

Review: *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*

Seth Kahn

Strickland, Donna. *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. Print.

I have to start with a confession. Even though my undergraduate background is in history, I often glaze over (at my own expense, I know!) when faced with histories of our field. With few exceptions (e.g., Robin Varnum's *Fencing with Words* because of its methodological peculiarity), I often find accounts of "how we got here" serving as cautionary tales à la George Santayana, and nearly always reinforcing the entrenchment of the problematic ideas they purport to dislodge or expose. That reaction to histories of the field isn't very fair, of course. The more precise version of that reaction would probably go like this: the more convincing a historical account of the field is, the more difficult it is to address the problem it describes. It's a common problem with academic argument: we work so hard to establish the significance of our topics that saying anything about them other than what makes them so significant is tough.

With that said, if you write or think about labor issues in the field of Composition Studies, Donna Strickland's *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* is a book you'll wish you'd read. Strickland's reframing of our history will interest historians, of course, given that it convincingly contests any number of conventional narratives that tend to be, as she puts it, "histories of ideas" (5) about teaching writing, and that locate administrative work as a subfield. She responds to that prevailing sense by asserting that the administrative ethos so central to our daily lives as Composition specialists is *not* ancillary or subsidiary to our work as rhetoricians or writing teachers. The *managerial unconscious* is for Strickland the heart and soul of the field as it has

developed since the early Twentieth Century. Rejecting a clear distinction between *management* as socio-economic identity and *administration* as a “polite” substitute for the same practices (10-11), she traces *managerialism* through case studies of three moments—the founding of CCCC; the early days of the Council of Writing Program Administrators; and the social turn in composition in the 1990s—Strickland produces what she describes as “the case for a more vigorous materiality” (7) in our histories, in which management of writing programs can be done ethically. I have to say, parenthetically, that Strickland has underestimated her own result. Yes, it’s a “case for more vigorous materiality,” but it more than carries its own weight as an *example* of same.

For readers who aren’t drawn to reading histories, there are two very important theoretical concepts in the Introduction that may propel you into the analysis. First, Strickland points to the troubling tendency in our professional discourse to conflate *work* and *labor*. Although she doesn’t distinguish them precisely the same way I would, just seeing somebody remind us that the terms aren’t interchangeable is important. More concretely, distinguishing the terms forces us to get more specific about how the machinations of our economic systems construct our profession than by relying on abstract, often oblique, references to capitalism or neo-liberalism. A conversation, out loud, about the value we produce as professionals and on whose backs that happens—and what happens when it’s extracted from our programs—is welcome; putting writing program administrators in the center of that conversation is, as the book demonstrates, crucial to developing ethical responses to bureaucratic and political imperatives of all kinds.

Second, Strickland re-engages a debate that has, unproductively in my opinion, gone quiet over the last ten to fifteen years, about the relationships between the terms *managerial* and *administrative*. She credits (and has defended him for saying it) Marc Bousquet for the observation that our field consists largely of “managerial intellectuals” (9); even those of us who don’t administer programs find ourselves increasingly consumed with managerial tasks: assessment, evaluation, placement, scheduling, and so on. While Bousquet was castigated for this position in the mid-2000s, several years later I found myself making almost exactly the same argument in a presentation at the 2009 CCCC (“If I Don’t Do It, Nobody Will”) about management task-creep into

faculty life. That presentation provoked an audience member to stand up, fist shaking, and announce something like, “I can’t believe we’re STILL having this conversation after ALL THESE YEARS! When are we ever going to learn?” Maybe Santayana is onto something after all.

That anecdote helps me frame the most difficult challenge I have in assessing this book: not only am I on board with its key claims, but I’ve wound up making allied claims—or more precisely, drawing allied conclusions—many times over the years already. I’m left trying to imagine what it’s like to read the book without having tried to think through much of what it says. That’s not to say people who are staunchly pro-labor and experienced at thinking about labor issues won’t find it useful or interesting. However, the depth and thoroughness of the historical analysis is such that we sympathizers clearly aren’t Strickland’s only, or even primary, audience. Hinging her analysis on the uneasy relationship between the administrative and the managerial, and self-identifying from the opening page as a career-long writing program administrator, Strickland invokes an audience of WPAs who have to come to grips with the fact that our disciplinary identity has ignored the material implications of that identity on workers—and has done so from (ostensibly) unconscious motives that are troublesome.

In a nutshell, Strickland contends, much of our disciplinary apparatus, especially as represented by our two most recognizable professional organizations (CCCC and CWPA), is designed to manage teachers—and thus the teaching—of writing as efficiently as possible. Debates over pedagogy, from the early days of writing programs through the formation of CCCC and especially contemporary times, for example, often rest on the economics of what we can afford to ask of, demand from, train, and supervise writing teachers to do. Our professional division between the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing emerges from arguments about the intellectual value of consumption and production of texts, and about canonicity and so on. Just as importantly, it also emerges from the institutional belief that teaching writing is gendered—and thus less expensive, less demanding of professionalizing, and less intellectually challenging. Strickland isn’t the first historian to make such a claim, of course. Nan Johnson, Martha Nussbaum, Dana Harrington, Cheryl Glenn (I’m making no effort to be exhaustive here) have all, in their various

projects, articulated the gendered histories and implications of various aspects of writing (grammar/rhetoric/language arts) instruction.

Strickland's refraction of that history is through the lens of administrative/managerial theory, which positions white middle-class men as thinkers and women as transcribers; which purports to teach male students to think, explore ideas and be clever while women produce tidy text; and which discourages teachers of writing from doing scholarship because writing instruction is so labor-intensive, thereby disarticulating composition from recognized intellectual activity. Strickland's claim isn't that these arguments weren't necessarily *unique to* or *new* in the early days of writing program administration, but that managerialism has thoroughly and profoundly embedded them in our disciplinary unconscious while providing all sorts of noble-sounding arguments for doing so, most noteworthy: protecting the students by encouraging writing teachers to focus on the labor-intensive work; and designing programs that alleviate the burdens of curricular design and pedagogical innovation.

As I was reading the book, and even as I write this review—especially as I write—I'm finding it hard to parse two reactions. One is the previously mentioned sense that, while the narrative is different, the outcome is something I already understand; as a result, the internal arguments and evidence are so interesting only because I don't need them to be convincing. I expect, although I'm speculating as I do so, that readers more interested in historical and archival methods will engage that material more deeply and differently than I did. The other: that, as I read this book, I'm shaking my fist in solidarity with the audience member at my CCCC panel, in some ways even harder than he did. We've been talking about splits between composition and literature, about writing pedagogy *vis a vis* professionalization, about management creep, about contingent labor exploitation for as long as I've been in the field, and in many cases much longer. In a roundabout way, Strickland's book reinforces the fist-shaking urge by anchoring these problems even more deeply—not in chronological but in professional/institutional terms, and by obscuring managerial imperatives about workers in discourses that have, in many cases, taken on their own scholarly ethos (assessment and placement are two obvious examples). Having a profoundly frustrating sense of the profession simultaneously illuminated and reinforced is

difficult to react to; if you're already as frustrated by these conditions in the field as some of us are, I imagine the sense of illumination is heightened as a result.

That mixed reaction comes to a head in the Afterword, which is simultaneously optimistic and deflating, neither of which is probably warranted by the details. Having traced managerialism through nearly a century of its impacts on our discipline, Strickland argues for a stance she calls *tweaking* (120), which entails small changes in management practices and visions, with an eye towards opening and exploring possibilities rather than striving only for increasingly effective ways of reaching determined (often not by us) outcomes. Taken as a call for pragmatism that's impelled by a willingness to imagine radical changes, it's a beautiful vision. Taken as a call for caution that's buffered by a cathartic exercise in imagining futures we know we can never really achieve, it feels like settling. In the end, the suggestion to *tweak* acts as both a vision and a caution, and articulating the products of that tension seems like the obvious trajectory following from this groundbreaking analysis.

About the Author

Seth Kahn is a Professor of English at West Chester University of PA, where he teaches courses in writing and activist rhetoric. He currently serves as co-chair of the CCCC Committee on Contingent, Part-time, or Adjunct Labor. Recent publications include the chapter "What Is a Union?" in Rita Malencyk's *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* and a guest co-edited (with Amy Lynch-Binieck and Sharon Henry) special issue of *Open Words* on Contingent Labor and Educational Access.