

INTRODUCTION

The present text took shape in the shadow (or is it the light?) of two presiding works of criticism that are disguised as glossaries: Raymond Williams's classic *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), and Ambrose Bierce's wicked *Devil's Dictionary* (1911). Strange bedfellows, to be sure. The Welsh Marxist gave the world a series of absorbing, studied essays on one hundred terms central to the analysis of social life and cultural production—bound together in a volume that condensed a career of sustained reflection on art, literature, and politics by one of the great progressive intellectuals of the twentieth century. By contrast, the bilious cynicism of Bierce, a hardened American journalist and wounded veteran of the Civil War, eventually found issue in a casual torrent of skewering *aperçus* concerning the vanity and vacuity of “modern” life—a roll call of zingers, many of which still sting. On the one hand, hopeful and generous learning. On the other, bitter and misanthropic satire.

For all the differences between these two books, each reflects the highly personal and idiosyncratic voice of its author. But the volume before you can claim no such unitary maker. And in that regard, a third glossary project must be mentioned here as an inspiration for the current undertaking: the “Collective Dictionary” project of the organization known as Campus in Camps, founded by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. Campus in Camps functions as a collaborative and politically engaged pedagogical project within the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in the West Bank of Palestine. As part of the ongoing work of bringing a

shared awareness to generations of young people in that challenging environment, Hilal and Petti have, over the years, encouraged each campus “class” to contribute to the collective drafting and redrafting of a set of short essays on key terms shaping the lifeworld of Dheisheh. Words like “participation” and “ownership.” Charged words, in context. And the work of reaching a shared understanding of that context is meant to happen in the course of the collaborative defining and redefining of those words.

Each of these three dictionary-like things has contributed something to the spirit of our project. From Williams, we have taken the serious proposition that our critical and productive possibilities are absolutely inextricable from the existence of a shared lexicon—that the richness of our discourse is a function of the richness of that lexicon, which to possess and activate we must attend to with live minds, historical sensitivity, and lots of questions. From Bierce, we have taken the liberating license of irony, together with a commitment to impiety wherever it may work its astringent virtues. From the utopian/emancipatory enterprise of *Campus in Camps*, we have taken the promising hope that collaborative work on the meanings of words can be a powerful way to build and strengthen communities, and prepare them to work for change.

And so what is this thing that we have made together, thusly inspired? And who were we?

In brief, *Keywords;...Relevant to Academic Life, &c.* emerged out of a graduate seminar taught at Princeton University in the spring term of 2017. The title of the course was “Interdisciplinarity and Antidisciplinarity,” and it convened under the auspices of the university’s Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities, or IHUM, an initiative less than a decade old and aimed at nurturing experimental and forward-looking Ph.D.-level work across history, literature, philosophy, music, architecture, and the other relevant domains of art and learning. The course description read, in relevant part:

Academic life is largely configured along disciplinary lines. What are “disciplines,” and what does it mean to think, write, teach, and work within these socio-cognitive structures? Are there alternatives? This course, drawing on faculty associated with the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities (IHUM), will take up these questions, in an effort to clarify the historical evolution and current configuration of intellectual activity within universities. Normative questions will detain us. The future will be a persistent preoccupation.

We were about ten students and faculty in regular attendance, drawn from nearly as many departments. Across the term, we received weekly visits from a dozen distinguished scholars: Lucia Allais, Andrew Cole, Devin Fore, Hal Foster, Eddie Glaude, Anthony Grafton, Federico Marcon, Rachel Price, Eileen Reeves, and others. Each assigned us a classic text from his or

her area of expertise—by request, a text that would be of use to us in our effort to understand both the enabling power and limiting perspectives of disciplinary inquiry. The resulting syllabus was arguably eclectic (though not especially “diverse”: Althusser, Derrida, Du Bois, Eco, Husserl, Kluge, Momigliano, Warburg, etc.), but our conversations were surprisingly focused: again and again we came back to fundamental questions about humanistic inquiry—its ends, its means, its past, its present, and its prospects. And this meant a return, again and again, to the primary institution that has sheltered and nurtured humanists: the university.

A summary of the class is beyond the scope of this introduction (though we did draft such a document together over the term). Here it will suffice, perhaps, to say that the course toggled productively between two very different registers. From the outset, there was a strong inclination to ask a frighteningly general and deep question about our work as students and teachers: What is worth doing? What intellectual work is real and good (as opposed to merely “tactical” or “pragmatic” within the micro-arbitraging cosmology of *Homo academicus*)? If that line of inquiry represented the “high road” of aspiration and vision, we paired such moments of noble folly with a salutary return to the “low road” of nuts-and-bolts inquiry into the local ecology of higher education: we followed the money; we examined incentive structures; we were skeptical and (at least provisionally, heuristically) disabused of any residual idealisms. The result was, for many of us, both stimulating and clarifying. And if nothing else, the

mood of the inquiry fostered a very real sense of shared enterprise.

This keywords project emerged in that context, as a final collaborative exercise. We collated about fifty terms that had come up across the semester in the course of our discussions, and that seemed central to our concerns. We divided them up. And we each (students and faculty) took on the task of drafting definitions (sly, dutiful, resistant, surreal, impassioned) that drew on and spoke to our conversations and readings over the semester. These individually drafted texts then spilled into a jointly-authored manuscript that underwent a summer of participatory expansion, editing, and consolidation. The book in your hands is the fruit of that labor. The decision to publish it under collective authorship was itself made collectively, and each contributor retained the option to pull his or her material out of the enterprise right up to the end. But an iterative project of writing and re-writing left us with texts that all were willing to treat as the work of all. Yes, to be sure, some worked more and some worked less. And yes, it is probably the case that no one of us feels that the totality of the work herein represents wholly congenial reflection. But it has been interesting to work to make a text that—in process, structure, and content—defies a number of the standard conventions of academic production. One should not overstate this. It is, after all, a perfectly recognizable product, this little volume. But still, we wrote it “together” and all elected to sublimate our individual authorial voices in a collaborative text-project that cuts across students

and faculty from several different departments and programs—and that is a little unusual.

There is no manifesto in these pages. And no “call to arms,” exactly. But the reader will surely notice, here and there, the sharpness of a voice expressing discontent or frustration—and that voice at times resolves itself into something close to provocation. If one were to try to sum it up, this provocation, one might say that this text seems to ask, again and again, in different ways, whether the current configuration of the university serves the high ideals of the humanistic tradition. And whether we, the inheritors of that tradition, and its devotees, have yet been equal to the call. The text pushes: How could we do better?

And that vigorous dissatisfaction must rebound onto this volume itself, which thinks of itself as a first pass at the terrain it wishes to cover, and which looks to the future for correction, revision, and whatever extension might be deemed appropriate. Should such work ever be undertaken, we wish those who turn to it as invigorating an experience as it has been our pleasure to share.

KEYWORDS;
FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION
and
PARTICULARLY RELEVANT
to
ACADEMIC LIFE