Doing the Hokey Pokey? Why Writing Program Administrators’ Job Conditions Don’t Seem to Be Improving

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Many English departments are seeking specialists in rhetoric and composition to direct writing programs. Over the past decade, hiring specialized directors has increasingly become “the thing to do”—it’s fashionable, it’s doing the right dance. However, what’s “fashion” is not always accepted or valued, even by a department that decides to conform. In response to difficult WPA working conditions, the Council of Writing Program Administrators is drafting a statement of principles and standards for the equitable treatment of WPAs. In this statement, many of the suggested guidelines reinforce the argument that a WPA should be, if not an expert in the field of rhetoric and composition, at least appropriately trained in rhetoric and composition studies, indicating that, as a field, we believe more than just “fashion” is at issue. Underlining the draft Statement of Principles and standards is the reality that “[m]any WPAs find themselves in untenable job situations, being asked to complete unrealistic expectations with little tangible recognition or remuneration.” Furthermore, when these WPAs are rhetoric and composition specialists, often they exploit themselves further by working to improve their programs.

As a direct consequence of these difficult job conditions, many trained and once enthusiastic WPAs will leave their programs tired and discouraged. While specialists are being hired as WPAs, often they do not survive, or, when they do survive, they often “retire” as quickly as possible once (if?) they receive tenure. To understand the WPAs’ general job conditions and roles and to examine what we suspected was a low job survival rate, we conducted a year-long case study of the day-to-day life of a Writing Program Administrator at a large, state-funded University. Through this study, we have identified some of the issues that continue to make the job of Writing Program Administrator problematic for composition specialists—especially when defining that role within the English Department. Becoming a successful WPA requires more than following fashion or learning the right dance (“put your right foot in . . .”). At issue are complex problems involving authority and identity. By keeping a time log and journal narratives, we—Gay Lynn, the GTA
program assistant, and Wendy, the program director—have charted Wendy’s day-to-day activities as WPA for a large first-year writing program consisting of four instructors, 70 GTAs, and 2300 first year students. As the study begins, in January 1992, Wendy is in the second year of what will be a three-year directorship. Our time analysis shows, not unexpectedly, that Wendy works long and demanding hours—days, evenings, weekends. For instance, January through December, she worked 7.7 hours per day, computed on a seven-day week, and a 365-day work year (even though she holds a nine-month faculty position—she teaches new teachers in a six-week summer session and has some contractual administrative responsibilities throughout the summer months). This pattern, a year-round work schedule, is not unusual, particularly for an Assistant Professor working toward tenure. Stories from those on the English department tenure-track, like James Phelan’s, detail stress-producing work demands that often cut into personal and family life. Wendy’s WPA predecessor told her that for eight years as WPA she would return early from Christmas vacations so she could “start” the writing program for the spring term. In the same manner, Wendy finds she begins each semester a week earlier and ends a week later than “normal” professor colleagues.

Defining the Position

It doesn’t take much time reviewing the available literature on Writing Program Administration to realize that WPAs serve multiple needs for often demanding English departments and that these positions generate complex—often laughable—job descriptions. Joseph Janangelo explains that WPA positions are typically envisioned by traditional departments in ways that place overwhelming demands on applicants. Basing his claims on an analysis of MLA job ads, Janangelo suggests that a typical WPA job applicant needs to be an expert in areas ranging from student assessment to ESL to computers and writing.

English department assumptions about WPAs, however, often downplay the importance of the field of rhetoric and composition. We can illustrate this problem. In October 1988, Wendy read an MLA job description that requested applications from those interested in becoming assistant professors of rhetoric with specialties in ethnographic research and collaborative learning. Since she had conducted research and published in both areas, Wendy applied. During her campus visit, she was informed that, should the job be offered to her and should she accept it, her current position would be twofold: she would be hired as an Assistant Professor of English, teaching graduate students in the department’s MA and PhD program in rhetoric and composition, but in her second year, she would also become Director of First-Year Writing.
As in this case, English departments send mixed or conflicting messages to job candidates. In addition, departments have tacit expectations as to what they hope to obtain when hiring a WPA. Lynn Z. Bloom highlights a chair's desire that the WPA be someone who will

remain a Writing Director for the rest of her days, and who will find fulfillment in this most ennobling, if humbling, of tasks. Once I have shown her the ropes I will expect her to handle everything; we will indeed be a team, but I will be the titular head, the silent partner. (177)

These are the expectations, demands, and attitudes that prompt female as well as male WPAs to re-explore their job descriptions through the metaphor of long-suffering department wife. Charles Schuster says,

Married to these figures [English literature faculty members] (and an uneasy marriage it is) are the writing faculty, dutiful wives who do much of the dirty work: teaching writing, reading myriad student essays, training TAs and lecturers, administering testing programs. That is the primary function of the composition wives: to maintain the house and raise the children, in this case the thousands of undergraduates who enroll in composition classes. Thus do they conspire in their own oppression. (88)

Any WPA is aware of the burdens of directing a writing program. Many of us are aware of the department's expectations (the hope?) that we settle into the job and never want to leave, and most of us quickly learn "our place." (You take your left foot out . . .). In Schuster's words, we know, to some extent, that we conspire in our own oppression, as Wendy did when she took the writing program with the graduate program in rhetoric and composition, the sour with the sweet. However, she didn't view the chance to direct a writing program as the sour opportunity that many in her department do; in fact, Wendy had chosen Writing Program Administration as one of her doctoral exam areas. She thought she was choosing the sweet and the sweet, though, of course, she simply conspired to misunderstand her own metaphors.

Surviving in the Position

Wendy spent her first year in the department training to become the next WPA and thinking in-depth about that position; during her first solo year as the WPA, she confirmed her initial impression that the job had become far too large for a single administrator. Immediately, she began talking to the department chair about improving the quality of her
secretarial support and planning ways to reapportion the duties of the position. In the first year, she presented a plan for a co-directorship. After the middle of the second year, she was pushing to hire a new director since the department had failed to hire in rhetoric in its first attempt (due, in part, in Wendy’s estimation to a continuing unclear presentation of the position during interviews). Wendy’s own day-to-day work load had not been changed. In fact, in her second year she paid more attention to her life as a composition scholar and writing teacher, so that professional demands in all facets of her work life increased.

Wendy was rapidly wearing out; her journal entries point to an increasing sense of being overwhelmed by the roles she had to inhabit, by the expectations and size of the job(s) she was responsible for:

**January 6:** Driving to work this morning I marveled at my faith that all the teachers and all the students would simply show up at the right spot at the right time [on the first day of classes].

**January 16:** Toxic day due to no one’s fault. I get frustrated when I cope but don’t feel good about the quality of the interactions, moving too swiftly from one task to the next.

**April 1:** The composition program is looming like an unruly presence—it takes so much maintenance and there’s never enough time.

**April 18:** Some wariness comes from not having any department mechanism that does allow for a sense of a semester being completed and being completed well. I work to reward and the simplest of praise. Our annual reviews now mean nothing [no salary increases and no merit moneys].

**July 2:** So teaching [new teacher’s for the fall] was bracketed with stress—opening door and closing door, saw lots of people. I guess I’m realizing that here, in July, I’ve really started the fall semester.

**Committing to the Position**

These entries signal a familiar message of overwork and underpay. We know that English departments don’t value writing programs. And nowhere does this seem more evident than when established WPAs assert their voices to argue for better job conditions. Throughout the early months of our study, Wendy was trying to get the department search committee to commit to a job description that she felt was more honest than the one she was hired under and never saw during contract negotiations. Since it was the second year of the job search, Wendy was no longer willing to co-direct, for her previous year’s suggestions concerning hiring had not been considered seriously. But she was still willing to examine
the WPA position and to exchange some released time for partial administrative duties. In suggesting this, Wendy hoped to reduce the work load for her position in order to advertise it in a manner that would be attractive to a rhetoric and composition specialist. During discussion, it was suggested to Wendy that the department might look for someone who was willing to maintain the program as it was, someone less interested in professional advancement in the field of composition, someone who “didn’t mind” administering (someone we term a technician rather than a specialist). These journal entries document (always from Wendy’s perspective) her interpretations of the prevailing attitudes toward this job search and the WPA position.2

January 6: I asked the Chair if we had come to some conclusion about reducing the director’s job responsibilities. He said “No. We will talk to the candidates about the job as is.”

January 28: I presented my plan for letting the WPA job candidate know I’d do a unit of administration as an associate director. . . . His reply was, “I think he [the candidate currently under consideration] is willing to grow into the job; I don’t think the department would put up with more administrative time allotted to the writing program.”

During this job search, The English department did include the word “administration” in its MLA job ad although the description read much like the ads Janangelo analyzes: asking for multiple capabilities in a manner that undervalues the expertise of composition scholars, and interview discussions inevitably included the off-hand information that the “department” hoped to hire a new WPA who would “volunteer” to remain in the position for eight to ten years.

Wendy continued her efforts to define a WPA position that would better complement the professional goals of a compositionist. The English Department did end up hiring a new director; however, by the end of that job search, the other English department administrators had created a revisionist world in which Wendy’s job would no longer be too big once the new WPA took over. At the same time, during the last weeks of the spring 1992 semester, Wendy was asked to consider a projected increase to the size of the fall 1992 First-Year Writing Program. Plans included adding five GTAs, one instructor and 800 freshmen, a 34.7% increase.3 This increase was prompted by upper-level administration’s desire to increase the percentage of graduate students holding assistantships campus-wide, and such changes were suggested to Wendy at the end of a two-year discussion concerning problems with her job conditions without provisions to improve those conditions.
Understanding the Conflicts

Wendy’s attempts to redefine the WPA position set her up to be the wife Charles Schuster describes, and left her with a limited, and unsatisfactory, set of options:

She [the WPA] can forswear her love of the child [the writing program], abandon the nurturant role of “mother,” and enter into a love relationship with the man [English Studies]. She can become the man [administrator], adopt a phallocentric mode of being, and in the process either shed the need for the male or subject him, make him “female,” [change the department]. She can attempt androgyny, for herself and others—both male and female—and thus inscribe a sexless world or one that is polymorphically perverse [maintain the status quo]. She can expunge the male presence from her society, through ideological or even physical means [form a non-English Department writing program] . . . (88-89)

Basing these options on Jane Gallop’s Freudian reading of male/female desire, Schuster spins out a relational metaphor that details the actual developments we see played out in English departments across the U.S. (You put your left foot in and you shake it all about . . .). The WPA abandons her program; becomes a hierarchy supporting administrative “male”; tries to change the English department; gives up and becomes a “mere” technician, neither Literature or Composition scholar; or leaves by starting her own department of writing as suggested by Hairston and put into practice at institutions like Syracuse and USC. And she’s driven to these extremes by a job that refuses and confuses her identity(s).

Those of us in WPA positions, or looking to be in WPA positions, are intellectually aware of the patterns and conflicts Schuster discusses. In addition, we are aware of the consistent feminization and marginalization of rhetoric and composition in most English departments as detailed in articles by Sue Ellen Holbrook, Susan Miller, Eileen Schell and others. However, we find the transition between an intellectual understanding and an understanding of experience has much to teach us. Wendy’s journal entries illustrate the tacit ways a writing program may be devalued by other department administrators and indicate why many WPAs find themselves choosing from the limited options Schuster describes:

April 2: [The day ended] with the Chair telling me the Dean wants us to hire five more TAs, bringing the program up to 75 GTAs, and to prepare for 3100 freshmen . . . And I just looked at him and said that I knew there were reasons it was good for the
English Department but, absolutely, no, that I could not take on the supervision of another single TA—[the secretary] could not do the work, we might be losing the Director of the Reading/Writing Center, we have no office space, I have no time to talk to the TAs I’m responsible for, no, no, no. The Director of Undergraduate Studies looked at me in amazement—he was in the Chair’s office—and said the sophomore level classes could use the GTAs.

Forswearing the love of her child (abandoning the interests of her program and those teaching in it) did not seem a viable option for Wendy. Her training and her belief that she had been hired as an educator to the program GTAs, advocate for First-Year Writers, and administrative faculty/colleague to thirty professors, established her role as “good mother,” fiercely protective of her program. Those beliefs led her into dangerous arguments and unpopular positions that worked to marginalize her within the English department.

In addition, by aiming to build a stronger program, Wendy ended up marginalizing herself farther. As a rhetoric and composition specialist, she was predisposed to define the WPA job in ways that confronted and challenged others’ views. In hiring Wendy, this department employed a rhetoric professor—willing to administer—who views herself, first of all, as a writing teacher and writing teacher educator, interested in curriculum, eager to improve an already strong program. The department, however, intended to hire a WPA who also had the responsibility each summer—almost incidentally—to educate new teachers. Over time, it became apparent that field-specific qualifications were really not valued as much as was administrative maintenance, running the program efficiently and quietly (You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around . . .).

When Wendy thought she wasn’t doing enough, some department members thought she was doing too much or that certainly some of the things she was doing could wait or were not needed at that time, such as improving the Teacher’s Guide, increasing the TA mentoring program, developing a new curriculum. Part of the problem of this WPA situation, then, grows from Wendy’s seeking to define it on the basis of her professional expertise.

Next, we’ve found that Wendy’s interactions and easy identification with graduate teaching assistants—the most disempowered community in the department—fed into her own sense of marginalization as she internalized, to some extent, their image of powerlessness:
APRIL 2: Tonight I’m asking myself if I’ve created myself (and to what degree) as the overworked WPA and to what degree everyone else is contributing literally would come back to my office these last two days and not get down the hall without at least three people saying, “I know you’re busy but…” And their apologies were earnest. TAs shouldn’t have to feel they are burdening me to want to talk to me . . . . There are not enough people [for them] to talk to.

So Wendy worked to remain accessible to GTAs; so much so that at one point in her journals she remarks, “My office seems less like an office and more like an audience chamber.” At another point, Gay Lynn observes as she responds to that journal, “I guess you’re only as important as who you direct.” Obviously, the continued low status of composition and writing programs and the often unexamined uses and abuses of graduate student teachers in writing programs are consistent quality-of-life factors for Wendy as they are for all WPAs.

But to what extent has Wendy created this position? On one hand, her accessibility (what we have termed her “open door policy”) signals a set of job expectations on the part of her employer—the English Department in general and the department chair in particular—which she accedes to because it fits her sense of a professional self. Quite simply, the hierarchical structure of the traditional English department has been replicated in the structure of this writing program; therefore, there are too many individuals who view Wendy as their boss, supervisor, or mentor and whose needs to meet with her often go unmet.

Additionally, as a woman, Wendy found that being at the top of the heap, being the single authority with the open door, did not suit her actual style of teaching (student-centered and collaborative) or her imagined preferred style of administering (also collaborative, social, dialogic—shared). It’s lonely, she found, being so responsible for so many. And it’s problematic to feel eternally insufficient for the job at hand.

In journal entries, we see that the door is open, but this WPA is tired, lonely, and frustrated. And inevitably, when working with other administrators, Wendy is uncertain if she has the authority to take the stands she believes are necessary (That’s what it’s all about . . . ?). In fact, often she surprises herself in programmatic conversations. As a WPA and sole female administrator, she could find herself sequestered behind closed-doors with two or three male administrators, arguing alone for the interests of the writing program. Loneliness in the job of WPA certainly flourishes under such conditions of professional isolation.
Negotiating Authority

On April 22, the discussions over enlarging the program continued. The next journal entry shows how marginalization and isolation play out as Wendy negotiates her authority. She receives suggestions, once again, that she might need to enlarge the writing program:

I mentioned continuing problems with my secretary, my worries over taking on a bigger program during 1992-1993 and then handing it over to the new WPA after a year. The Chair started mentioning reducing the number of new GTAs from [a projected increase of] 75 to 72 or 73 TAs (I said I still considered 71, 72, 73 as being problematic—ethically—as 7). I got angrier at this disregard for my position, the fact that I was an untenured faculty member balking their desires. . . . It was suggested that TAs teaching introductory literature courses above the first-year level could be doubled-up in offices because they didn’t need to conference. I said I thought no one making only $7,000 a year had a good housing situation and that every GTA deserved an office work space. Then I said, of course, I’d have to do whatever they decided, and my voice broke, and I knew they were unhappy dealing with “problem” me again. So I just said I had to leave (which I did). Suddenly the director of graduate studies said we didn’t really have to decide now. Tears come to my eyes again [as I am writing this.]

This entry is heartfelt but not unusual. As Wendy’s journal entry continues, she worries that she may be wrong, that she doesn’t have the authority to make these claims, that she may just be paranoid about the difficulties of completing her work honorably within an English department that she still characterizes (and keeps characterizing) as better than the six previous departments she’s worked with during her fifteen-year teaching career.

In their survey of department chairs’ attitudes toward WPA work, Gary Olson and Joseph Moxley name “communicating regularly with the chair” as one of the top three traits of a good WPA in a chair’s view. Certainly Wendy was communicating with her department chair, but she was relaying messages that were obviously unwelcome and she was not being compliant. The positions she was taking vis-à-vis her workload were authoritative. She argued that she knew best when the demands of her job were too great. In not accepting the traditional WPA role outlined by Olson and Moxley, that of coordinator, supervising for the chair, Wendy was asking to have the full value of her title—program director (That’s what it’s all about . . .?).
And, according to her job description, Wendy is the program director. Olson and Moxley suggest that reconceptualizing the role of WPA will give the WPA the power "to construct a viable, effective, coherent program," that is, will give her needed political leverage in the department. But as we have learned during this study, WPA life is more complicated than that. Wendy has most if not all the powers Olson and Moxley suggest she needs, yet the rift between her apparent authority over the program and her real authority is still great.

Revisiting the Problem

To complete this story for the spring 1992 semester, the next WPA was hired. And by luck, given the department recruitment procedures and internal dissonance, she is a fine scholar, teacher and administrator (but also female, untenured, newly degreeed, and hired at the rank of assistant professor).

But the WPA job, in our opinion, still remains ill-defined. Wendy did not improve job conditions by creating a co-directorship, or ameliorate day-to-day working conditions for her last year of administration; never was she encouraged (sometimes she was not allowed) to directly address the department faculty about her concerns for the health and future of the writing program; all discussion was screened and mediated. And in many ways it matters little that Wendy’s position includes certain curricular and administrative powers since the attitudes of other English department administrators and the department overall—through ignorance or through intention—continues to devalue and/or suspect the work she does and the field she represents.

What WPAs seem to have now is external power only (if that). A title, an office, and a never-ending job description mean little if WPAs are disempowered within the English department culture. Ultimately, we’re powerless unless we have a role in saying how “we” and not just our “roles” or our “job descriptions” are defined. To be successful, WPAs can’t simply be told conditions have changed; they have to reside in a truly changed English department. And we don’t know yet where such an English department is housed and what dance is taking place there.

We imagine many good WPAs are leaving their jobs with feelings similar to Wendy’s and under similar conditions; we hear this at conferences and we read it between the lines in the drafts of the WPA Statement of Principles and Standards. While it’s difficult to tease out these problems, it’s also difficult to draw optimistic conclusions from our research or from this discussion. When Wendy has to argue and her arguments go unheard, she feels pushed to sound like the shrewish wife complaining about having too much housework to do and too many children to care for. When she acts the earth mother who identifies with
her disempowered GTAs perhaps too much, she feels isolated as the only one looking out for and trying to alleviate the conditions they live under. These roles lead to weariness, leaving WPAs no other choice but to turn to the limited set of options Schuster describes.

As Wendy began to imagine and plan for her departure from her position, she also felt an increase in her discontent and confusion about her roles as a WPA. Yet these feelings actually began in February 1992, during the search for her successor:

**February 11:** Simply, this morning I was outraged at a department that would put an untenured faculty member (me) in the position of having to argue heartily and emotionally with senior faculty.... I was put in the position of looking like I hate WPAsing. ... [It was made more clear, more forcefully than ever, that rhetoric is beyond the pale—[we’re] some bastardized imposters in academic dress. It was suggested we hire a senior rhetorician who would then do all the administrative work and perhaps have a hobby while the other rhetorician and I would do the rhetoric degree program work (a hobby?—a senior professor in rhetoric seems to mean another version of pure administrator, a senior clerk, while a senior professor in literature is wise, venerable, a master scholar of international reputation, etc., etc.) I’m still fuming.

Her discontent and confusion continues as she begins to envision a non-WPA future:

**May 5:** I felt badly as I left the office yesterday, and found myself making the same jokes about my WPA replacement as the WPA before me did about me, about the next WPA “getting” to write the new *Teacher’s Guide*. It was an “I won’t have to do this anymore” response and I’m sad to find myself having these feelings. I wanted so badly to improve the job. But there is this feeling of “last time” and relief that it is approaching. I can tell I’ll be ticking off the duties: last time scheduling classes, last time, etc. . . .

Our study shows that WPAs form a generational chain of committed individuals who serve for a period of time in these positions, making heroic stands; experiencing anger, humiliation, and confusion; perhaps turning into technicians who keep the business afloat in a perfunctory and non-threatening manner; oftentimes leaving the job altogether.
And Charles Schuster’s suggestion that WPAs be hired in as senior rhetoricians will not solve our problems: senior rhetoricians often are former WPA Assistant Professors who survived—in some cases after difficult tenure battles—and we shouldn’t blame them if they don’t want to step back into these treacherous positions (You put your right foot in ...). They’ve had their Quixotic moments and know that it is not a simple matter to aid a new generation of younger scholars. Equally, we should not agree to hire someone senior until someone junior becomes tough enough to take on the job. Until conditions change—and there’s no sight of that happening—"senior" rhetoricians would still be committing to another turn doing the Hokey Pokey while life in English studies goes on as usual.

Right now being a college Writing Program Administrator feels far too much like being a woman in academe overall. Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington conclude their study of the lives of academic women which is honest, insightful, and none too hopeful by claiming, "In spite of pressures to the contrary, what women seek is to be autonomous and whole, not somebody else’s half, not even somebody’s ‘better half’" (156). We’d say the same holds true in this study. Our initial reflections make us hope that subsequent study will help us discover under what conditions it might be possible for a WPA to be autonomous and whole, not somebody else’s bad girl or better half. We understand how far we have yet to go, and we realize that we haven’t come far enough if we still can’t find a way to envision the WPA job as a worthwhile pursuit (not a child’s dance at all) where all composition specialists—junior or senior, female or male—share in the work of writing programs together. We wonder, will future WPAs ever stop asking, "Are the conditions all right now? Dare I try?"

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Notes

1 This essay focuses on only a few aspects of a longer, book-length report, The WPA and the Culture of English, funded in part by a grant from the Council of Writing Program Administrators. In the complete study, we will present the entire year's time analysis. A few additional figures
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may be useful, however. In an average month, Wendy worked 236 hours. She spent 68.7 hours per month on general administration; 23.5 hours per month on one-to-one conferencing (most of these hours were conferences with GTAs rather than with her own students); 36.7 hours per month teaching; 11 hours per month on research; 33 hours per month writing; 23.7 hours per month giving/attending professional workshops and participating in national conferences; and 39 hours per month on a variety of other categories, including department service, manuscript preparation, reviewing, professional reading, and problem solving. These are year-round averages; obviously during certain months teaching hours dropped and writing hours increased, etc.

Though another research team would certainly break down categories differently, times were filed consistently during the course of the study. To amplify time logs, Wendy kept a journal (164 entries) and Gay Lynn, at that time the First-Year Writing Program assistant, responded each week to issues in the journal, adding her responses to our data files (34 entries).

2 We are not pointing to this department as a problem department. Quite the reverse. We feel it is average to above average and, therefore, quite representative of English departments in America. Clearly, though, we are looking at the English department culture from a particular and situated angle, using the monocular lens of this study, analyzing journals from our involved experiences in these unfolding events. We settled on this study because we feel that WPA views are rarely explored and that it is time to ask those in dominant roles in English studies to listen to what it feels like to partake of this culture, to inhabit our room in the House of English. (See Friend, for instance, for a discussion of the way Graff’s Professing Literature sidesteps the issue of where we fit in the English department floorplan.) Or, to use our essay’s metaphor, why are we doing this dance?

3 As is often the case, major discussions within English departments take place with an eye toward an expected or desired future. Institutional constraints—mainly fiscal—resulted in an entering class of 2650 FYW students in the fall of 1992 and a TA staff of 70 despite the larger numbers being discussed in these entries (although 2650 FYW students still represent a hefty 300 student increase form the previous year’s enrollment). We need to point out that this university, like many, is being buffeted by state budget problems of alarming proportions, exacerbating stress and increasing internal divisiveness.
Works Cited


Connors, Robert J. "Rhetoric in the Modern University: The Creation of an Underclass." Bullock and Trimbur 66-84.


