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AN EXEMPLARY CAREER

CARY NELSON AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR THE UNIVERSITY

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*You cannot be a Union Man,
No matter how you try,
Unless you think in terms of "We,"
Instead of terms of "I."*

—J. P. Thompson, "Union Poem"

[P]oetry's political apotheosis comes in the form of collective knowledge and collective action.

—Cary Nelson¹

It is well known that the humanities are currently in dire straits. Funding is stagnating or being cut, and the humanities' position of authority relative to the disciplines that make up the contemporary university continues to erode as market forces increasingly penetrate the so-called Ivory Tower, and business and techno-science replace humanistic learning with respect to resources and, perhaps more importantly, prestige or symbolic capital. This situation is not new, but in the current context it is being exacerbated by the almost uncontested doctrine of neoliberalism, a doctrine that would like to submit all realms of human existence to the exigencies of the market. Yet as necessary as it is to offer such dark assessments of the conditions of humanities research—and, indeed, of fundamental research and public education more generally—such assessments only capture part of the story. Indeed, the situation of the humanities today, as for much of the last few decades, is paradoxical: while, on the one hand, the humanities exist in precarious material conditions and with waning intellectual prestige, it is equally true, on the other hand, that humanities research remains vibrant and humanities teachers remain essential to educating a democratic citizenry.

The problem is not one of humanists' irrelevance or obscurity, although that is most often the judgment that emerges from the centers of corporate management and the right-wing media; to the contrary, the insights humanists have to offer are dangerously relevant to a society that would like to banish critical, historical thinking in a time of war and untrammled market dominance. If scholars and teachers in the humanities are to avoid despair and collaboration in our own demise, then it is crucial to address both sides of the paradoxical situation in which we find ourselves—a task that *Cary Nelson and the Struggle for the University: Poetry, Politics, and the Profession* sets out to accomplish. Accounts are needed of the material constraints that limit possibilities for creative, challenging research and stunt the careers of too many humanities students and colleagues. The humanities must, nonetheless, persist in the production of new, critical knowledge, keeping in mind that the cost of giving up our pursuits would be too high, the end of democratic possibility itself. With these stakes in mind, this book assesses and builds on the contributions of one exemplary scholar-activist—Cary Nelson—whose writings, actions, and vision consistently draw our attention to the varied, if often inhospitable, terrain of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural and intellectual life.

A self-confessed “tenured radical,” Nelson is probably best known by a general audience for his uncompromising and brutally honest contributions to understanding the first side of the humanities' paradoxical situation—the immiseration of the humanities and the destruction of the conditions necessary to any kind of humanistic education. Consider, for instance, “It Might as Well Be a Conspiracy,” the ironically titled introduction to Nelson's most recent book on the academy, *Office Hours*, coauthored with Stephen Watt. Nelson and Watt waste no time saying that “[h]igher education as we have known it for nearly a half century is in the process of unraveling,” and they do not hesitate to catalogue the ills that currently beset “disciplines unable to generate their own revenue”: “Increased class sizes, increased teaching loads, decreased library resources, decreased research funding, declining real salaries in less entrepreneurial disciplines, increasingly centralized curricular control, steadily increasing reliance on contingent labor, decreasing job security, increasing political threats to academic freedom,” and so on (1, 3). There are, in short, more than enough reasons to despair.

But despite such necessary and clear-eyed assessments of real decline, Nelson's career actually provides one of the best illustrations of the importance of addressing both sides of this condition: his career combines field-changing work on modern American poetry, on the one hand, and activist and discursive interventions into the organization and working conditions of the university, on the other. Nelson—and the other colleagues and former students gathered here—is no less passion-

ate when producing new knowledge about apparently esoteric subjects than he is when attempting to change the conditions of possibility for that production. The distinction is not between the political and the nonpolitical: especially in Nelson's hands, work on modern poetry is as political as writing essays on contingent labor and the increasing corporatization of the university or, indeed, as sitting down in the middle of traffic in support of graduate student unionization, as Nelson recently did in order to use his new position as president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to draw attention to a strike at New York University (NYU). To be sure, these interventions work at somewhat different levels and temporalities and come with divergent risks and stakes, yet they are all potentially political—and Nelson's career suggests that we in the humanities should do a lot more of all of them.

The essays and reflections collected in this book make a strong case that Nelson's career is *exemplary*: it simultaneously sets a very high bar for scholarship and activism and yet can and should serve as a model for the engaged academic.² Nelson's career is worth exploring in depth both because of the extensive and influential scholarship he has produced and because of the highly visible work he has done as an activist in the academy. Like Nelson's output, the essays collected here may at first glance seem eclectic. But the career, like the book, is held together by overarching commitments that gain in power when they resonate together. The unifying node of Nelson's career is a commitment to the radical democratization of American culture and a recognition of the many progressive projects and energies that have been forgotten or repressed. The major lesson of Nelson's engagement is that the democratization of American cultural history will remain an unfinished project as long as we fail to democratize the *institutions* of American culture—and that means, first and foremost, the university.

In an effort to make Nelson's multifaceted career available for further reflection and revision, *Cary Nelson and the Struggle for the University* brings together well-known and up-and-coming literary and cultural studies scholars to explore an exemplary career in which scholarship and activism have been united. Neither a Festschrift nor a tribute, this book uses Nelson's career as a focal point for a consideration of the politics of the academy. It is organized around the three key roles Nelson has taken on throughout his four decades in the academy: innovative scholar, tireless public intellectual and activist, and dedicated mentor.

Among Nelson's contributions on the scholarly side are six authored, two coauthored, and sixteen edited books, plus more than one hundred essays. As several essays included here demonstrate, his studies of modern American poetry, including *Our First Last Poets* (1981), *Repression and Recovery* (1989), and *Revolutionary Memory* (2001), have energetically recovered,

analyzed, and celebrated the cultural work of writers on the Left, and his radically innovative Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), accompanied by an extensive and growing Web site, has dramatically expanded the canon. Nelson's long-running, successful efforts to diversify the canon of American poetry dovetail with his more general contributions to ethnic studies and feminist studies. While focused especially on the US context, Nelson's commitment to excavating a pluralist Left also opens up obvious links to internationalism. These links are especially evident in his long-term project to recover the poetry and artifacts of the Spanish Civil War—a project that has resulted in the publication of volumes such as *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (edited with Jefferson Hendricks, 1996), *The Aura of the Cause: A Photo Album for North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (1997), and *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War* (2002).

As Nelson's studies of modern American poetry have led him back into its forgotten past and outward into its international affiliations, he has increasingly articulated the many connections between poetry and politics, both in the work of politically engaged poets he has brought back to our attention and in the ideologically restricted conception of modernism that long excluded them. One of the things that makes his career exemplary is the way it springs from a passionate belief in the value of poetry itself.

Poetry has had a very long cultural history, as prayer, as chant, as curse, as the song of the subject and the song of the chorus. Nothing poetry has become was foreordained. History might have gone differently. But as things have worked out poetry's inscaped language registers a culture's idealizations and its traumas with unique compression and power. There's nothing else quite like it. Save for technology and science, poetry embodies all you need to know on earth. (Bousquet)

Here, with Nelson's characteristic touch of hyperbole, we can recognize a vital source of his achievement. Just as poetry's history might have gone differently, so might the literary and cultural interests of a critic on the Left have gone into the more typical study of fiction or the media, his or her radical energy into ideological critique. Instead, Nelson's dedication to recovering forgotten poets and critiquing the forces that repressed their memory has dramatically extended our sense of both poetry's recent history and its possibilities. The 161 "poet companion sites" on the Modern American Poetry Site testify to this extension, while their growing network of commentaries and contexts shows the many ways poetry can indeed register culture's idealizations and traumas. Nelson has

recently extended this expansive democratizing impulse even farther in his study of poem postcards, rescuing ephemera whose claim on readers' attention is less their intrinsic aesthetic interest than the individual and cultural uses they served, especially in times of war. In paying serious, careful attention to these mass-produced texts, Nelson has found yet another surprising way of celebrating poetry's long cultural history.

As another set of essays suggests, Nelson is also a trenchant analyst of the problems and prospects of the academy. In books such as *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (1997), *Academic Keywords* (1999), and *Office Hours* (2004), as well as in the edited volumes *Higher Education Under Fire* (1994) and *Will Teach for Food* (1997), and in dozens of occasional pieces, he has established a reputation as one of the most forthright critics of the status quo in the academy. His biting, but often hilarious, accounts of the strange and destructive customs of the profession have angered many, especially those who occupy the upper reaches of academic privilege, but at the same time they have made him a hero to those toiling at the bottom of the pyramid. Nelson's engagement with such issues as academic freedom and the working conditions of graduate students and adjunct faculty has also informed his lengthy service in the Modern Language Association (MLA) and AAUP, service that has culminated in his current presidency of the latter organization. As AAUP president, Nelson has helped bring into public focus controversial issues concerning academic freedom and politics in the classroom and has generated a necessary, lively—and sometimes contentious—debate. Here too there is much to be learned from Nelson's example. As in his scholarship, so in his "service" (typically the least honored and rewarded of the three categories of expected academic activities), he has found remarkably effective ways to advance his expansive, democratic agenda. He shows how the solitary work of a researcher in the archive and the collective work of committees and policy debates can become joined in a continuum of underlying values.

While ever productive and always engaged with forces at the institutional level, Nelson's ultimate influence may be felt through the younger scholars he has inspired and helped spur on to further projects. His legacy is a direct result of his dedicated work as a mentor, especially for graduate students. He has directed more than two dozen dissertations, of which ten have already been published as books. His students occupy important positions in the profession and have already made major contributions to scholarship; these students, many of whom are represented in this book, make up what Nelson calls in his afterword a "research community" dedicated to working on various sides of a common project. This aspect of his career is exemplary precisely in suggesting the necessity of considering intellectual work a collective endeavor, involving tasks greater than any one scholar—even one as prolific as Nelson himself—can or

should accomplish alone. Nelson's persistent and generous attention to mentoring is reflected in the essays that close this book, attesting to the formation of a community of scholars united—although not without tension or difficulty—by common intellectual, political, and personal commitments. Attentive to the poetics as well as the politics of mentoring, these final reflections suggest that the struggle for the university will continue as new generations of scholars and students revise and rework the lessons of their teachers and mentors. Seen in objective terms, the present and future of the profession may look grim. But if there is to be hope for radical change—or even significant reform—in the institutions of higher learning, then it is going to come because of the kinds of collective projects that Nelson has played such a key role in inaugurating.

Divided into three parts—"The Canon and the Politics of Poetry," "Corporatization and the Politics of the Academy," and "Pedagogy and the Politics of Mentoring"—the essays collected here are accessibly written, lively, and funny, as is only fitting for a volume that considers the Nelsonian legacy! They are also passionate in their commitments to politically informed scholarship and pedagogy. That most of the scholars here have long-standing affiliations with Nelson—either as colleagues or former students—does not mean that these essays all toe a common line. Far from it. Rather, the interest of this book lies in the intellectual energy of engagement that is common to the contributions: some essays survey Nelson's contributions to particular areas (poetry, activism, mentoring), while others engage quite critically with some of his ideas, and yet others recognize the need to extend his contributions into fields he has not yet weighed in on.

Thus in the poetry section, part 1, Edward Brunner and Walter Kalaidjian take up Nelson's work on modern American poetry, but they come to rather different conclusions about the nature of his critical career, with Brunner arguing for long-term continuities and Kalaidjian locating a significant break between Nelson's first two books. Meanwhile, Grant Farred develops some unexpected affinities between Nelson's archival activism and Derrida's theory of archive fever, and Karen Jackson Ford and Michael Thurston take inspiration from Nelson in order to develop their own particular projects in poetics.

Marc Bousquet opens the section on the politics of the academy, part 2, with a detailed account of different notions of corporatization. He stresses Nelson's contributions to the critique of the corporate university and seeks to extend Nelson's engaged cultural studies model through his own original research on the dominance of administrative logic. Michael Bérubé turns to Nelson the "organization man." He makes a strong connection between Nelson's work on marginal poetry and his defense of marginalized teachers in the academy; just as *Repression and Recovery* was dedicated to uncovering "modern poems we have wanted to for-

get," Nelson's work at the institutional level is, Bérubé suggests, dedicated to "uncovering and redressing academic realities we have wanted to forget." Stephen Watt's essay demonstrates just why we need more "organization men"; he tracks some of the internal limits to activist organization in the self-defeating tendencies of some humanities professors. Once again there are some disagreements about Nelson's model—here with respect primarily to activism. While Lisa Duggan finds inspiration for contemporary political engagement in the model of cultural studies developed by Nelson and others at Illinois in the 1980s and 1990s, Jane Juffer's provocative essay on how to respond to the corporate academy takes issue with central aspects of Nelson's approach to the politics of the academy. At the same time that Bousquet and Andrew Ross acknowledge Nelson's critique of corporatization, they nonetheless suggest the need to attend to new avenues for such political engagement. Ross's timely and original essay calls for a new account of the global university.

In the section on mentoring, part 3, former students highlight not only what they learned from Nelson as a teacher but also how they have continued to develop and transform what they have learned. Marsha Bryant's essay on the "poetics of mentoring" opens this section by laying out the ways she has developed Nelson's practices into a full-fledged program for mentoring. James Finnegan, Brady Harrison, John Marsh, James D. Sullivan, and Jeff Sychterz take a productively direct approach in their reflections on Nelson's professional personae; they employ bracingly honest voices that assess the brutalities and purposes of working in the humanities, and they track the influence of Nelson's pedagogy and research into the diverse locations of higher education, including community colleges and even the US Naval Academy. It is in these essays especially that the themes of this book coalesce; Nelson's former students demonstrate how thoroughly intertwined teaching, research, and service actually are in practice, but also how difficult it remains for the profession to recognize this basic fact. In addition to testifying to Nelson's personal as well as professional influence, these pieces indicate how the political purposes informing his scholarship and activism can extend into the training of the next generation: political activism and intellectual commitments come together in Nelson's graduate mentoring to form an exemplary pedagogy.

If a name can be given that would unite the many sides of Nelson's career, it would probably have to be cultural studies, as Bousquet also suggests. Taking inspiration especially from the British cultural studies of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, although giving it a decidedly American spin, Nelson has remained true to what Hall called the "presentist" moment of cultural studies—its insistence that the political stakes of all scholarship are in the contemporary world, even when that scholarship is

dedicated to a mutually enlightening dialogue between the past and the present. Cultural studies, Nelson has wittily remarked in a controversial sixteen-point manifesto, might be thought of as something like a rat among the disciplines: “a largely urban animal who is wary, focused on local conditions, and willing to eat almost anything. [. . .] [a] political animal attuned to assuring the survival of his or her interests” (*Manifesto* 73). This image of Machiavellian omnivorousness nicely captures the tactically minded, necessarily eclectic intellectual and political commitments that define the best of cultural studies and Nelson’s own work.

Nelson himself has played a galvanizing role in the emergence of cultural studies as an intellectual and political force in the US academy, a story Duggan’s and Harrison’s essays vividly narrate. His contribution to interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences is manifested especially in his leading role in organizing and editing the proceedings of two major international conferences, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988) and *Cultural Studies* (1992), monumental collections that remain unsurpassed in their scope and ambition. These works are, without the slightest exaggeration, legitimately called landmarks, and they testify to the brilliance of Nelson, as well as his coeditors, Lawrence Grossberg and Paula Treichler, in identifying the right contributors, the right essays, and the right moment to make the intellectual intervention. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the contemporary theoretical landscape without some of the essays published in those volumes, such as Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Fredric Jameson’s “Cognitive Mapping,” from the *Marxism* volume, or Constance Penley’s and Donna Haraway’s innovative explorations from the *cultural studies* volume, among many other highly influential essays in those collections.

Those two mega-conferences were organized under the auspices of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, a unique program Nelson cofounded in the early 1980s. Under Nelson’s early leadership and ongoing involvement, “the Unit”—as it is known in Urbana-Champaign—served as a portal throughout the 1980s for the introduction of cultural studies to the American academy. Today, in a moment sometimes facetiously defined as “posttheoretical,” the Unit continues to promote intellectual community among theoretically minded faculty and graduate students by providing a base for interdisciplinary scholarship with a progressive political edge. If, as Nelson remarks in his manifesto, “the work of theorizing [. . .] is inescapably grounded in contemporary life and current politics,” and it thus becomes impossible “to theorize for all times and places,” the work of theory is not rendered dispensable (*Manifesto* 68). Rather, it remains an ongoing commitment, a necessary component of humanities scholarship and political activism. Furthermore, as Nelson recognizes (and

discusses in his afterword), ongoing commitments—to theory, cultural studies, and activism—require habitable institutions and communities. The Unit's persistence well into its third decade owes much to Nelson's belief in the importance of institution building—and his institutional savvy.

This book derives from the most recent in the Unit's tradition of simultaneously scholarly and politically committed conferences. It seeks to learn from Nelson's exemplary career in order to set out a multifaceted (if necessarily partial) program for recognizing the radical potential of American culture and for facing up to the ideological and institutional limits that often block that potential or render it invisible. Like the book itself, this program comprises three parts: an exploration of the politics and political potentialities of culture (here charted in exemplary fashion via the ongoing reconsideration of modern American poetry and the problem of the canon); a critical interrogation of the academy itself as the macro-context of intellectual production (with a special focus on the neoliberal corporate academy in both its domestic and increasingly global guises); and the excavation of the micro-politics of intellectual inquiry through a textured, personal consideration of pedagogy and mentoring that reveals the importance of cohorts and communities of scholars in enabling innovative research. Thus although organized through intensive focus on an individual career, the "argument" of this book maintains that intellectual projects are most likely to succeed when pursued with awareness of their larger enabling and limiting institutional contexts, and when understood as oriented toward the creation of and participation in communities and collective structures. This is, of course, an argument that owes a large debt to Nelson's own work; as Nelson and Watt write, "There is [. . .] but one way to resist all the forces at work to disempower and degrade the professoriate and instrumentalize education—collective action" (*Office Hours* 2). In a moment of budget cuts, war, and wiretaps, the essays collected here advance a project for collective action: a cultural politics dedicated to free inquiry, workplace solidarity, creative scholarship, and a deep sense of the relevance of the struggles and legacies of the past.

Notes

1. J. P. Thompson's poem, published by the Vancouver Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World on a folded red card, circa 1909, is reproduced in Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory* 30. The card comes from Nelson's personal collection. The quotation from Nelson is from the same book, p. 9.

2. For a related view of the exemplary status of Nelson's career, see the tribute by Alan Wald.

Works Cited

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