

## CHAPTER ONE



# A Credit to the University

“Tell us you didn’t want to stir up debate. Tell us you didn’t want controversy,” wailed one of my colleagues to me some years ago in the form of an open letter to the department. Her occasion was my own open letter to the department head protesting his sudden distribution to the department of copies of my article, “On Teaching at a Second-Rate University,” originally published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*.<sup>1</sup> “You don’t care who gets hurt by the analogies you make public,” she continued, “and you hide behind the curtain of a larger idea, a larger premise.” Perhaps the first thing to say about a second-rate university (other than the fact that you sure as hell better not write anything so designating yours) is that it largely comprises its own audience.

It wasn’t so much what I had said about Clarion. It was more that I had structurally situated its sheer obscurity and provinciality, and offered some personal anecdotes about the comedy of being somewhere that had no institutional power to command any larger vision of itself. What I wrote can be explained by way of contrast. At one point in his memoir of a year teaching at Kenyon College, P.F. Kluge quotes a colleague in the English department as follows: “At Kenyon, elitism is moderated by a sense of fundamental second-ratedness. Who else do you think’s going to come here and pay twenty thousand dollars for something that, in principle, is of no immediate practical use? We know we’re not Williams, and that’s part of our identity. We’re the best imitation of Williams west of the Alleghenies. There’s always a market for the second-best Italian restaurant in town” (180).

“Second-ratedness” here means something like happy amateurism. Kenyon can afford to think of itself in this way because it can

maneuver itself while remaining secure at the top of a hierarchical structure. Clarion, however, simply can't afford to think of itself at all in terms of this same structure. Its students don't even pay a fifth of what Kenyon students pay, and many can barely pay that. Its degrees have no other source of appeal than practical use. Its identity is derived from some general expectation of "college" rather than a famous specific example. Clarion University is not an elite school. Few of the students have heard of Williams—or Kenyon. The town doesn't even have one Italian restaurant.

Understood in this context, a second-rate university is pleased to think of itself as staging a local version of the same old national play: Higher Education. Everywhere the performance is based on a solid script, featuring responsible administrators, hard-working faculty, and earnest students. Moreover, we in the cast all know that there are good reasons why the play has been so long running (since 1867, in Clarion's case). So all wish only—well, what? That there would be a wider audience? It would seem so. The idea of some audience other than oneself (apart from the state legislature) is difficult to get rid of. Furthermore, these days even the most local players are bound to be affected by the widespread uncertainty about what exactly should be going on in any one academic production. So another thing to say about a second-rate university is that it is implicated very deeply in a fundamental contradiction: at the same time much of the official energy is intent on keeping the curtain down, much of the rest is bent on hoisting it up.

But only so far, and then only according to certain discursive rules. One is that the institution may be compared on a national scale with other universities only at great risk. For example, in 1990 a report by *Money* magazine ranked Clarion University as one of the top 50 "best buys" among public colleges in the United States. This fact was promptly and prominently mentioned in all university publicity. Alas, in its 1991 report, *Money* failed to mention Clarion at all in its 100 best college buys. National recognition is fickle. In my article, I was interested in examining why, for universities such as Clarion, such recognition is in fact nonexistent.<sup>2</sup>

Argue this, however, and locally one is only going to be more deeply imperiled by the contradiction. In a second departmental open letter, another colleague, taking his usual high road, wrote a righteous paragraph in which my villainous byways lay below, strewn with bodies: student teachers embarrassed, freshpersons confused, and Clarion graduates appalled by the sudden publicity when the *Pittsburgh Press* got wind of the article. "You made Clarion the issue," he

thundered, in what I took to be the very voice of provinciality, red-faced with the phenomenon it decried. A third thing about second-rate universities follows from the second: unable to produce the conditions for their own wider visibility, they come to resent any conditions, while they continue to long for the right set.

What would be the right set? A column mocking me in the student newspaper purported to settle the issue: "Clarion University is legislatively mandated to serve a region and not an economic and intellectual elite." Fair enough, one supposes—and would that any university could live by legislative mandate alone. Instead, "regional" ones abide according to standards and criteria held by national elites. The student hastened immediately to negatively register them: "Clarion is not, and never has been, a richly-endowed research institution." The very editor of the newspaper began the year by positively registering them. During his summer journalistic sojourn, he had informed us, not only did he discover that Clarion students are getting "a good education," but "this education is on an even keel with some of the other big name schools around the country."

Other? But isn't his point that Clarion is not a "big name" school? Otherwise, there would be no sense to his prouder point that "to be blatantly obvious, I ended up teaching them [the other big name schools] a few things." What kind of writing is this? Through the analphabetic haze, what sorts of anxieties are being expressed? I believe the most prominent one is of a piece with that expressed by my colleagues above: institutional identity at a Clarion abides by being divided against itself. On the one hand, we are bid to be "Clarion proud." On the other hand, we secretly wonder if sometime between 1990 and 1991 *Money* got hold of the student newspaper. A few weeks later during that fateful year, a faculty member wrote in decrying that his earlier letter was rendered intelligible because "PhDs" had been taken to be an abbreviation for "Phasing." One reads this sort of thing and fears for the legislative mandate itself.

## 1.

The pride of second-rate universities is an insecure thing, because it is situated at the pleasure of much larger, wealthier, and altogether more sovereign institutions from which we must distinguish ourselves while participating in the same discourse (of scholarship; interdisciplinary concerns; multicultural agendas; and so

on) by which they, in turn, realize themselves. How do we distinguish ourselves? We teach. Who? Well, students who don't know what a Ph.D. is. Most American college students, after all, don't come from homes where a parent or a relative has a Ph.D. Somebody has to teach these students, especially if they're the first in their families to attend college. Yet what happens when their teachers attend regional or national conferences in their respective disciplines? They discover that their students effectively don't exist because the issues that vitalize the conferences have virtually nothing to do with them.

During the fall semester of the departmental open letter, I chanced to attend a conference in Chicago. There a woman from Oberlin gave an excellent paper which expressed the follies of teaching politically-correct texts to students who know they're politically correct. Her example was a novel by an author who has a Sudanese father and an English mother. Her students missed how trenchant is the book's postcolonial critique because the photo of the author on the back cover made it obvious to them he was just another Western white man. They didn't like the book at all. Listening to this presentation, I couldn't help but think that, for my students, the photo would provide one of the few reassuring reasons why they might like the book. Their backgrounds contain few representations of the "Third World." In 1991, they were only just beginning to learn what political correctness was; I'm still not sure to this day they know it other than as a stance that someone else has, such as students from Oberlin, perhaps, wherever that is.

Of course, one is always presumably free to give one's own paper at any conference about one's own follies. Nonetheless, how not to return from one of some national scope without the feeling that some experience is authorized because some is not? It's no easy thing to be a second-rate university because the more general discourse of American higher education flattens out the vast exclusions and purports to extend an available rhetoric to any and all institutions. On this basis *there are no second-rate universities*. No matter that everybody knows the number of acclaimed elite ones who write the lines and direct the show, at once behind the scenes and right up front; these in turn recreate, reproduce, and diffuse the power of economic elites. As usual, it is one central burden of standard rhetorical options to efface what "everybody knows." I heard it remarked that I could have avoided a lot of trouble for myself if I'd merely been politically correct. Clarion is not second-rate. It is *differently rated*.

“I still don’t understand why you had to mention Clarion,” my dean kept saying to me the one time we spoke, most agreeably, about my infamous article. Once again, a Clarion is, specifically, Clarion in one fundamental sense because it can’t be mentioned. Elites, on the other hand, are elites because they can be mentioned—indeed, are mentioned so often, in so many contexts, that citation of “Harvard,” for example, can be indifferent about the material institution. One of the curiosities around the controversy concerning the strike of Yale graduate teaching assistants—to take a recent example—is that it threatened to ground prestige in the commonplaces of literal working conditions. Citing a local professor who characterized the students as “among the blessed of the earth,” Michael Bérubé brings us back to the point: “They are not, after all, any garden-variety cheap labor; they are cheap labor *at Yale*” (*Employment*, 51).

A Clarion cannot afford to be so casually cited, and must remain mired in literalities. So how to explain that my article was a deliberate effort to intervene in the conventional discourse whereby, first of all, Clarion can’t be so much as mentioned? I wanted to reveal, specifically, how its unmentionable status is appropriated by the encompassing system of institutional hierarchies (including how even something scandalous at a Clarion can be charming or piquant at a Kenyon). One reads about higher education today amazed at how the names still have to be changed to protect the actual.

If its authority isn’t depersonalized and unspecified, it’s often falsely designated. The new academic magazine, *Lingua Franca*, apparently designed to counter the perceived blandness of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, regularly contains pieces written by pseudonymous academics. Similarly, even during a period of strenuous, thorough professional critique, articles in books feature pseudonyms. See, for example, the brief contribution to the recent *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, “Somewhere Off the Coast of Academia,” by one “Robert Rich.” He sketches a grim, sardonic portrait of present academic life, e.g. “The slightest sign of individual difference draws a show of force. One is constantly watched, followed, under surveillance, and the subject of reports” (291).<sup>3</sup> Is the reason that he is identified as “the pseudonym of a teacher at a large western university” merely because he fears for his tenure? Examples such as Danell Jones’s account of his disillusionment with Rocky Mountain College remain extremely unusual (and even here seems possible because Jones only stayed a year and got another position at the University of Denver).

I'm reminded once again of a favorite statement by Michel Foucault: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does" (cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 187). Among many of the things this suppression of institutional affiliation does, I think, is to consolidate the very hierarchical structure it's ostensibly set free to question. In fact, "Robert Rich" doesn't question this structure. He isn't aware of it. He just participates in it. Granted, one has to participate in the structure even when one means to disclose its silences, its secret ruses, and its human costs. No discursive position is going to cease being, as they say at conferences, "vexed"; Gayatri Spivak expresses, I think, one of the profound theoretical truths when she maintains as follows: "Persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit is the deconstructive stance" (795). Nonetheless, the structure of institutional hierarchy significantly perpetuates itself because it will accommodate a critique from certain favored institutional sites only.

Even more crucial is the function of an evaluative vocabulary. There simply isn't any public one apart from the guidebook and magazine ratings of American universities designed for high school graduates. "What's the difference between 'second-rate' and 'second-tier?'" a Pittsburgh reporter asked me during the fall after the publication of my article. I wanted to reply that it was the difference between plain speaking and academic bullshit. Perhaps this would have been too easy, although an inescapable part of any thing is the language used to describe it, and few people other than academics have good reason to be sensitive about the fact. A woman from a college in Vermont I'd never heard of wrote me and gave its address in conclusion as on "University Drive," only to write in the margin, "Sometimes the address is the last straw." Perhaps no professional more than an academic falls into the gap between an institution's hushed, mundane frailties and its lofty, timeless occasions. Sometimes all you can do is plunge.

After the publication of "On Teaching at a Second-Rate University," I heard from many who had hit bottom and splattered. Let me continue with more from this same woman: "For most of us, it was over long ago. In a profession obsessed with elitism and correct sympathies, most of us are buried by the pretensions of the nouveau elite research schools. . . . The few who are successful in the academy fear that failure is contagious and they do their best to smother us. The genuine failures revel in their superiority as 'the real teachers.'" I have to assume that I'm being true to the spirit of the

communication in quoting from it. This is a letter that protests against having to be “personal” even while it remains so. How her institution is ranked is the single most important fact of this woman’s professional life. Part of the pain of having hit bottom, I take it, is that everybody around is still acting as if they’re on top.

Just so, part of the experience of being an academic, anywhere at all in the United States, may be that there is a daily, steady, gaseous pressure by means of which any institution expands its own prestige. Of course nobody likes to be thought second-rate. This doesn’t mean everybody needs to be thought first-rate, or just, well, “differently rated.” I couldn’t very well have been surprised years ago to the local reaction to my article, once enough xeroxed copies of it made their way around. (It was as if, via photocopying, the campus had not only created a very personal, hand-to-hand foundation for the article’s reception, but reauthored it as a communal enterprise. Most read the same copy, complete with underlinings, and nobody knew who made the original.) I was astonished the day a man with whom I’ve taught for many years accosted me with my only mistake: I should have called Clarion third-rate!

People react differently to pretense. How an academic reacts may very well determine what sort of career he or she is likely to have. Another day I met another old colleague whose “take” on my infamy wasn’t so clear. I reminded him of the party a few years ago when our group fell into a how-did-you-come-to-Clarion mood. In the midst of the usual reasons, he had suddenly blurted: “We’re here because we couldn’t get jobs anywhere else.” I had howled. The comment was hardly intended to be a balanced assessment. What delighted me instead is how the words flew in the face of, well, balanced assessments. (These always stress *choice*.) Blunt evaluative principles have been edited out of such assessments. Hence, into the voided space flows both a covert self-importance and an even more covert resentment. Must one’s own institutionalized second-ratedness be something one never quite sees? When does it lose its character as a *consigned* thing, and take on the coloration of something more personally held? How many fail to realize how such duplicities function to consolidate the larger interests of institutional politics?

Consider the difference between evaluation and recognition. A Clarion has every reason to be vitally interested in the distinction, yet possesses no discursive power to alter how it is weighed. Hence, the following characterization of Clarion as an “invisible college”



(as the headline of a subsequent profile on me in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* had it) in a letter-to-the-editor by one Gerald Phillips, a professor from the area's major research institution, Penn State: "Its faculty, with some notable exceptions, are quite dedicated to teaching undergraduate students, and, for the most part, do a fine job of it. Some of its faculty also do research and publish the results and are given appropriate credit for it" (B3). How does the professor know? Of course he doesn't, in any specific way. What he does know is how to give evaluation the character of a recognition without passing through the stage of description. So it goes with second-rate universities, over and over again: recognized in order to be categorized, and then categorized in order to be dismissed or patronized. "Their faculties are dedicated to their teaching tasks," the Penn State professor propounded, "as they are defined for them by policy and circumstances."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, all is well there as long as faculty members do what they're told. Do they, in fact? I believe one reason for the notoriety of my article is that it suggests some faculty aren't as content as they're mandated to be with teaching at places where they're supposed to do nothing else. I don't say I'm not. In fact, I don't say anything about teaching—and this proved to be sufficient provocation. The Penn State professor, of course, keeps mentioning teaching because at his own "highly visible" institution the important thing is doing research. Of such a virtually unexamined hierarchy of value is the whole enterprise of American higher education constructed, even if one rarely gets to see it expressed so crudely.<sup>5</sup> The incoherence of a system where research did *not* have more power and prestige than teaching might be surpassed by the threat to a system where all activity in the lower ranks is not as dedicated to teaching as it's supposed to be.

Criticism of the power of research culture has become more widespread in more recent years. (For a sample of the range of this critique, see Damrosh or Ziolkowski.) Yet, as Zelda Gamson concludes, not only have attacks "not seriously affected the schools in which the culture was created." There is more: "The stratification system in the academy is stronger than ever" (73). In terms of this stratification, it's essential that most American universities remain "invisible," or, what is the same thing, *known* simply in terms of their teaching.

Consequently, the larger public can proceed without really understanding very much about these universities at all. This suits the universities just fine. The "controversy" at Clarion over my



article, for example, was that there *was* a controversy in the first place. In fact, no “debate” ensued. I scarcely expected that there would be. Indeed, I didn’t even think anybody would so much as read the article. The library stopped subscribing to *South Atlantic Quarterly* years ago. Late that summer, one respondent—from a first-rate institution—had written of the magazine to me as “one of the most spectacularly reputable journals going.” If so, would not simply getting published in it constitute something of the article’s claim? Instead, few on my own campus appeared to have heard of the magazine. A colleague from another department left one morning with my copy of it in a plain brown envelope.

Instead of debate there was fear. “There’s no forum to discuss any of this in the department,” another colleague confided to me one day. He seemed afraid. Of what? Unpacking what “any of this” referred to? My impression was that students, in contrast to faculty, were bemused. “Woefully provincial” I had characterized these students. “Woefully provincial” broadly smiled one one day, bouncing into class most unwoefully. In any event, the public outcry failed to develop further. The publicity, if not my local infamy, was over in a couple of weeks. We were all grateful, I think, to resume the business of forming campus-wide committees in order to implement the 12 Strategic Planning Goals and to complete the survey from the Faculty Development Action Plan Grant.

## 2.

How much fear is there at campuses throughout the rest of the country? Often, reading letters I continued to receive through the semester, there seemed to me so much fear elsewhere that Clarion came to appear as a forum. One man from another Pennsylvania state university actually asked me to write a letter stating I didn’t know him, lest he be mistaken for someone mentioned in my article! Probably this was too highly timorous an instance, and yet consider the following comment from another man at a Texas university (one I’d never heard of) about it and others in his experience: “No one cares if you publish at these places except that they become conscience stricken, jealous, and, then, hostile if you do. I’ve published *more* because I work in such places but have also probably suffered more. Students are of low quality here and this goes (generally) hand in hand with the faculty.” He mentions that he’s won numerous teaching awards.

Nothing surprised me more about these professors than several who assured me that they taught at places less favored than Clarion. "As one who has slipped well below your 'second rate university,'" one introduced herself. Another, from somewhere in Alabama, mentioned an employment record of six institutions in nearly fifteen years, "none as good as Clarion (or certainly no better)." I had not meant my use of the term, "second-rate," to represent more than an affective category. Even so much as the addition of regional factors (as more than one correspondent noted) complicates how any one university may be evaluated, and of course probably any one can be made to appear either better or worse depending upon some other placed alongside it; a placement is seldom made at all except in one's favor, as we note with respect to the citation of Williams College by the Kenyon professor, above. Nonetheless, there are clearly vast deeps of inky prestige into which it would be fruitless to inquire. "We're a good second-rate university," pronounced still another colleague one day to me. I nodded. We both felt we knew plenty which weren't so good. I'm not sure how many we knew which were barely universities, but they exist in great number, and real people teach at them.<sup>6</sup>

How many of them resent those at their more visible counterparts? One woman reminded me that educational research conclusively demonstrates institutional prestige to be the most important single factor in securing one's first job. "It still wrenches my guts when I come across simpletons in the field at Ivy League schools who got their jobs because they had an influential adviser or the right graduate degree," wrote a man in Virginia. He said he's published books and numerous articles. Is it these that enable him to have the confidence of his bitterness, on the basis of which he assured me: "You are not the only one out in the academic Gulag?" Would the man have felt this way had he been content simply to teach? What *is* it to be content to teach? Not to read anything, not to go to conferences, not to have professional ambitions?

That is, what is it to teach not exclusively in relation to one's students or even one's own colleagues but to the standards of the promotion committee, much less those of the whole discipline? One doesn't, after all, just "teach." The teaching is situated in a broad professional continuum where it is subject to any number of valuations relative to other activities. (See the chapter, "High Flying at Low levels," in Caesar, *Writing*.) Of course one may choose to teach. People who hold forth on the self-sufficient rewards of teaching usually define it as a matter of choice. But then what is choice?

Certainly not something free from its own mystifications. If it were, James Phelan, for one, in his journal of fifteen months of professional life, wouldn't be able, on the one hand, to bemoan that so many academics have so little choice about where to live, while, on the other hand, remark that "professors are all finally free agents" (195).<sup>7</sup> One can only wonder what the discipline would look like if some of these people who only teach, under the exclusion of all other sources of value, published their own stories.

Out of graduate school, Phelan came in second at Berkeley. The people about whom I'm speaking, however, never had a chance at Ohio State (where Phelan came in first) and they don't appear to feel the insufficiency of teaching because they aren't any good at it. They just don't have any choice. "I don't expect to do much better in my career," wrote a man from Louisiana, "as a realist at forty, despite almost twenty publications, membership in two NEH Summer Seminars, postdoctoral coursework to update on technical writing, computers, etc." "No one ever got out of here," wrote another to me from Nebraska, "as that character says in Dante. In eighteen years, I have never seen anyone move on except through death or retirement." Phelan's *Beyond the Tenure Track*, on the other hand, details a record of activity staged in an entirely different theatre before an entirely different audience. He's expected to be free to move—in a professional network of friends and associates, at conferences throughout the country, and to another position, if he can get it.

But of course, one could retort, this is all nothing new. Teaching is disvalued? Everybody Knows. Some universities have more prestige than others? Tell me another. Academic life is insecure? Say it isn't so! The surest way to discount something is to assert its sheer self-evidentness. In fact these issues seem to me the product of everybody purporting to know on the basis of not wanting to know. Take elite universities: how is one supposed to regard them if one is positioned institutionally below them? It might depend upon how far below. At second-rate universities, though, my feeling is that the individual is simply not supposed to regard them at all. Hence, for example, the Clarion student who once weighed in to the student newspaper with her opinion that my "main concern is to gaze rapturously at people who happen to work at institutions with more name recognition." How to reply? By asking: who, in fact, actually controls the gaze? Or by wondering: who defines sight? To have to be accused of being contaminated in order to ask these questions illustrates one way through which the remorseless hierarchy of American higher education perpetuates itself. The student

can be forgiven, I suppose, for just not wanting to hear about this hierarchy, unless as a source of envy.

One day during the end of the semester I received a letter from a man who taught at an American institution not even located on the U.S. mainland. He had read his *Chronicle* and “was particularly interested in your comments defining a caste system of universities, with the idea that ‘you are where you teach.’” Only recently, the man went on to say, had he become aware of “the hidden implications of being a part of a second-rate institution. . . . The problems I see here are aggravated by the official pretense of the university hierarchy, that this university is somehow on par with mainland campuses.” “Increasingly,” he concluded, “I have the feeling that I must escape from this rather pathological milieu or suffer a slow poisoning of my career.”

How to respond? Everybody knows? He didn't. Should he? Perhaps—years later. Now rereading these letters reminds me of nothing so much as reading the high school teachers who contribute hopeful pieces in the past couple of years to the Modern Language Association's annual issue of *Profession* or, better, the professors who describe work in county jails or as full-time adjuncts in the pages of *On the Market*, a new collection of essays by the youngest members of the generation. They are, as Bérubé writes, “being squeezed by a system whose ideal image of itself promotes theoretically sophisticated, interdisciplinary work in extraliterary studies but whose material basis is shrinking as fast as its superstructure is expanding” (*Employment*, 101). But years later, it seems, even a heightened consciousness of career horizons does not necessarily lead to realistic expectations on the part of those lucky enough to land a ride on the tenure track at “invisible” or “comprehensive” institutions that we still don't even know what to call because “the system” has a vested interest in promoting a lack of interest in them.

My own conviction is that, whether off the U.S. mainland or in the heart of the Midwest, these institutions are at the very least mysterious places, far from being populated by faculty who have “chosen” to be there or who are happy to be teaching because it has been legislatively mandated that this is all they can be happy doing. Despite the consoling mythology of unified “community” that has also been accorded them, these institutions may contain experience so raw, diverse, and either blasted or unregenerate that even their first-rate counterparts could not easily accommodate it. At one point, my man in Texas stated: “We're losers, all (and we know it?).” How substantial an investment does this individual, or any individual, make in the question mark? Another correspondent

phrased it this way: "Where did we find it necessary to construct institutional non-being (or slums, I suppose)?" I would put the question still another way: having constructed institutional non-being, where is the value given to its knowledge of itself?

Kathleen Woodward has an interesting essay-review on some recent memoirs that dramatize a state she terms, "bureaucratic panic," produced "by deadlines and other inflexible requirements of a bureaucracy" (60). None of her examples is from academic life, despite the fact that it might easily seem this particular bureaucratic mode of being illustrates at least as well as any other the way in which the positional and the personal fail to equate. How can we explain the absence of academic instances? Of course a number of reasons could be suggested. It seems to me that one is particularly compelling: bureaucratic panic, not to mention dissonance between the personal and the positional, exists to be recuperated by first-rate institutions alone.

An enormous interest continues on the part of the contemporary critical or poststructuralist theory in marginal sites, postcolonial conditions, and even indeterminate or decentered identities. (I make this point more forcefully both in Chapter Three and in Chapter Seven.) Here let me be content to note that others have seen the linkage. For example, Stephen Slemon in a critique of postcolonialism writes as follows: "I cannot help but noticing [that] . . . our theoretical masters in Paris and Oxford are read and referenced by exemplary theorists of the local . . . but these metropolitan theorists seldom reference these cultural and theoretical mediators in turn" (31).

Of course David Bromwich (speaking more generally on the writhings of "academic culture") is right: "To see ourselves as *natives under seige* would lend credibility as well to the poignant evocations of 'community' from university presidents and other incapacitated local chieftains. The perspective of colonial victims could be, if not the light at the end of the tunnel, certainly an apt and acceptable light in the tunnel itself" (232). But it needs to be recognized that this "perspective" has always been immanent (if not actually lit until recently) in the very construction of the tunnel. Bromwich's "ourselves" comprises an already divided constituency, and this division now becomes theorized in the 90s as a displaced form of an aging academy's (self) consciousness of its own totality. Its power silences not only ethnic minorities but also degraded cultural locations.

Another way to describe this consciousness: being embedded; that is, we are the product of our constraints; we are always already in place; we are inconceivable, even to ourselves, apart from

our professional circumstances. As Stanley Fish states in his introduction to *Doing What Comes Naturally*: “Being embedded means just that, being embedded *always*, and one does not escape embeddedness by acknowledging, as I do, that it is itself a fractured, fissured, volatile condition” (32). So (at any rate) it looks from Duke. (Where of course all sorts of dissonance between the personal and the positional have famously emanated; for an account, see Begley.) From a less lofty vantage, embeddedness looks monolithic, seamless, and stagnant. Or to put this differently, one can be more than half in love with easeful margins of any sort if one does not occupy the institutional space of one.

The question of how directly I can write out my own personal marginality will ceaselessly occupy me throughout this book. What I fear far more than charges of bitterness or bad faith is the prospect of [always] already having my experience simply effaced, before its own fateful appropriation by more “metropolitan” centers, full of more powerfully embedded others of all sorts. Doubtless it’s true that marginality can be written of only insofar as it participates in the far more impersonal, not to say invisible, network of theoretical presuming and institutional positioning. (This is not to consider the case of marginality rewritten as subjection. For a searching consideration, see Butler.) But neither theory nor institution says everything about how marginality—especially when it fails to be, in the current idiom, “enabling”—can be written. I don’t agree with James Sosnoski with respect to “the autobiographical mode,” which he claims “does not work well as a critique of power relations” (*Token Professionals*, xxix).

For one thing, the nature of anyone’s marginality changes, depending upon how many voices (some similar to yours, some not) you can hear. (Again, I would refer to the rather astonishing range in the Boufis and Olsen collection.) Speaking of “invested principles and privileges” idealized behind the figure he terms “the giver of seriousness,” James Kincaid puts the matter succinctly: “Different tones lay out different maps” (12). Another thing: the potential or actual comedy (just to name one route) of anybody’s peculiar embeddedness may not result in escape; it can result in renewal, as a reader of Emily Toth’s advice will discover, if nowhere else. In my own experience, I couldn’t have known when I left Clarion for that fall conference years ago that the most direct moment of open hostility I’d encounter about my article would take place while I was signing into a Chicago hotel. A woman (who had evidently heard me introduce myself to someone else) suddenly stepped up

and burst out: "My husband teaches at Clarion. I think your article was [unintelligible] and insensitive." She stalked away before I could reply. Since what I thought she'd said was "inappropriate," I wanted to ask her if she didn't know any fiercer words.

### 3.

Let me conclude with another story. By the time I left Clarion, I thought all the furor was over. Certainly my apprehension was. The whole semester really hadn't been so bad. Only the action of my circulatory chair had rattled me. But the open letters had been fun; I like to think they'll go down as highlights in the unrecorded annals of the department, along with the departmental meeting decades before when a senior man suddenly stood up and wished eternal damnation on our old chair, or the summer letter of resignation years later sent to everyone by another chair, who promptly allowed himself to be persuaded to reconsider and recind at the first fall department meeting. What had bothered me most was the thought that I'd be fired—or at least that the administration would move against me in some way. One friend maintained, "The president couldn't do anything to a full professor if she tripped over you having sex with a dog outside her office." "But only if it could be proven that the animal had consented," I cautioned, trying not to be so worried. In fact, I was not the hero of my own experience. I was afraid. All praise to tenure, though. There was no official response.

So why this late fall day did I instantly freeze, once inside my door, when a letter fell onto the kitchen counter? "Office of the President," it read. I was unusually relaxed this day. This is when the blow always falls. There could be no doubt now what was inside the envelope. The administrative logic was suddenly clear: wait till all the publicity had died down and then make your move. I feared I'd misplaced the name of a certain lawyer. I wondered if I could find the reply from the American Civil Liberties Union to my letter of inquiry. It finally had to be admitted: you simply *can't* write an article entitled, "On Teaching at a Second-Rate University," and, well, get away with it.

Would I be suspended first? I stared at the envelope and ran through in my mind all the discussion many weeks previously that my wife and I had about what to do if this should happen. Had we concluded suspension would be for the best? I decided to make some soup before opening the envelope. There was only chicken noodle



available. Sometimes you don't want chicken noodle. So what the hell: I opened the envelope and read the following first paragraph:

“Being part of the Clarion university family is very special to us all. We share pride in our accomplishments, confidence in our future, and a common desire to serve our institution and its tradition. To enhance that tradition, we are embarking on a new business opportunity . . . the Clarion University VISA Credit Card.”

Did somebody say something about a larger premise or about community? I smiled. I heated up some soup. No matter where in the academic world you are, you just can't beat all this talk of *power*. You can't *fix* it. Even when you think you're most embedded (if not endangered), the energies of American higher education, not to say capitalism itself, will find a way out for you. This in part is what being embedded means. Some position amid the most remorseless hierarchy is never completely stable. Identity can always be recreated in another register, and the rigors of an unfortunate categorization can be reborn as a first-rate opportunity.

But of course the rest of what being embedded means abides in the familiar, daily ways: saying hello to colleagues in the hall between classes; keeping office hours so students can say hello to you; and just generally being a member of a department. After the open letters exchanged with two of my erstwhile colleagues, I grew less sure about whether I'd been written out of the department or had written myself back in. Who decides, anyway—in actual social fact, I mean? Perhaps the nicest thing about being a member of a department is that nobody has the power to decide.

There is only the official compact: with tenure, you're part of your department until death or retirement do you part, no matter what your colleagues really think of you. You can always go to meetings. You can always vote. I did both during the following spring semester, without ceasing to wonder if I should have done either, much less exactly what I was doing in the first place. If the analogy of a department to a marriage is an almost inescapable one, then there's probably much good it makes available especially during those periods when the familiar becomes strange once more. Or maybe best of all during those periods when the nuptial origins appear almost entirely gone and the bonds seem to endure more for the good of everybody else than for the principal parties.