations of “management” that see it as incongruent to a perceived humanistic field of study. However, by leaving the idea of management as an unexplored motivation behind the direction of composition studies, Strickland argues, we potentially obscure or misrepresent crucial issues that demand our attention such as class and labor issues or the (arguably) democratic nature of our work. Ultimately, Strickland’s project revises the history of the field of composition studies to be one not solely constructed, as it has been in the past, as a speculative “history of ideas” (5), but rather as “the history of the increasing importance of managers of the teaching of writing” (17). Further, Strickland’s turn to the managerial highlights another area that such an established history of ideas neglects: actual material, hierarchical workplaces that are connected to composition studies. In her re-reading of composition’s history, she finds that such managerial professionalism has tended to enfranchise those administrating composition while disenfranchising the vast majority of teachers of composition. Not surprisingly, Strickland’s project in *The Managerial Unconscious* is a political one, striving to critically challenge established notions of management and

approaches to writing program administration and, in addition, generate challenging and, perhaps, radical alternatives.

Strickland's book consists of four chapters, each one tracing major events in the established history of composition studies and utilizing one prominent figure as a case study: chapter one focuses on the origins of writing programs in higher education at the end of the nineteenth century and focuses particularly on figures on Harvard's committee on composition; chapter two brings us to the establishment of CCCC in the middle of the twentieth century and concentrates on George Wykoff, a founding member of CCCC; chapter three turns to the founding of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 1977 and explores texts by Kenneth Bruffee at that time; the fourth chapter looks to the social turn in composition studies in the 1990's, drawing on the work of James Berlin as a case study. Strickland concludes with an "afterward" to call for a more critical attention to writing program administration.

In the first chapter, Strickland opens her argument about the relationship between the managerial and composition studies by demonstrating the shared foundation between the concept of the commercial managerial and the birth of writing programs. Drawing from historical documents from two universities' nascent composition programs, Harvard and Alabama Polytechnic Institute, and the research of scholars looking at office work, Strickland provides evidence to counter the commonplace notion that writing was being devalued or marginalized by the academy. Instead, she argues that the dominant "economic and managerial logics" of the time played a key role in the genesis of writing programs, dictating how writing courses were to be conceived and executed (31). Particularly, Strickland notes that writing programs, undergirded by these professional discourses, operated as a kind of management tool to both observe and assess college students. Further, Strickland also points to how many dominant cultural values inscribed divisions of labor, especially across gender and race. Ultimately, she insists, at issue is the fact that our work in writing program administration is deeply entangled with

these ideologies “that separate meaning from mechanics and that articulate ideologies of gender and race with ‘proper’ uses of language” (46). This inheritance, she notes, requires a labor struggle to challenge and undo such ideologies that remain with us to this day.

In chapter two, to emphasize how these managerial notions remained with composition studies as it developed and professionalized, Strickland next turns to the years preceding and immediately following the formation of CCCC. Drawing from texts written by preeminent figures connected to the founding of CCCC, she finds that these founding figures, while well-intentioned, ultimately focused on meeting the needs of composition professionals such as directors of first-year composition, and consistently concerned themselves with issues of administration—that is, how to “extract the proper kind of labor” from teachers of composition (73)—rather than considering the actual, material conditions in which these composition teachers were working. Strickland finds that early CCCC discourse frequently and repeatedly figured the “lowly teacher of composition” (49) as the problem of the composition course that was desperately in need of systematic managerial intervention. As a result, Strickland points to the persistent notion that composition is primarily a teaching subject in which composition teachers were charged with producing good writing in students, and in order to improve this production, these workers, Strickland’s reading finds, did not need better working conditions but better training and management. However, as she points out, the flaw in this logic is that it “blames the teacher for the economic status of composition teaching and suggests that it is up to the teacher to gain knowledge, rather than to work for economic reform, in order to improve that status” (68).

In chapter three, looking at watershed moments in the early years of WPA’s history in the 1960s and 1970s, Strickland argues that, although the formation of the WPA stands as evidence that CCCC was not fully responding to the administration of writing programs, ultimately, the WPA ends up replicating the same

unspoken ideologies about teaching and management. “By substituting the emotionally preferred ‘teaching,’” Strickland writes, “for the more aversive ‘managing,’ . . . the WPA has continued the obscuring of the managerial function that the CCCC began” (79). To maintain a division among administration, teaching, and research may assist not only in perpetuating the divisions between disciplinary work and disciplinary knowledge but also maintaining what she sees as the normalizing function of most writing programs, and even so-called democratic pedagogies may be as participating in this normalizing. To prove this, Strickland explores two curious parallel phenomena: first, the rise of composition studies as an academic discipline and, second, the increasing emphasis on the democratic nature of the discipline. Pedagogies our discipline has argued are democratic or empowering may not always be so; rather, they may function as “managerial commonplaces” that may not always forward democratic goals. In fact, these leftist pushes into the field, she finds, arose in parallel with appeals to quality and teamwork in the world of corporate management (100). However, Strickland sees such directions not as negative or counter to the work we do, but rather as opportunities to explore how such approaches reproduce unexamined ideologies that may limit us. Strickland ends the chapter with a central question: “Is it possible to enact not simply different social arrangements . . . but also a different economic model, a different class process?”

In her afterword, Strickland answers this question, briefly offering two possible courses of action. For the first, which she deems a concrete example, Strickland describes her unique experiences as a graduate co-coordinator of a first-year writing program in which she, in concert with a tenured administrator leader and other administrators and graduate students, were able to collectively dialogue about and experiment with the program—what she labels “tweaking.” This experience of tweaking represents the kind of operational approach that Strickland suggests productively acknowledges the crucial affective foundation of administrative work—that of people

working and collaborating in writing programs. This frequent engagement with human beliefs and emotions—including disappointment—represents a way to motivate constructive action. The second, a theoretical approach, is grounded in Brian Massumi's concept of "operational reason." Operational reason "is the experimental crafting . . . of the practically impossible," and such an approach is a collaborative effort "to pose unpredictable futurities" (121). This stands in opposition to instrumental reason that focuses on "getting things done" and turns its focus on the relationship between our emotional stances and our work, including ethical and political questions about writing program administration. Strickland's experiences suggest that these emotional stances—including the disappointment of failure—have the potential to catalyze critical action in positive ways.

The major strength of Strickland's book lies in this push for action by presenting a re-vision of writing programs as sites of class struggle, as sites focused on challenging and transforming the conditions of exploitation. The approach Strickland takes encourages us to challenge totalizing narratives of speculation in composition studies and presses us to pose questions such as "How can a person in a managerial position work with the people being managed rather than take advantage of them?" (16). Strickland's book, then, certainly is the kind of antidote we need at a time when academia is particularly challenged by administrative and labor issues. In addition, like other constructive re-visions of composition studies' histories, Strickland's book is valuable because her project is rooted in a reflection on how we approach the writing classroom. Strickland, in particular, is interested in how the circulation of discourse in the field plays a persuasive role via a "circulation of affect"—that is, how and why scholars affectively "feel the rightness" (117) of certain pedagogical approaches that are in high circulation and how such rhetoric persuades scholars to behave in certain ways. Particularly in an educational era of standardized testing and the increasing mechanization of teaching and learning, this continuous,

challenging reflection on what we *feel* we know and confirmation of what we most value is absolutely crucial.

However, the book also leaves crucial questions unanswered. If we are talking about re-visiting the way we look at and frame composition studies, it seems most valuable that such historical revisions should help us complicate and expand the way we look at our discipline while challenging us to re-visit and deepen our practice. Here, Strickland falls short because she simplifies rather than complicates the field, reducing it solely to administration, research, and teaching. Strickland envisions the managerial as “a third term that usefully breaks up the usual dichotomies of teaching/research, marginal/central, and production/consumption” that have limited the discourse of composition studies. Yet, this third term fails to “catalyze action” in the way that Strickland envisions because managerial remains embedded in a framework comprised of unnecessarily static categories of the field. In this way, it is troubling that, although such third terms can frequently challenge us to rethink our approaches to composition studies, Strickland seems to still be operating within a speculative narrative in which the discipline still remains more or less stable. Here, Strickland’s “boundary work” feels more like developing potentially challenging ideas on the sidelines—they seem tentative and under-practiced.

Further, by making the assumption that the managerial unconsciousness is pervasive in the field of composition studies, Strickland seems to suggest that this issue permeates evenly across the entire discipline. Certainly, the problems that Strickland uncovers *do* exist in composition studies and should be challenged; however, these issues do not apply wholly or similarly to every academic location in which writing administration occurs. Ultimately, the infrastructures and the rhetorical situations of program administration are vastly different and, as a result, the discourses are different. In a discipline that is particularly attuned to the ecologies in which writing occurs (for example, Cooper; Weisser and Dobrin; Edbauer) this seems like an odd omission in Strickland’s book. Finally, and most disconcerting to writing

program administrators hoping to enact this approach to management, Strickland doesn't really offer potential ways to apply or put into practice what she is advocating. She leaves us wondering how might we put "tweaking" and "operational reasoning" into practice in a variety of different environments in which writing program administration is well-established, a work-in-progress, or just taking its first steps. Rather than addressing this question in practical terms, Strickland leaves us all struggling with our own forms of "boundary work." While we might better see the struggles because of this book, we remain unsure of the tools.

Despite these criticisms, *The Managerial Unconscious* still represents another valuable contribution to revisionist histories of composition studies. As practitioners in this field, we should continually reflect on and challenge speculative metanarratives that ignore or downplay important material concerns while suggesting a stable notion of disciplinary fixity and control. Instead, as Strickland nobly aims for in her book, we must strive to uncover and enact the emancipation narrative, pushing ourselves to ask new and challenging questions and pushing at the boundaries of composition studies.

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