

# Endgame

Can literary studies survive?

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# Endgame

THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF LITERATURE is no longer on the verge of field collapse. It's in the midst of it. Preliminary data suggest that hiring is at an all-time low. Entire subfields (modernism, Victorian poetry) have essentially ceased to exist. In some years, top-tier departments are failing to place a single student in a tenure-track job. Aspirants to the field have almost no professorial prospects; practitioners, especially those who advise graduate students, must face the uneasy possibility that their professional function has evaporated. Befuddled and without purpose, they are, as one professor put it recently, like the Last Dinosaur described in an Italo Calvino story: "The world had changed: I couldn't recognize the mountain any more, or the rivers, or the trees."

At the *Chronicle Review*, members of the profession have been busy taking the measure of its demise – with pathos, with anger, with theory, and with love. We've supplemented this year's collection with *Chronicle* news and advice reports on the state of hiring in endgame. Altogether, these essays and articles offer a comprehensive picture of an unfolding catastrophe.

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Cover illustration by Jan Feindt for *The Chronicle*

# My University is Dying

And soon yours will be, too.

By SHEILA LIMING

**I**LIVE IN a land of austerity, and I'm not just talking about the scenery. When most people think about North Dakota — if, indeed, they ever do — they probably imagine bare, ice-crusted prairies swept clean by wind. They see the clichés, in other words, not the reality — the towns that are, in fact, aesthetically identical to so many in America, with all the usual houses and shopping malls and parks and freeways. On the campus where I work, though, *austerity* has many meanings and many guises. Some of them you can see, like the swaths of new grass that grow where historic buildings stood just last year, before they were demolished in the name of maintenance backlogs. Most, though, are invisible.

Starting in 2016, our state university system endured three successive rounds of annual budget cuts, with average 10-percent reductions resulting in a loss of more than a third of the system's overall funding. Additional cuts, even, were on the table this past year. And while our state legislators ultimately avoided taking yet one more stab at the dismembered body of higher education, there has been no discussion of restoring any of those funds.

The experience of living with the metastasizing effects of austerity grants me some insight into what has been going on in Alaska. In July, Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy announced a plan to strip the University of Alaska system of 41 percent of its operating budget. He has since tempered this plan, opting instead for a 20-percent cut to be meted out over a period of three years. After weathering three straight years of forced retirements, self-protective “pivots” to administration, and personal waterloos on my own campus, I cannot help but grieve for my colleagues in Alaska. Some of them, I know, will lose their jobs, or else be coerced into giving them up, as my own colleagues have been (my department lost 10 tenured/tenure-track faculty members — half of its roster — in four years and has not been permitted to rehire). But some of them, I know, will not, and I grieve for them, too.

Back in 2013, when I was finishing up my dissertation and heading out “on the market,” I did so in the company of a number of other tenure-track hopefuls. The end of that year saw two of us packing up and heading off to new jobs: me to North Dakota, another to Alaska. A third colleague at a nearby school went off to Wyoming. What all of these states and all of these schools have in common, of course, are economies that rely on natural-resource extraction. When the budget cuts first hit North Dakota in 2016, our state legislature cited falling oil prices. I had been hired at the tail end of a boom that was just starting to taper off and resemble healthily average rates of production.

Oil production in the state has grown since then and now outpaces the boom rates of 2014, even. But our campus has not recovered. The same will be true in Alaska, where the governor's veto was spurred by campaign promises touting high-

er household revenue from the state's Permanent Fund, which pays out dividends from oil revenue to private citizens.

Our campus has struggled to recover, first, because austerity isn't *over* for us, even if the blitzkrieg of cuts has stalled for the time being. The second reason is because there are fewer people around now to help see each other through the grueling work of recovery. We lost our top-ranked women's hockey team, which nurtured many an Olympian over the years; we lost whole programs and departments, or else saw them so hollowed from the inside as to effectively be lost. We survivors lost friends, colleagues, and neighbors. No one from my college, which is the largest at UND, a flagship state school, went up for tenure last year, because there was no one left who was eligible to apply.

But these are the obvious losses, the ones that could be counted and read about in the local newspaper, or in the *The Chronicle*. It is the many and lingering surreptitious forms of loss — loss of confidence, of spirit, of purpose — that do the real damage.

In the spring of 2018, I found myself occupying a spot at a banquet table as part of our campus's annual Founders Day festivities. The event honors faculty and staff who are retiring from the university, alongside those who have won awards for service, research, or teaching. Two of my departmental colleagues were included among the latter, so a small group of us reserved a table (everyone — including award-winners — must pay to attend). No words can describe the bleakness of an affair recognizing dozens and dozens of middle-aged, energetic employees who have been told that it is the end of their career. The theme for the evening was a 1950s sock hop, which couldn't have been less appropriate given the age of most of the honorees. Then there were the speeches. The president was supposed to serve as master of ceremonies, but he couldn't attend because he was interviewing for a job at another university. (He didn't get it, but he got one a year later and has since moved on.)

This is what I'm talking about when I talk about living with, or surviving, austerity. I'm talking about the nonmaterial consequences of material resource depletion, which can last for generations and make earnest attempts at normalcy appear shot through with undercurrents of gloom. But the feeling isn't unique to campuses like mine — campuses that have already met and locked horns with the new, ascetic order.

If you build it, they will come; if you tear it down due to a maintenance backlog, they will go somewhere else — if they possibly can. But austerity is an infection. It spreads with those who run from it. As Karl Marx, writing in England but speaking to his native Germany, warns in the preface to his famous *Capital*, “De te fabula narratur!” The story is about you. ■

*Sheila Liming is an assistant professor of English at the University of North Dakota.*

# English by the Grim Numbers

Even elite departments can't place graduates on the tenure track

By EMMA PETTIT

ALEX PROIMOS, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



**A**T COLUMBIA University, a poor job-placement record for Ph.D. candidates in the English department created some “alarm” in the program, according to a letter that circulated there this year.

The news was grim. Columbia University’s English department had failed to place a single current Ph.D. candidate into a tenure-track job this year. And 19 new doctoral students had accepted admission into the program, raising questions about why the cohort is so large when the job prospects aren’t plentiful. This had “given rise to some alarm,” concerned graduate students wrote in an April 30 letter to department leadership.

According to the letter, circulated by the department’s graduate student council and obtained by *The Chronicle*, the lack of tenure-track placements exacerbated continuing concerns about the department’s structure and culture, namely large student cohorts, uneven mentorship, insufficient teaching opportunities, and the deprioritization of non-academic work. Graduate students were asking the department to take “meaningful, measurable steps” to address these concerns.

“We understand exactly why they were so worried,” said Alan Stewart, chair of Columbia’s English and comparative-literature department. (He noted that since the letter was sent, one Ph.D. candidate has landed a tenure-track job, another landed a permanent, non-tenure-track job in academe, and five others got multi-year postdocs.) At the time, there was a feeling of great anxiety among the graduate students who were on the academic job market, Stewart said, and not without reason. In the past decade, the number of jobs in English advertised by the Modern Language Association has dropped by 55 percent. Of the jobs that are left, a shrinking percentage exist on the tenure track.

For anyone who dreams of tenure, the pressure is constant, and the chances are slim. It’s a truth English departments are having to reorient toward. Columbia kept its head above water for a while, in regard to placing graduate students at academic institutions, said Stewart. And it’s always placed people outside of academe. But the letter prompted the department to think about how to make alternative career paths a part of graduate school “the minute our students get to us,” he said.

#### **‘FIND WHERE ELSE THEY MIGHT BE HAPPY’**

These issues are broader than just one department, the letter acknowledges. But the current agreement with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences regarding cohort size “forces graduate students to compete with one another for opportunities that should be guaranteed.” As it stands, the department culture is “unacceptably hands-off and competitive,” the letter says. (Stewart said there’s

nothing unusual about admitting 19 doctoral students. And the claim that the department is hands-off and competitive “surprised and slightly dismayed” him.) Carlos J. Alonso, the Arts and Sciences dean, did not respond to an interview request.

The letter, signed by more than 80 people, demanded active mentorship from all faculty members. Students must feel comfortable discussing a range of employment options with their advisers, it says, and Ph.D. candidates should be familiar with things like job-market terminology, dossier formats, databases, and job listings well before the placement seminar begins. Students also want a policy that bans discrimination against Ph.D. candidates who decide not to continue in academe. Among other things, they also want the department to publish “transparent and accurate” placement information, including the total number of current Ph.D. candidates on the market. (Currently it publishes yearly data on which students landed academic positions, including at high schools. Last year, four candidates landed tenure-track positions at colleges.)

Once the letter was sent in early May, the department acted immediately, Stewart said. A faculty meeting was held, then a town-hall meeting with the graduate students where they went through all of the concerns, which was a useful first step, he said. There’s also been follow-up contact with the graduate student council, he said.

The graduate-school operation at Columbia is very hands on, Stewart said. What the English graduate students want is for the department to open up its idea of what placement should be, he said. And what they want requires more resources, he said. “We’re willing to do that, and we’ve started.”

**For anyone who dreams of tenure, the pressure is constant, and the chances are slim. It’s a truth English departments are having to reorient toward.**

The department will spend this year developing a course that will directly introduce graduate students to careers outside of academe, Stewart said. Faculty members are looking into bringing people to campus who have been part of its graduate program in the past, who currently work outside of academe, he said. The department wants to emphasize internships and help students spend summers working in galleries or museums and perhaps “find where else they might be happy.” A placement

officer has begun meeting with everyone on the academic job market during the summer, Stewart said, so that they are not letting those months go by without assistance.

And, Stewart added, the department is also trying to discourage people from going on the academic job market before they are completely ready, because sometimes Ph.D. candidates can invest a lot of emotional energy into something that is not going to pay off.

Professors have to be honest from the minute students arrive on campus, or even the minute they turn up on visiting day, about the fact that this very likely won't turn into a tenure-track job after six years, Stewart said. "That's the exception nowadays." When they do land tenure-track jobs, he said, it's often two or three years out.

### **'ALL WORK UNDER CAPITALISM SUCKS'**

Honesty is crucial for any professor of Ph.D. students, said Jonathan Kramnick, a professor of English at Yale University. It's irresponsible and professionally unethical to not be aware of the lousy job market, he said.

And the current situation is vastly different than it was a decade or two decades ago. When Kramnick got his first teaching job in 1995, the process was analog, uniform, and "backed up by relative affluence, even in the leanest of years," he wrote in an essay for *The Chronicle*. Now, not only are there fewer tenure-track jobs, but they appear "scatter-shot over the course of the entire year," and they are advertised and filled "in a manner that is poorly understood," he wrote.

On the one hand, Kramnick said, it is vital for departments like Columbia and Yale to think about how the training that's specific to obtaining a Ph.D. in English might provide skills that lend themselves to jobs off the tenure-track, or outside university walls altogether. At the same time, he said, departments need to be honest about how many of those

kinds of jobs exist. It might not be many, he said. "It's a tough middle road that we need to walk."

With that context in mind, Kramnick said, limiting enrollment is a difficult question, but one that Ph.D.-granting departments "need to think seriously about."

But limiting enrollment can present its own problems, said Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University who writes about graduate education for *The Chronicle's* Advice section. If colleges trained only enough graduate students to replace retiring faculty members, you'd lose out on all kinds of racial, socioeconomic, and intellectual diversity, he said, and "I don't think anybody wants that."

It is important to be transparent with incoming graduate students about their chances, but "most prospective graduate students did not fall off the turnip truck yesterday," Cassuto said. Tiana Reid, a sixth-year Ph.D. candidate in English who signed the letter, said in an email that she's "not particularly worried about my future place in the academy as I have never expected the university offer any kind of refuge or even knowledge."

"Sure I hope I get some kind of a job," she said, "but I say that with the opinion that all work under capitalism sucks."

What Cassuto thinks will work best is a student-centered approach that works backward from what students will actually need. Because for every eight students who enter a humanities Ph.D. program, about four will not finish, he said. Of the four who do, statistically, two will eventually get full-time teaching jobs. Less than one will get a full-time job teaching at a research university. Yet the curriculum is almost entirely geared to that less than one person, he said.

"So what are we doing, when we're teaching those eight? What should we be doing? Those are questions that I think we should be asking." ■

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CHRONICLE ILLUSTRATION BY RON CODDINGTON

# Want to Know Where Ph.D.s in English Get Jobs? This Is What Grad Programs Will Tell You

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

**T**HE ROAD to the professoriate, when stripped down to its most basic milestones, goes like this: Enroll in graduate school. Earn a Ph.D. Land a tenure-track job — eventually. Or, just as likely, not at all.

Current and prospective graduate students trying to predict whether they'll beat the odds to join the faculty ranks face a tough task. That's because colleges vary widely in what they say publicly about where their Ph.D. students land after graduation. "Individual doctoral programs usually try to

keep track of their graduates. Some departments try harder than others,” Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, wrote in a column for *The Chronicle* last year. “Some publish their results, while others sit on their numbers — a venal decision that helps no one.”

To be sure, the decision to pursue a Ph.D. itself is, in some ways, a leap of faith. It’s a years-long endeavor largely fueled by the conviction that a stable job in academe will be the reward in the end. Graduate-student advisers, particularly at top research institutions, help bolster that belief by assuring the scholars they supervise that they’ll be among the chosen few. Grad students have little incentive to ask too many questions out of fear that doing so could signal to an adviser an unwillingness to buy into the mind-set of tenure-track-job-or-bust. Some of them may not even know what to ask.

Graduate students mulling whether or not to enter a program would benefit from some sort of analysis of what its alumni have done with their degree. But institutions often fail to consistently track and publicly report this information. It’s a much-discussed shortcoming in higher-ed circles and was the impetus for a discipline-wide, interactive database for historians. Earlier this month, the Association of American Universities announced a grant-funded initiative to help a pilot cohort of eight institutions make more widely available data about the Ph.D. career paths of its students in certain disciplines, among other improvements to graduate education.

The association started the effort after learning from a survey it conducted last year that, over all, its member institutions could be more transparent about their Ph.D. program data.

“I am convinced that reliable, accurate, and readily available data are necessary for making career diversity visible,” Mary Sue Coleman, president of the AAU, wrote in a blog post about the initiative. “We have much work to do and many miles to go, but I am convinced that there is a real potential to leverage each others’ strengths to positively influence the culture around Ph.D. education and career pathways.”

As the academic job market begins yet another cycle, *The Chronicle* sought out publicly available information about where Ph.D. students who’ve gone through the process now work. We turned to the websites of the top 30 graduate programs in English, as identified by *U.S. News & World Report*, because it’s a field whose doctoral training is geared toward preparing people for careers in academe — and the market is particularly tight. Here are the categories that describe the kinds of placement data that are available:

#### **SCARCE DETAILS**

Sometimes, an institution gives just the faintest

details, offering a quick take on what gainful employment looks like for its graduates, but not quantifying outcomes or naming their destinations. One example is Indiana University at Bloomington, which, in a section of the department’s website that explains what its Ph.D. in English prepares graduate students for, says its “alumni can be found

## **“Individual doctoral programs usually try to keep track of their graduates. Some departments try harder than others.”**

working as faculty and administrators in the Ivy League, flagship public universities, smaller regional universities and colleges, and liberal-arts colleges throughout the United States and beyond.”

The director of graduate studies for English at Indiana, Rae Greiner, wrote in an email that an updated list of jobs by year is available on request to current and prospective students, and that this information could be added to the program’s website soon. Tracking down the information to keep it updated, however, is a task that has been complicated by the amount of time it takes former graduate students, who have often moved away, to find a permanent position in academe or elsewhere, wrote Greiner, an associate professor of English. Self-reporting career moves after that doesn’t regularly happen; Greiner and an assistant — who in recent years have used social media to locate former alumni — sometimes hear thirdhand about jobs former Ph.D. students hold.

“Such students will usually alert their dissertation chairs and perhaps other committee members about their progress,” she wrote, “but they often do not think to alert the graduate office, which is the one office that keeps track of such things.”

#### **SLIGHTLY BETTER, BUT STILL VAGUE**

Other programs give top-line data and the names of a few institutions where their graduates have wound up, but not much else. At the Johns Hopkins University, for example, the English department notes that 84 percent of its 25 students who earned Ph.D.s since 2009 went on to academic jobs or post-doctoral fellowships. It then goes on to say that a dozen of those graduates landed tenure-track jobs and are employed at institutions that include Stanford University, Cornell University, City College of New York, and Case Western Reserve University.

In the same vein, some programs post something

akin to “greatest hits” lists of varying lengths, naming the colleges that have hired graduates of their program. It’s a way to show that students attract a wide variety of academic employers, but key data points — job titles and the years that the appointments took place — are missing.

One example of that approach is the University of Virginia, where the English department provides “a complete list of institutions where holders of the Ph.D. from our program found assistant professorships from 2000 to spring 2018.” Following that list is a much shorter one of “similarly distinguished institutions” where the program’s alums have found full-time visiting and postdoctoral positions. Such lists, when not divided by year, can make it hard to determine how more-recent graduates have fared.

### THE CONTEXT PROVIDERS

At this point, there shouldn’t be any risk in openly acknowledging that the academic job market for the humanities is a tough one. But for the most part, institutions don’t mention it in connection with placement data for their own graduates. A few, however, are refreshingly candid.

The introduction to Princeton University’s English Ph.D. placement information notes that in the humanities just over 50 percent of Ph.D. holders will get tenure-track jobs, and it recommends that “every entering student actively consider other kinds of work to which their studies may lead.” Still, the Ivy League institution notes, its academic job-placement track record is “very competitive,” and the website goes on to provide a year-by-year list of the number of active job searches, dating to 1995, and how they turned out. Another moment of truth in the footnote attached to its data: “Please be aware that candidates for jobs sometimes repeat their candidacies over more than one year in the job market.”

Duke University says that “the worldwide financial crisis that began in 2008 affected our placement rate (just as, we assume, it affected the placement rate of all our peer institutions).” But like other English departments that nod to the effects of tough economic times, Duke — which calculates its placement rate using the number of Ph.D. graduates who get a tenure-track job within three years of graduation — makes a point to highlight its success despite that context. Between the spring of 2008 and the fall of 2013, the institution says, its placement rate was 63 percent, and it names graduates, specifies the year they earned their Ph.D., and tells where they work.

Cornell University points to how steeply the number of advertised positions in literature departments have dropped since the recession, but it goes on to paint a picture of how its graduates are beating the odds. One section of the English program’s placement data includes a look at what happened to

Ph.D.s between 2012 and 2017. Eighty-five percent of graduates in those years found initial employment in higher education, which includes all types of academic jobs, while during that same time period about 60 percent of 2012 graduates accepted tenure-track positions, an indicator that “graduates from Cornell’s Ph.D. program in English outperform the national average on the tenure-track academic job market.”

### LOOK AT OUR ALUMNI

Job placement information isn’t always marked as such. Sometimes it’s tucked under the “alumni” section of a program’s website. It may span a decade or two, and what’s available there varies. For instance, the University of California at Davis breaks down its English Ph.D. alumni by year and includes a name, dissertation title, job title, and place of employment.

“Our program posts all the information we have about our Ph.D. alumni, which means updating their current status as we are able,” wrote John Marx, chair of the department, in an email. “And therein lies a challenge we are currently working to address.” This year, he wrote, plans are underway to “activate and formalize” the department’s Ph.D. alumni network to “provide more information to our current students about the diverse career experiences that our alums are having.”

## “The University of Pennsylvania, with perhaps the most extensive archive of program alums, lists graduates back to the 1890s.”

The University of Pennsylvania, with perhaps the most extensive archive of program alums, lists graduates back to the 1890s — yes, the Gilded Age — although the department’s site gives only name, dissertation director, and dissertation title until the 1990s, when employment information — in the form of “where they are now” — is added to the mix. But, even among institutions that take this very detailed approach to listing alumni, big-picture data can be hard to come by.

### LOTS OF DETAIL, BUT STILL OMISSIONS

A popular way for institutions to organize placement data is to break it down year by year with the names of graduates, their position, and institution

or other workplace. But such lists often raise their share of questions — like how many people were on the market each year, how long it took them to find jobs, and how many of them never did.

Rutgers University, for one, acknowledges upfront that it takes job seekers two or three years to land a tenure-track job. The university doesn't include data from its recent graduates in its calculations. Instead, it gives the share of its 134 graduates between 2004 and 2014 who found work teaching on or off the tenure track or held a postdoc.

### **OK, NOT EVERYBODY'S AN ACADEMIC**

Even as more institutions have decided to help Ph.D. students find work outside academe, that's not reflected in placement data. For the most part, higher-ed outcomes are the focus.

Brown University's English department, like Johns Hopkins's and UVa's, gives information about employment in academe only. It spans 2015 to 2019, and it shows assistant professors, visiting assistant professors, postdocs, lecturers, and instructors. For placement lists like these, it's unclear whether none of a program's graduates hold

jobs outside academe or if institutions are selecting which employer information to include.

Yet some institutions have more purposefully included nonacademics in the placement data. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill says that its "graduate students have been hired into excellent tenure-track positions, postdoctoral fellowships, lectureships and visiting assistantships, and careers outside of academia." Its English department's list of places where former Ph.D. students work is sorted by job type and includes employers outside higher education, like preparatory schools and Google.

The University of Michigan similarly breaks down how many of its English Ph.D.s who have been admitted since 1994 (and completed the program) work outside of education, and what fields they're in. Among them are writing and editing, business and law. Says Michigan about its placement data, which include nine years of information about where its graduates found work: "We strongly encourage prospective students to seek out comparable data from other schools they may be considering." ■

*Originally published September 25, 2019.*

# Anatomy of a Polite Revolt

Graduate students are waking up and demanding more  
from their departments

By LEONARD CASSUTO



**T**HE GRADUATE students in Columbia University's English and comparative-literature department hit a tipping point late this past spring. After not a single one of its job candidates got a tenure-track position during the 2018-19 hiring cycle, they decided to complain.

Smarting from that disappointment, and worried about their own prospects, the students were further catalyzed by news that their program had offered admission to 35 students for 2019-20. Nineteen of them accepted and enrolled this fall. In April, the department's graduate student council held a students-only meeting. By May, a group of students had drafted and sent a protest letter to the department administration.

Students complained in the letter about inadequate faculty advising and too little professional development. They also cited an overly competitive department culture in which large student cohorts were forced to battle each other for limited faculty time and teaching opportunities.

The letter made news in *The Chronicle*, on social media, and elsewhere for two main reasons. Most obviously: It was written by students at an Ivy League university. Prestige always attracts inordinate attention in the higher-education business, especially when the news is that an elite pedigree doesn't open the doors that people expect it would.

There's a prevailing myth that Ph.D.s from elite programs like Columbia have been vacuuming up the few remaining professorships in today's desiccated academic job market. That's not the case — and Columbia's recent student outcomes bear that out. (After the protest letter was sent, one of the department's graduates did end up getting a professorship and a few more won postdoctoral fellowships. But that's a tiny sprout, not even a fig leaf.)

It's true that Ph.D.s from elite programs generally make strong candidates for jobs at other high-ranking departments, but: (1) Those jobs amount to a very small percentage of the tenure-track market, and (2) elite Ph.D.s may struggle when they contend for teaching-intensive positions. The inverse is true at less-wealthy universities, where doctoral students usually teach a lot in graduate school.

As I've noted before, academics inhabit a job ecosystem — not a pure hierarchy where the richest get their pick before anyone else can approach the table. That environment has grown harsher, but, as students at top-ranked programs like Columbia's can attest, it's harsher across all levels of higher education.

Another reason why the students' letter made news was because it spotlighted an unusual level of cooperative resistance to authority. It's not news that many graduate students are unhappy, but it becomes news when they organize to say so. For graduate students to protest, they have to be pretty

damned unhappy — and we professors need to appreciate that fact.

That's because graduate students, much like their faculty advisers, generally respect authority. School is a hierarchical system: The teacher gives the grades, and the students work to get them. We went into this business because we liked school and were good at it — so most would-be academics generally welcome the professional hierarchy they seek to enter.

It therefore takes a lot of discontent to make professional students want to buck that hierarchy. Eighty-four graduate students — an overwhelming majority of them in the department — signed the protest letter.

Consider what the students are complaining about. One student — let's call him Rob — wrote in an email that he felt “a sense of futility” coupled with “a sense of outrage” that “the department was admitting more students than would possibly have a tenure-track job on the other side.” At the same time, the students criticized the program for not preparing them for alternative careers.

Simply put, they felt hindered in their pursuit of college teaching jobs and insufficiently prepared to pursue anything else.

Those concerns were not the product of one boiling instant but of years of simmering frustration. Another student — “Gloria” — told me in an email that the letter arose from “a moment for taking stock” brought on by current events. “It's not like we had just this one bad year on the job market and then freaked out and wrote a letter,” Gloria said.

**For graduate students to protest, they have to be pretty damned unhappy — and we professors need to appreciate that fact.**

In essence, the students believe that their doctoral education is not preparing them for the reality awaiting them upon graduation. If only a handful of them are going to get academic jobs, then why is the department not paying more attention to the kinds of nonfaculty jobs that the rest of them are getting?

In the letter, the students said they “must be able to feel comfortable discussing a range of employment options” with their advisers, not just academic careers. They asked for “a policy banning discrimination against students who decide not to continue in academia after the Ph.D.”

The implications of these demands hit particu-

larly hard. If students say they want their advisers to be more receptive to multiple career options, that means a good number of those students don't feel comfortable raising that subject now. If they want an actual policy banning "discrimination" against nonprofessorial careers, they must sense that discrimination now. Those are subjective impressions, of course, but what do they say about academic culture?

"For the most part," said Rob, "I've found the faculty to be really receptive to student concerns and to share the sense of structural crisis." But, he said, "they are unsure what to do about it."

The students' letter offered some useful directives for the English department. First and foremost: Only admit the number of students that the program can support fully — that doesn't just mean supporting them financially but professionally. The letter suggested the department offer a seminar on diverse career options for English Ph.D.s, and set aside a budget to support unpaid "internships outside of academia."

Some good news here is the department's constructive response. Professors listened to the students and didn't try to silence them. The faculty first met as a department, and then worked with the students to set up what Gloria called "by far the most well-attended town hall we ever had." Students moderated the meeting, which produced "an honest exchange of views" between people acting "in good faith," she said. Rather than debate whether the students' grievances were real, she added, the "overall vibe was one of trying to figure out solutions."

"A solid contingent of faculty want to do extra work and make changes," said Gloria. Some changes were noticeable immediately. The department's placement seminar "began in June this year," instead of the fall, "with meetings and workshops over the summer," she said.

A professional-development seminar is now in the works, according to the department chair, Alan Stewart, and internship possibilities are being dis-

cussed. Gloria says she's "cautiously optimistic." But the students haven't heard much through official channels yet, and Rob says that he "won't be satisfied until I see evidence."

Columbia's English department is off to a good start, then, but it's a long course to run. Plenty of other departments at other institutions should follow the same path. The problems described by the Columbia students aren't unusual or unique to its English department. They proliferate throughout the humanities — and many of the social sciences and sciences, too.

We should view the Columbia letter as a shot across our collective bow, not just an attack aimed at one department.

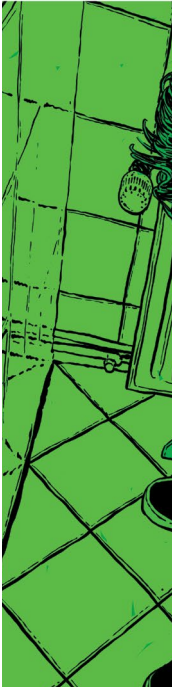
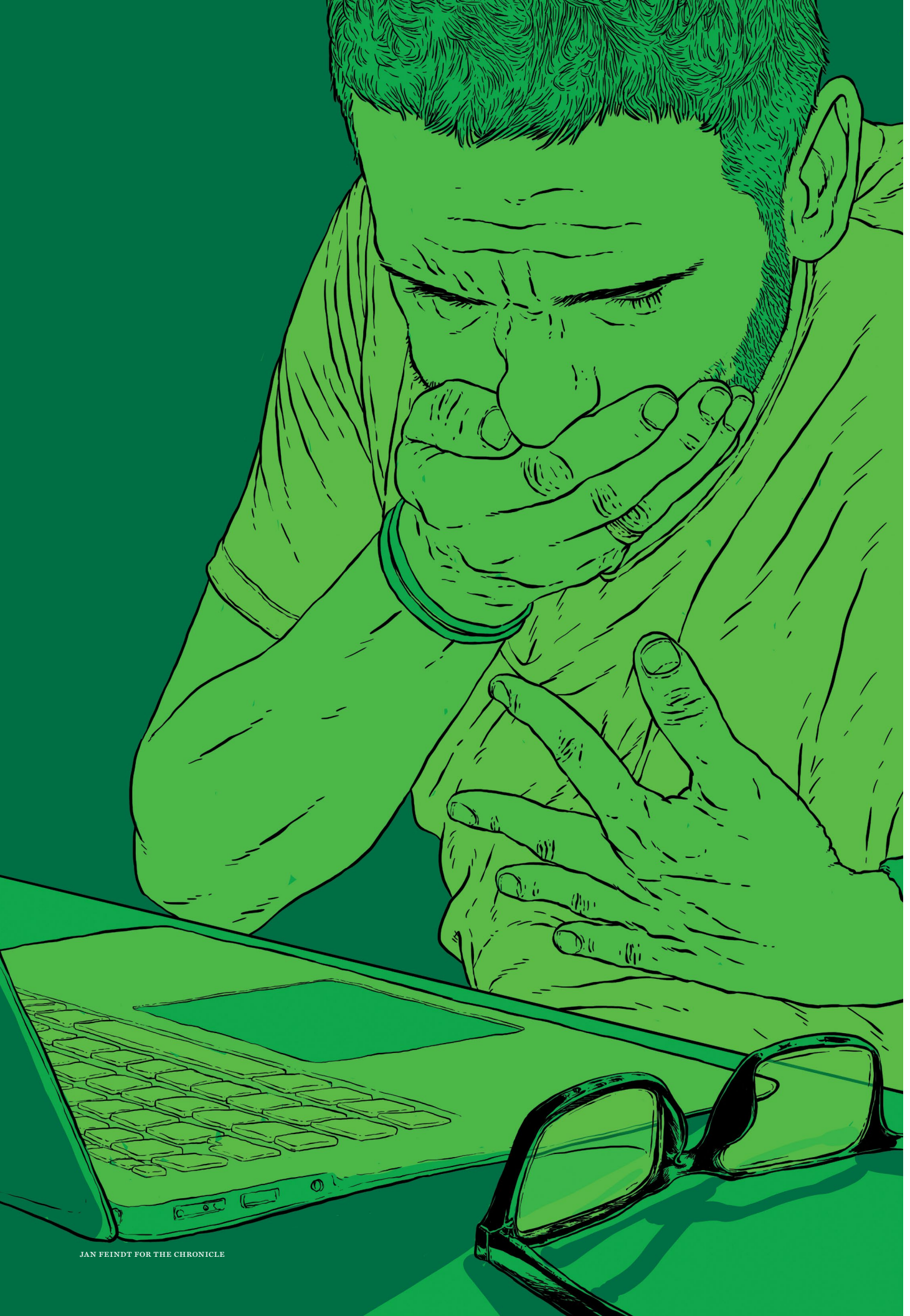
There's a scene in The Who's rock opera *Tommy* in which the title character — once a "deaf, dumb, and blind" pinball prodigy and now a cult figure — instructs his minions that "to follow me," they must wear ear plugs and eyeshades, and "You know where to put the cork." Not surprisingly, this arrogance doesn't go over well. Tommy's followers revolt against him and together announce, "We're not gonna take it."

That's basically what the Columbia students politely told their professors. "We do not believe that the current structure of the department is sustainable," they wrote in their letter. The same is true of doctoral programs at many other institutions.

The real question here: Why aren't more doctoral students writing protest letters to their departments? Let's not wait for them to do so before we act ourselves. ■

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It*, published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at [lcassuto@erols.com](mailto:lcassuto@erols.com). Twitter handle: @LCassuto.

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# The Disgusting New Campus Novel

Burping and vomiting on the way  
to academe's collapse

BY KRISTINA QUINN

**I**F CONTINGENT faculty were being killed at your university at the rate of one per day, how many days would it take for someone in your administration to notice?" That's the question asked by Geoff Cebula's murder-mystery novel *Adjunct* (2017), set at fictional Bellwether College. The mysterious disappearance of faculty members compels Elena Malatesta, an adjunct professor in the modern-language department, to unravel budget cuts from murder and uncover the real cause behind the disappearance of Bellwether's adjuncts. In the end, Malatesta also disappears from campus. She quits teaching to pursue a life of the mind outside academe. She will, however, advise a part-time colleague to continue teaching. Because a full-time position may — just may — open up in the future. Thus the crisis continues.

Cebula's novel contributes to a new trend in American campus fiction that features contingent faculty and staff as protagonists seeking to understand the changing nature of higher education and to gain job security, professional recognition, and promotion. Such novels and short fiction — instances of what Jeffrey Williams has called the "Adjunctroman" — include Julia Keefer's *How to Survive as an Ad-*

*junct Professor by Wrestling* (2006), J. Hayes Hurley's *The Adjunct* (2008), Alex Kudera's *Fight for Your Long Day* (2010), A.P. O'Malley's "*Vagrant Adjunct*" (2012), and Gordon Haber's "*Adjunctivitis*" (2013).

These small-press or self-published narratives of contingency frustrate the most recognizable mode of campus fiction, the "Professorroman," with a saga of Sisyphean lack of progress. If the Professorroman is a version of Bildungsroman that substitutes a story of coming into tenure for a coming-of-age narrative, in the Adjunctroman no one achieves professorship or even gets close: These are cautionary tales of academic drudgery and professional woe.

The old Professorroman reflected the realities of academic life and, for some, doubled as a kind of how-to manual. Elaine Showalter confesses in *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2009) that she read academic fiction as a kind of advice manual, because it projected desirable attributes for her own professorial persona: "In an era before there were handbooks, novels taught me how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail." But now that the tenure track has more or less completely disappeared, a new genre has arrived.

To be sure, tales of academic job insecurity are not actually all that new. Early academic novels, such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), and David Lodge's *Small World* (1984), tell tales of faculty (largely in English departments) who struggle to build a career and who in the end leave. Later 20th-century fictions, such as Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995) and Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1997), use satire to explore the pressure-cooker atmosphere that results when high-level thinkers are underemployed or feel invisible in crumbling institutions.

Coming-of-age narratives have traditionally shown us the underbellies of institutions, often through the eyes of a beleaguered and sympathetic protagonist. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, *Pip*, or *Oliver Twist* come to mind. Classics of the tradition, Dickens's Bildungsromans called attention to brutal class disparities in a rapidly shifting Victorian social climate. A century later, readers still sympathize with his orphaned protagonists. Along these lines, the Professorroman has helped many of us catch a glimpse of ourselves so that we might reflect on the academy in which we labor and live.

**B**UT THE 21st-century Adjunctroman is different, not least because its protagonists tend to be unsympathetic and because it can be so relentlessly disgusting. Feces, vomit, blood, amputated limbs, corpses — these are some of the motifs by which the new campus fictions announce their difference from the old. Faculty are represented as what Julia Kristeva theorized as the "abject," that

which is expelled from the body proper as waste. "Neither subject nor object," Kristeva writes, the abject disturbs and disrupts. The abject horrifies.

Haber's novella "Adjunctivitis" opens with Robert Allen Rabinowitz preparing to grade a fresh batch of undergraduate essays from one of his introductory composition courses: "A five-year veteran of undergraduate essay correction, Robert had everything he needed in front of him: pencils, coffee and a double Irish whiskey with ice. ... Thus prepared, he read one sentence — *Since the beginning of the universe, American society has always loved reality TV* — and turned his head just in time to spray the wastepaper basket with vomit." Rabinowitz takes a few minutes to clean and resettle himself: "Then he returned to his desk. He read the second sentence of the essay — *Reality TV is the most popular type of TV show for Americans worldwide* — and immediately puked again, this time directly onto the floor, as he had left the basket outside to dry."

## Feces, vomit, blood, amputated limbs, corpses — these are some of the motifs by which the new campus fictions announce their difference from the old.

Rabinowitz's triggered vomiting offers an obvious commentary on the quality of undergraduate writing and instruction. It is also a rich characterization of professorial abjection. And Rabinowitz is hardly alone. In the first pages of James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale*, Nelson Humbolt loses a finger in a freak accident while walking across campus. In Kudera's *Fight for Your Long Day*, Duffleman (a.k.a. Duffy) spends an inordinate amount of time thinking about his bodily functions. In O'Malley's "*Vagrant Adjunct*," an obese, middle-aged adjunct who teaches at a for-profit business college burps and farts as he copies and pastes his afternoon lecture from Wikipedia. Keefer's protagonist in *How to Survive as an Adjunct Professor by Wrestling* dies multiple times, her corpse ultimately dispersing into the digital stratosphere of online instruction. In these tales of professional decay, the adjunct protagonist may once have aspired to the professorial ideal but has since been reduced to a waste product, the "jettisoned object" (as Kristeva has it) that "is radically excluded" not from the machine of higher education but from the realm of the professorial, the expert, the tenured or the tenure-track. In this way, then, the abjection of

the adjunct threatens to undo the very meaning of *professor*.

In a review of *Fight for Your Long Day*, William Pannacker judges Kundera's "depiction of the life and psychology of an adjunct teacher" to be "realistic." But Pannacker balks at the repellent quality of Kundera's protagonist: "Fight for Your Long Day is not without problems. The sexual and digestive preoccupations of the protagonist seem like distractions from the larger message of the novel. One could argue that they relate to Maslow's hierarchy; in any case, they are revoltingly described," which "undermines any sympathy the reader might have for him as a representative of adjuncts." Perhaps it is the rare artist who can craft gastrointestinal-challenged characters with high literary merit — James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Monty Python come to mind. Pannacker recognizes that Kundera's novel participates in a significant shift in the representation of faculty on the contemporary campus, but he misreads its "sexual and digestive preoccupations" as *distractions*. On the contrary, they are the abject essence of the novel.

Duffleman's musings on and fantasies about bathrooms, bowel movements, and farts parallel the abject conditions of his employment as an adjunct who moonlights as a security guard. His search for a clean public restroom at the close of his evening security shift at Liberty Tech is, as Pannacker complains, a bit of a slog. The nearly 30 pages through which Duffy carefully considers his routine evening toilet break — its time, location, and stall — also signal his "overworked adjunct state" and his equally routine shame that he "hasn't written anything beyond email in several years." Soon the reader, too, begins to long for relief from his digestive issues. Duffleman's lack of gastrointestinal and professional movement reflects another common quality of the Adjunctroman — neither the protagonist nor the narrative progresses.

Ultimately, as a narrative form inextricably bound but supplemental to the Professorroman, the Adjunctroman is incapable of representing anything other than the failure of an academic to move forward, to make progress, to build a career. Cebula, Haber, Keefer, Kundera, and other writers of

the contemporary Adjunctroman remind us that the stories we tell ourselves about who we are as professionals — as professors — are important. In these novels, we confront the deprofessionalization of higher education in stark terms and grotesque figurations. Showalter once quipped that "the daily life of a professor is not good narrative material." The daily life of the contemporary adjunct is even less so.

As Mark Bousquet says, adjuncts are "treated like shit." To use Kristeva's language, adjuncts are the "jettisoned"; they are "radically excluded" from the decision making and professional opportunities of their departments. They may even be excluded *because* they remind tenure-tracked colleagues of the deprofessionalization of the academy more broadly, bringing faculty "toward the place where meaning collapses." The adjunct professor swims in stagnant pools of unstable funding, rather than along the designated streams of

## The Adjunctroman is incapable of representing anything other than the failure to move forward, to build a career.

institutional investment and professional development that support tenure. The adjunct's institutional place recalls the Kristevan subject's sense of horror when confronted with such emissions and expulsions of waste. In the toilet bowls that contain the waters of faculty funding pools, adjuncts sink, reminders of the excess and waste of the professorial pursuit. ■

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# Losing Faith in the Humanities

The decline of religion and the decline of the study of culture are part of the same big story

By SIMON DURING

**A**RE THE humanities over? Are they facing an extinction event? There are certainly reasons to think so. It is widely believed that humanities graduates can't easily find jobs; political support for them seems to be evaporating; enrollments in many subjects are down. As we all know.

Even if the situation turns out to be less than terminal, something remarkable is underway. Bewilderment and demoralization are everywhere. Centuries-old lineages and heritages are being broken. And so we are under pressure to come up with new ways of thinking that can take account of the profundity of what is happening. In this situation, we need to think big.

I want to propose that such big thinking might begin with the idea that, in the West, secularization has happened not once but twice. It happened first in relation to religion, and second, more recently, in relation to culture and the humanities. We all understand what religious secularization has been — the process by which religion, and especially Christianity, has been marginalized, so that today in the West, as Charles Taylor has famously put it, religion has become just one option among a smorgasbord of faith/no-faith choices available to individuals.

A similar process is underway in the humanities. Faith has been lost across two different zones: first, religion; then, high culture. The process that we associate with thinkers like Friedrich Schiller, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold, in which culture was consecrated in religion's place, and that in more modest forms survived until quite recently, has finally been undone. We now live in a doubly secularized age, post-religious and post-canonical. The humanities have become merely a (rather eccentric) option for a small fraction of the population.

Cultural secularization resembles earlier religious secularization. What happened to Christian revelation and the Bible is now happening to the idea of Western civilization and "the best that has been thought and said," in Arnold's famous phrase. As a society, the value of a canon that carries our cultural or, as they once said, "civilizational" values can no longer be assumed. These values are being displaced and critiqued by other ostensibly more "enlightened" ways of thinking. The institution — the academic humanities — that officially preserved and disseminated civilizational history is being hollowed out, partly from within. Only remnants are left.

For all that, we should not insist too strongly on analogies between the two secularizations. Doing that risks downplaying the ways in which they differ. The power of the "second secularization" thesis is not just that it helps us recognize the humanities' plight in their largest context, but that it helps us view them dispassionately.

One difference is that the humanities and religion operate differently in terms of class. Unlike religion, the humanities have always been classed. In their formalized modes especially, they have belonged mainly to a fraction of the elite. Another difference: Cultural secularization is less unified than religious secularization in the sense that it has had two different targets.

On the one side, cultural secularization involves a loss of status and perceived functionality on the part of "high" cultural canons and intellectual lineages. Quite suddenly, having a detailed knowledge of and love for Bach's music, say, stopped being a marker of a "cultured" or "civilized" person and became just a matter of opinion and personal interest.

## Despite the humanities' variety and dispersion, they accrue a power that is hard to extinguish.

On the other side, cultural secularization entails the loss of belief in the ethical and intellectual value of the traditional academic humanities disciplines — what we can call the "high humanities." The idea, current since Kant, that the disciplined humanities lie at the basis of academic life cuts little ice today.

These two forms of cultural secularization — the erosion of canonicity and the loss of authority — are joined. That is why it has become almost impossible today to affirm the social or ethical value in studying, say, verse forms in John Dryden's poetry; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's relation to Moses Mendelssohn; the early modern Dutch ship-building trade; differences between humanist thought in Florence and Milan in the quattrocento; contemporary analytic philosophy's technical debate over free will. Such topics are of course still researched and even taught, but they have become socially and culturally peripheral precisely because they are not connected to a communal acknowledgment of the high humanities' value. Thus, at least in Anglophone countries, it has become all but impossible publicly to defend the use of taxpayer money on them.

**S**o WHY did cultural secularization happen? Globalization, of course, has been one of its causes — globalization intertwined with both feminism and decoloniality. As such, it is a slightly contradictory globalization that affirms a relativism for which all cultures are ascribed equal value at the same time as it downgrades European high culture as a product of colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. (We might call this

contradictory formation “emancipatory culturalism.”) In this context, canonical European culture is dismissed as a vehicle for dead white men, of little interest to those who are neither men nor white nor dead.

A second cause of cultural secularization is what is often called “neoliberalism,” the extension of market relations into domains and institutions where they previously played little or no part. The relation between cultural secularization and capitalism is complex. On the one side, an education system primarily directed at increasing economic competitiveness and productivity sidelines the traditional humanities because their economic contribution is minimal or at least indirect. On another side, in an era of radically expanding and niche-marketed consumption, many commodities and commodified experiences (luxury brands, tourism, wines) can provide the cultural distinction that high cultural participation once did.

Cultural secularization’s last and more minor cause is internal to the academy — namely, professionalization. It is obvious that cultural secularization has happened alongside the increasing self-enclosure of the academic disciplines.

**D**ESPITE THE second secularization, in some form or other the humanities retain considerable force and shaping power. The humanities have never had a single project or ethical center. They are not based on a belief or a set of beliefs. They are radically dispersed: They have involved and still do involve all kinds of activities, dispositions, and arguments that go in different directions politically and morally. They are certainly not, as is often said, connected to the encouragement of empathy and social critique. And they are hard to secularize for precisely that reason: They possess no essence, no specific doctrines and ethical principles, to break with.

Despite the humanities’ variety and dispersion, they accrue a power that is hard to extinguish just because they provide fertile ground for historicized reasoning, truthfulness, memory, conservation, imagination, and judgment. Being able to think logically (and dialectically); knowing more than others about the past; being good at checking things for their truth and accuracy; having a strong casuistical sense of what rules count when; being especially familiar with information and archives; being able to dream up possibilities and exciting impossibilities; being intellectually curious; being able to make quick and accurate assessments about whether this (version of an) image or a text is better in a relevant way than that one; having the ability to tell persuasive and accurate stories: All of these are dispositions and skills that secure authority and power for individuals in all kinds of situations. Such skills are not confined to the humanities, but they do thrive and expand there.

This is why a secularized humanities — a post-canonical humanities — still reaches deep into our society through all kinds of networks and institutions, in many forms and media, often at a distance from the academy.

Most discussions of the humanities assume that they are essentially academic. This is a simplification. Even if we grant an orthodox understanding of the history of the humanities as developing out of early modern European humanism and reaching an apogee in the West during the Cold War, many of the most significant scholarly and theoretical contributions to that trajectory were written outside the academy.

Indeed, beginning with the emergence of humanism in early modern Italy right up until the later 19th century, the university system was routinely at odds with the currents that have most powerfully shaped the humanities as we know them. Historically, the humanities and the universities have mainly been opponents. Admittedly, the academy became more important to the humanities after 1945, and today it monopolizes at least our image of them, but it remains important to keep both today’s and the past’s extramural humanities in mind when we think about the whole humanities world.

Post-tertiary education’s extension since the war, and especially since the 1980s under neoliberalism, has enlarged the humanities world. So too has the general increase in cultural consumption. Many more people have studied in arts faculties, if only a course or two, than ever before; many more people produce and consume products that refer to knowledges and sensibilities that the humanities foster.

## In some form or other the humanities retain considerable shaping power.

But let’s not forget that a popular humanities has existed since at least the 17th century. We can recall Joseph Addison’s famous desire, expressed in 1711, to bring “Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and Coffee-Houses.” By the time that Addison was writing, the will to popularize was already well established, and over the centuries it would go on to produce a flood of books and reviews, and, later on, exhibitions, films, television and radio shows, and websites, disseminating analysis, understanding, preservation, and interpretation of society, culture, and nature — a flood that continues, stronger than ever, today. All of this fosters a huge amateur humanities in which many people, some of whom have had only the

most attenuated connection to the academy, think and learn. The humanities world has historically drawn much of its energy and legitimation from popular and amateur activities like these.

There also exists an extramural figurative humanities, by which I mean a domain of styles, objects, designs, and tastes that are shaped by the humanities, carry their imprint, and indirectly express and stimulate their findings. An example: the Bauhaus of the 1930s. Bauhaus designs and artworks, famous for their austere industrial elegance, their claim that “form follows function,” their refusal of mere ornamentation, were produced in accordance with sophisticated social and philosophical theories both academic and extramural, theories that loosely resonated with other, not necessarily related, “modernist” knowledges — with, for instance, T.S. Eliot’s rejection of romanticism, that formed the basis of 20th-century Anglophone academic literary criticism.

To recognize that the humanities are expressed in designs, fictions, movies, and so on — that a humanities sensibility is articulated in all these marketable forms — is to modify our sense of the humanities’ current imperilment. Under cultural secularization and its post-disciplinary university, the academic humanities lose authority even as the popular, amateur, and figurative humanities thrive.

**W**HAT ABOUT resistance to cultural secularization? It will help to turn first to the three major genres of resistance to religious secularization. The first is absolutist: Secularization is wrong because God’s revelations and miracles are real. The second is functionalist: Religion provides the framework in which our society, culture, and morality are most securely grounded, and therefore attempts to marginalize it should be thwarted. The third is existential: Human beings are lost in a cosmos they cannot account for and therefore driven toward the transcendentalisms that articulate the wonder, awe, and anxiety they encounter in approaching Being. Religion, the thinking goes, best expresses those affective, existential needs in part because it binds us to earlier generations.

The secularization analogy is illuminating here. Some of those who wish to push back on cultural secularization do so on absolutist grounds, making the claim, for instance, that the cultural canon that holds Western civilization’s glories is where real beauty and truth exist. Some make a functionalist argument: The humanities provide irreplaceable grounds for a good democratic society. They can, for instance, shape empathetic and tolerant moral sensibilities more powerfully than any alternative. Last, some who resist cultural secularization do so on existential grounds. They claim that high cultural traditions and artifacts, along with the practices of interpretation and critique developed in

response to them, provide us with the least reductive, most subtle, most profound, impersonal, and thoughtful experiences and lessons available to us, experiences that preserve and sanction the heritage.

None of these defenses seems to me particularly strong. Most of us agree that our canon does not bear any absolute truth and beauty, but rather it belongs to (a fraction of) one particular culture or cluster of cultures. The functionalist argument is weak because, as we have seen, the humanities preach many messages besides empathy and tolerance and the democratic, cosmopolitan virtues. And they don’t seem to make people more empathetic and tolerant anyway. The existential argument is politically impossible because of its implicit elitism: It divides and hierarchizes the world into those shaped by the humanities and those not. Against the grain of contemporary ideology, it also downgrades experiences that happen in, say, nature or in sport rather than in the proximity of high-cultural artifacts. But it is also weak because it is irrelevant. Some, especially among the upper-middle class, will no doubt continue to experience canonical cultural works as incomparably enriching (I do so myself), but that will not hold cultural secularization back. Under secularization, admiration for and commitment to the canon and the old disciplines remains an option (especially for elites), just as religion remains an option (especially for non-elites).

Some causes for cultural secularization are obdurate: It seems clear, for instance, that we cannot effectively prevent constant changes in technology. They seem to have a force beyond our control. Nor can we do much about academic professionalization and specialization: If those processes are going to slow, it won’t be because of exhortations to communicate more with the wider public, or to further quantify impact.

## **The humanities are to be preserved because they are compelled to push back on the capitalist apparatuses that are dismantling them.**

There are, however, two causes of cultural secularization that are open to negotiation because they are more plainly ideological. The first has to do with the processes of intellectual “decolonization” and identity emancipation that underpin cultural secularization. The argument that, to put it very crudely, the received canon is to be downgraded

on the grounds that it was created by white, male, heterosexist, Eurocentric, colonizing elites is very powerful today for reasons that most of us understand, and that express a desire for justice and equity that most of us share. But that understanding and that desire court dangerous simplifications. The purposes, qualities, and forms through which literature, art, music, and so on gain their powers and from which they draw their intensities should be understood as “relatively autonomous.” They have no direct relation to the broader social conditions out of which they are produced.

This is true of all aestheticized expressive forms in all societies. All known societies, white or not, colonizing or not, have been by the standards that are dominant in the humanities world today, cruel and unjust to some degree or other. To judge cultures and works not by their own qualities but by our understandings of the equity or not, tolerance or not, fairness or not, of the societies or individuals that produced them, is to end up with an all but empty heritage, and, in particular, to disown and waste the pasts that have formed us and the constructed world in which we live.

The other cause of cultural secularization that should invite pushback is the neoliberal extension of market structures into the education system. High culture and the old humanities disciplines now stand more against than athwart the neoliberal state’s ideological and administrative protocols, which pressure all social formations whatsoever into market-based rationality. The high humanities have to resist that rationality in order to be securely at ease. Potentially at least, for all their precarity and confusion, that resistance confers on the high humanities an internal cohesion, a political value and sense of purpose absent in periods when such

formidable external social and political pressure upon them was missing.

The high humanities are to be preserved, then, not just because they intensify practical reasoning and imagination; because they enable us fully to appreciate and enjoy the cultural heritage and connect us to the past; because they offer a space for free contemplation and reflection; because they help us spiritually “endure modernization” (as the German theorists Joachim Ritter and Odo Marquard have argued); or because they encourage particular political subjectivities and movements. They are to be preserved because they are compelled to push back on the capitalist apparatuses that are dismantling them. In that pushback, what remains of them is aligned with green and radically left anti-capitalist movements. That is so even for those in the humanities (and there are many such) who do not personally sign on to political programs that formally contest current capitalist state regimes.

The idea that we are now enduring a second secularization — this time not of religion but of culture and the humanities — helps reconcile us to our losses by helping us to see their larger logic. It is important to remember that religious secularization does not mean the end of religion. The same will be true of cultural secularization. And just as religious secularization involved political resistance, adjustment to cultural secularization will involve critique and resistance. ■

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# The New Humanities

Once-robust fields are being broken up and stripped for parts

By JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS



GARY NEILL FOR THE CHRONICLE

**T**HE HUMANITIES, we're often told, are dying. And yet, even as traditional majors like English and history are indeed shrinking, the past decade has also seen the rise of a new kind of humanities, including a wave of hybrid fields such as the digital humanities, environmental humanities, energy humanities, global humanities, urban humanities,

food humanities, medical humanities, legal humanities, and public humanities.

These new alloys emphasize commerce between other disciplines, particularly STEM or professional fields, and humanistic ways of thinking. And they're not just adding new intellectual perspectives; a substantial institutional infrastructure has materialized to support them, yielding new pro-

grams, journals, book series, conferences, courses, degrees, and (most importantly) jobs. All of this indicates that these new hybrids are not the products of some momentary fad: They're here to stay.

A few of them, like the digital humanities, have gotten a good deal of press, but their larger confluence has not. While they each vary in focus and field, what do they all add up to? And what do the new humanities mean for the shape of the university itself? Let's look at them in turn.

### Going Digital

The **digital humanities** (DH) has cast a sizable footprint in qualitative disciplines like literary studies and history, importing methods from computing, statistics, information science, and demography. A DH project, for instance, might comb a database of titles of British novels to ascertain that such titles grew demonstrably shorter in the 19th century, probably because of serialization and the pressures of a changing publishing industry. DH has garnered a lion's share of funding via initiatives from the Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, encouraging further research and, especially, graduate training. In turn, DH has found its way into a great many courses, certificates, research projects, and new jobs, and germinated at least 35 devoted programs and seven new journals, such as *Cultural Analytics*. Much like "literary theory" in the 1970s and '80s, the digital humanities has become a standard part of graduate education: A grad student can't go on the job market without it.

### Environmentally Conscious

Perhaps the most socially concerned effort has developed around the **environmental humanities**. Drawing especially on the life sciences, but also on disciplines like geology, economics, and engineering, it looks at the human aspects of environmental issues — particularly climate change. For instance, Princeton professor Rob Nixon underscores the "slow violence" of many environmental problems, especially those that disproportionately harm the poor. Environmental humanities has spawned dedicated programs, centers, and initiatives, a number of undergraduate majors, myriad courses across fields, and a major organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Like the digital humanities, it has also prompted a great deal of new research, journals, and anthologies to carry it. Some environmental studies use digital techniques, but for the most part the "D" in DH centers on method, whereas the "environmental" in environmental humanities centers more on subject, especially the cultural and social effects of ecological change.

### Worldly Humanities

Like the environmental humanities, the energy, food, global, and urban humanities draw on hu-

manistic ways to address major social topics. The **energy humanities** concentrates on specific resources and emphasizes the way that capitalism and energy shape our culture. The **global humanities** underscores the patterns of migration of people and the networks around the world through which goods are manufactured and distributed and labor dispersed, and the **urban humanities** focuses on metropolises. They have intersecting concerns with the environmental humanities, particularly in regard to exposing the circulation of waste and productive resources around the world, and the dynamic ecologies of cities. And the **food humanities** similarly attends to webs of production and distribution, although it might focus more on the cultures attached to food. Although not to the same extent as the digital and environmental humanities, the promise of these hybrid fields has materialized in institutions, initiatives, or research groups, such as the Academy of Global Humanities and Critical Theory, co-sponsored by the universities of Virginia, Duke, and Bologna; or the Rice Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences.

### Humanizing Law and Medicine

Two wings of the new humanities have also developed in medicine and law. Emergent programs and journals in the medical humanities bring humanistic perspectives to medical education, offering doctors and nurses the chance to explore ways of knowing beyond the purely scientific. "We realize that the care of the sick unfolds in stories," Columbia's division of narrative medicine notes, and the tools developed in the **medical humanities** can help medical professionals zero in on more successful treatments. There has been a similar impetus in law, seeded by initiatives such as the Mellon Fellowship for legal humanities research, several programs in law and the humanities, and journals such as the *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*. The **legal humanities** emphasize the fact that law is never just a technical pursuit, and that humanistic frames of analysis add depth to our understanding of the effects of law in practice.

### Reaching Outside Academe

Lastly, rather than importing STEM procedures into the humanities or using the humanities to augment work in other disciplines, the **public humanities** aims to represent what the humanities themselves are doing to a wider public. It charges disciplines like English, foreign languages, history, and philosophy to explain their research outside the confines of their academic fields, drawing on lessons from journalism, public relations, and marketing. It revolves around a push to publish on otherwise specialist matters in mainstream magazines or newspapers, to engage with community organizations or other groups, large and small, and

to promote the academic humanities more widely. Receiving a major boost from the NEH and from professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, the public humanities has led to the establishment of a number of centers, programs, book series, and training seminars for graduate students and faculty.

**T**HE OVERALL momentum of these new initiatives seems to testify to the vitality, rather than morbidity, of the humanities today. Indeed, one can already envision further hybrids on the horizon: Business humanities? Criminal justice humanities? Design humanities? Couldn't engineering use the humanities?

The new humanities heed the call for interdisciplinarity that has sounded over the past 30 years, bridging institutional barriers, conjoining otherwise distant fields, and spurring new knowledge. They show that the humanities do make a distinctive and essential contribution to knowledge production, as Jonathan Kramnick has argued. However, Kramnick makes this assertion in an effort to defend the autonomy of the humanities, whereas these developments point to their dependence on other disciplines. So, what else is behind the push to establish the “plus-humanities”?

From the outside, the rise of these various new fields might seem like a sign of evolutionary progress for traditional disciplines. Still, in many cases, the humanities don't have equal standing with the applied disciplines; they're more like a garnish, an add-on, valued only insofar as they link with and augment those other disciplines. Thus, these yokings tend to quell the independent, critical role of the humanities as an interrogative force for human values, principles, and history. A coal-company-funded engineering project, for instance, might be glad to hear about the heroic image of the miner in art and literature, but it is unlikely to welcome questions about labor and capitalism. In their effort to accommodate other disciplines, the humanities themselves may be co-opted and lose the very critical independence that defines them.

## These new hybrids are not the products of some momentary fad: They're here to stay.

As Rob Nixon told me in an interview for *The Iowa Review*, one danger in the environmental humanities is that, “On the surface you have a scaling up of the humanities as a partner in this big endeavor involving engineering, geosciences, life sci-

ences, social sciences, and policy. But there is sometimes a risk of humanities scholars entering into partnerships uncritically, in ways that become complicit with the neoliberal agendas of universities.”

We tend to invoke interdisciplinarity as an inherently good thing, but not all interdisciplinarity is alike. The idea of interdisciplinarity assumes parity among disciplines — it takes for granted that the university is comprised of relatively equal, autonomous areas that comprise a federated whole. But the rise of the new humanities, in fact, belies a shift in the structure of the university that enables the applied disciplines — or the entrepreneurial wings of other disciplines — to dominate and often determine the focus of academic projects across disciplines.

**T**HE FIGURE of “the two cultures” is often invoked to explain the position of the humanities now, as if it were a rivalry between the humanities and sciences — with the humanities the old-fashioned holdouts against the advances of the sciences. But the “pure” sciences are also under duress. A theoretical physicist will have as much difficulty getting a decent academic job as a literary theorist. If there are two cultures now, it is the now-dominant applied disciplines versus those in the arts and sciences — or, more bluntly, the entrepreneurial on the one hand and the academic on the other.

This is often said to be necessary because the applied disciplines go out and pay the bills, while the humanities stay at home and live off them. But the irony here, as Christopher Newfield shows in his studies of the California system, is that applied disciplines like engineering do not fund the humanities, as the myth goes; in fact, they typically are supported by the grunt work of all the teaching in the arts and sciences.

The humanities were the classical core of higher education. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the ground of higher education was Greek and Latin. That started changing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the rise of most of our contemporary disciplines and the invention of electives.

But even with the growing prestige of science and the expansion of higher education after World War II, the humanities were considered a cornerstone, essential to the development of any well-educated person. Whatever the limitations of that era, the humanities inculcated common ideas and values, and a company executive, a schoolteacher, and an engineer would have had similar undergraduate training.

While the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s vied over the content of the humanities, their very fierceness bespoke the humanities' importance, with the columnist George Will declaring that Lynne Cheney, then chairperson of the NEH, had a more important job than her husband, then secretary of defense. Whatever else they fought about, conservatives and progressives agreed about the

centrality of humanistic culture.

One upshot of that moment was the rise of cultural studies, and it is illuminating to compare it to the current rise of the new humanities. Both promote breaking down disciplinary walls and using techniques and knowledges from various disciplines, but cultural studies has tended to bring together neighboring disciplines in the humanities and arts, or cousins in the qualitative social sciences, like cultural anthropology and ethnography. Moreover, cultural studies emphasizes the value of the cultural — which the humanities have particular provenance over.

## The rise of the new humanities belies a shift in the structure of the university that enables the applied disciplines to dominate.

They differ in their social stances, too. Historically, the traditional humanities presented an alternative to the commercial market, seeing human value as more important than (and without equivalence to) mercantile values. More recently, cultural studies tends to criticize, if not directly oppose, the commercial market. Some wings of the new humanities, like the environmental humanities, have affinities with cultural studies, but others tend to be less critical, and more readily accommodate — or reproduce — mercantile values.

**T**HE NEW humanities augur the shape of the university to come. Rather than a confederation of sizable, semi-autonomous departments, they suggest a looser organizational structure of small, mobile teams formed on demand for particular funded projects. In organizational theory, this is generally called a network structure, as opposed to the divisional structure common in the 20th-century university.

The idea of a network seems much more open than the vertical flow chart of the traditional divisional model, with scholars freed from disciplinary constraints to interact across a horizontal plane. However, it glides over the structure of power. While interactions might be on a level field and no one wears a tie, the new model of academic employment is decidedly vertical: At the top is the administrator or project head, who draws together a team to address a problem to be solved, with much of the team on demand and underemployed rather than in decent, secure positions. Moreover, the problem might come from what businesses, nonprofits, or other groups bring to them, rather than from their autonomous decisions. This will be hailed as a virtue because it

connects academic work to the outside world and generates funds, basically following the model of some scientific and entrepreneurial research now.

If there is a law of the history of the American university, it is that it has continually changed throughout its history.

This model has benefits from a transactional standpoint, but one likely consequence is that other kinds of research, particularly disciplinary research in non-mercantile fields, will be left to languish. Whatever the virtues of working together collaboratively, one limitation is that such work gravitates to assigned projects, attached to grants or other transactions, rather than independent, open, individual exploration.

Another consequence will likely be the steepening of the structure of academic labor. We have, of course, already experienced a turn toward adjunctification, as a majority of professorial positions have been refashioned as non-tenurable and at will. However, most calls for reform — which I'm all for — tend to assume the divisional model of professors filling departments.

With the past two generations experiencing this reconfiguration of academic labor, the cultural memory of full employment and faculty control has faded, and the new normal will be unapologetically tiered. A classic definition held that the university was the corporate body of the faculty; they were the long-term core that sustained it and that those who passed through its doors encountered. Now we have a different sense of the corporate and the hierarchy of a large-scale company.

To be clear, this is not a call for a return to some mythic ivory tower. Frequently, prognosticators claim that the university is frozen in time, which is why it needs “innovation.” But that is a straw man: If there is a law of the history of the American university, it is that it has continually changed throughout its history. Early iterations of the university, for instance, adapted to colonial society by training ministers and others; the rise of industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the promulgation of engineering and research; and after World War II, universities opened to a far greater breadth of students, largely through public funding, as well as conducting advanced research.

The new humanities, I believe, represent another stage of adaptation. The issue, though, is who and what these crossovers serve, who has control, and what their aims are. Those are still in contest. ■

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ISTOCK

# How the Jobs Crisis Has Transformed Faculty Hiring

By JONATHAN KRAMNICK

**T**HIS FALL I will again be the job-placement officer for my department — a position I have held more often than not for almost 20 years, in three different English departments. The role of the job-placement officer is to guide graduate students through the painstaking,

drawn-out, and nerve-racking process of applying for positions in their field: from deciphering ads and preparing materials to interviewing with committees and, in the happy event, negotiating offers with chairs and deans.

Every part of this process is highly specific,

shaped by codes that are nowhere spelled out or written down. Moreover, every part varies from to discipline to discipline, whether subtly or dramatically. Applying for jobs as, say, a political scientist is different from applying for jobs as a literary scholar. The language of the chemists is indecipherable to those who speak historian.

For those reasons, the person holding the placement position really has to be a tenured faculty member with recent experience serving on hiring committees and an up-to-date sense of his or her field. In the last few years, however, a number of businesses have emerged to sell job advice to a captive and anxious market of graduate students and early career Ph.D.s. Don't buy what they're peddling. Any advice from outside your field is basically useless. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise.

While my advice is relevant only for people in English or related literary disciplines, my experiences with the transforming patterns and practices of hiring over the past two decades might be of interest to anyone with a stake in higher education. Much has changed during that time.

Most obviously, and as everyone knows, the number of tenure-track jobs has precipitously declined. Immediately after the economic crash of 2008, colleges and universities slowed all hiring to a standstill. In the years that followed, hiring picked up in some professional and STEM fields, but English and the rest of the humanities never recovered.

We are now 10 years into a jobs crisis that shows no sign of abating. I won't belabor the numbers or the causes here. For my present purposes, it is enough to say that the implosion of the market colors everything — from the morale of students worried about their future to the habits of search committees enjoying a buyers' market.

Discussion of that foundering labor market is now common currency for everyone interested in the present and future state of the humanities, but less often noticed are the broad cultural and institutional shifts that have accompanied the crisis. With the deepening crunch have come important changes in the timing and technology of hiring, the kinds of jobs that departments advertise for, and the structure through which early careers move. The jobs crisis, it seems, has been both brought on and shaped by a larger transformation in academic life.

In the weeks that follow, I'll explore different facets of that transformation up close and offer advice where I can. Each one is an important and under-discussed feature of our present moment. Here is a thumbnail sketch:

**The hiring season is much longer than it once was, and it now stretches over several platforms.** In English and foreign languages, there

used to be a single job list that appeared in print in mid-October with minor supplements added later in the year. Application deadlines fell between November and mid-December, and hiring concluded by March.

Today that job list has gone digital, appears earlier with frequent updates, and has several major rivals. So while there are fewer jobs to be had, they appear at all points during the year.

What is more, hiring committees as a rule used to interview candidates at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, held between Christmas and New Year's. Now with the advent of Skype and other forms of video technology, committees are increasingly bypassing the MLA convention (itself held in early January) and interviewing candidates remotely at all points between September and April.

In other words, a once-uniform timeline between advertisements and offers has come undone.

Candidates don't know where they are with one job when they are being considered for another. Hiring committees and their respective administrations cannot count on a consensus schedule among rivals, or that a position unfilled one year will be advertised the next. The result in individual cases can be unpleasant or even chaotic. Writ large, there is a sense of things never-ending. All job-market talk, all the time.

**While the mood is glum across the board, the fallout varies.** Some sectors of the discipline have undeniably fared better than others. The overall decline of tenure-track jobs in English has happened concurrently with new hiring in emerging subfields, especially in the areas of global Anglophone literature and of various ethnic American literatures.

Given fewer positions to fill, departments understandably prefer to hire in subfields where they have no one, rather than in ones that are already well stocked, or where they think student demand is headed, rather than where they believe it has already peaked. That's been the case even when it comes to replacing retiring professors.

So the overall decline in job numbers only tells part of the story. Internal to the discipline — in ways not recorded by MLA job-market statistics — some subfields are having a much harder time than others.

**The market is fragmenting.** Just as there used to be only one job list, there used to be only one kind of cover letter. Graduate students and recent Ph.D.s answered ads by presenting themselves as if they were about to join the kind of institution where they had received their degree. Research came first in the letter and took up most of the space. The tone was of a kind of august generality. Candidates spoke to a field that subsumed any particular de-

partment's curriculum and mission into larger and more abstract concerns.

That basic template may still be appropriate for many jobs, but some institutions fortunate enough to hire have become much more demanding about what they expect to see in a candidate's job application. They want tailored cover letters. They want candidates to comment directly on their institution's particular students and individual mission and to supply evidence of successful teaching and a commitment to diversity. They demand all that because they can. This is a buyers' market after all.

But the demand also comes from the same pressure facing candidates. When all hiring is scarce, the burden to get the right person for your specific institution — someone who will "fit" and who won't leave (and thus threaten the department's ability to retain the line) — just ratchets up.

So to the never-ending job market now go variegated and tailored cover letters and other application materials. The time that this requires of candidates is immeasurably greater than it used to be.

**Career narratives have changed.** The ideal beginning of an academic career in the literary humanities used to be five to seven years in a doctoral program and then a tenure-track job. Postdocs were mainly a thing of the sciences and visiting positions rare. Since 2008, all of that has been upended.

Partly as a response to the labor crisis, universities and granting agencies have created a whole new class of postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities. At the same time, administrations reluctant to bil-

let a permanent line for a professor of English have become more generous with short-term or visiting positions, sometimes on renewable bases. Graduate students have often already completed their degrees a year or more before finding one of those perches. Finally, the expectation that one ought not to go back on the market too soon after landing a tenure-track job has weakened or eroded.

The result has been dramatic and several fold.

Early careers are now always on the move, lighting down in a city or an institution for a year or two before moving on. The window between a doctorate and the start of a tenure-track job has elongated in some cases to nearly the length of time that assistant professors spend on the tenure track before they go up for promotion. The candidate pool for any given tenure-track job will range from fifth-year ABDs to scholars nearly a decade out from their doctorate. At the same time, productive careers have begun to percolate in renewable positions that sit outside the tenure system entirely. Behind all of this lies a shift of lifestyle fundamentally altering academic life.

My goal in the columns ahead will be to explore in detail these shifts as part of the everyday costs and contexts of the way that the profession hires in straitened times. If we better understand these costs and contexts, we might also discover ways of navigating and improving them. ■

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ISTOCK

# The Way We Hire Now

By JONATHAN KRAMNICK

**W**HEN I got my first teaching job in 1995, every position I applied for was advertised in a single place: the October edition of the *Jobs Information List*, published by the Modern Language Association. It was (and still is) the notorious “MLA Jobs List” — or simply, “the list.”

The list was a magazine-sized pamphlet with a construction-paper cover. It looked not unlike a modest junior-high school yearbook. Contents were divided state by state, from Alabama to Wyoming, with Canadian and overseas institutions bringing up the end. The appearance of the jobs list every fall had a kind of ritualized gravity. What was *the list* like this year? More jobs than usual or fewer? Where? In what fields? The geographical and institutional spread of its insides formed the matrix of our ambition and our fear alike.

The list was mailed to my department around the second week of October and immediately appeared in Xeroxed stacks next to the mailboxes. Those of us on the market that year took one home to read from front to back, circling and annotating all the positions for which we were qualified, and a few for which we weren’t.

The schedule we were on was finite and regular:

- The earliest deadlines were in the first week of November.

- Requests for additional material came in over the next month and invitations for interviews at the very end of term.

- Interviews were held at the MLA convention in some faraway city during the last few days of December, usually in hotel rooms.

- If all went well, campus visits followed in late January and February with job offers tendered and negotiated before March.



The process was analog, uniform, and backed up by relative affluence, even in the leanest of years.

The years that followed brought a dramatic fall off in tenure-track jobs, just as everything started to go digital. Sometimes it is hard to know where the one trend stops and the other starts, but the transformation of the faculty job market in literature and languages has been as thorough as it has been drastic: Today, there are fewer tenure-track jobs available, they appear in a scattershot way over the course of the entire year, and they are advertised and filled in a manner that is poorly understood and has few agreed-upon norms.

In Part 1 of this series, I offered an overview of how the jobs crisis has transformed faculty hiring. Here in Part 2 I'll turn to the sea change that has occurred in the logistics of how we hire assistant professors in my field.

To get a grip on where things now stand, start with the fact that the MLA jobs list has lost its monopoly. The low cost and simplicity of doing things online has meant that advertisements now appear on any number of platforms, including *The Chronicle*, Interfolio, Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), HigherEdJobs, and well beyond.

Liberated from the MLA bureaucracy, job ads show up soon after the start of the fiscal year in July. Compounding that development, the online version of the MLA jobs list now comes out in September — fully a month earlier than its print ancestor — and is updated every week of the semester. Application deadlines have crept earlier every year, even as new openings continue to trickle out well into the spring.

It would be good for everyone involved in this hiring process to have a sense of the timeline and its burdens.

Where once job candidates had the first part of the fall semester to prepare their CVs, cover letters, and other materials, they now must put everything together in close to final form over the summer. Under the analog system, moreover, a sense that printing and mailing paper took time and money meant that search committees usually staggered their requests for materials. Ads often just asked for cover letters CVs, and letters of recommendation, leaving writing samples until after the first cull. With the full-scale turn to digital submission, almost everything now gets sent up front. So all of a candidate's materials have to be in passable form soon after Labor Day and multiply revised, polished, and ready go by the start of October.

The concatenating effects of technological progress and economic decline have meant, in other words, that the job market is experienced as a constant presence and pressure even as its actual contents have fallen off, a bitter irony.

Consider the answer to a question you may have thought to ask: How do departments and administrations know that their ads will be read in the ab-

sence of a single, all-encompassing list? They can of course rely on the hunger of candidates to find their ads no matter where they appear.

However, they can also, wittingly or not, rely on that most pervasive and integral of digital phenomena, the academic jobs wiki. Like all sites of its kind, the academic jobs wiki is a crowd-sourced and constantly edited page that aggregates jobs as they appear, breaks them down by subfield, and provides appropriate links and information about materials and deadlines.

Each discipline has a wiki. In addition to aggregating all the job ads, the wiki also provides continuously updated rumors about the state of play of any given search, with users logging on to record any response they have received, to gripe, or to pass on what they may or may not know about what a search is “really” designed to produce, and so on.

## **Few of our rituals are more shrouded in mystique than the MLA interview — the unique longing and loathing that comes with sitting in a hotel suite with professors interviewing you for a job at their institution.**

In the event, almost as soon as a department has requested additional materials, scheduled an interview, set up a campus visit, or offered the job to someone, notice appears on the site. I advise every student to consult the wiki all the time. It is the best way to ensure that you don't miss any advertisement, from early July onward. But that means that students are in the echo chamber of their own dread for the duration.

Dread has, of course, always been a feature of the faculty hiring process. Accelerated technology and depleted resources have just created a special torque, one that is worth fixing so far as we can.

Nowhere is this more urgent than in the area of interviewing. Few of our rituals are more shrouded in mystique than the MLA interview — the unique longing and loathing that comes with sitting in a hotel suite with professors interviewing you for a job at their institution: handshakes, awkward silences, pitchers of water, the odd knock on the door. In recent years, however, the in-person convention setting has steadily competed with interviews done over Skype.

There are good reasons to prefer that we interview remotely, but some of the downstream effects

on timing and on the norms of engaging candidates have been regrettable. Prior to Skype, the MLA convention schedule held a pivot point on a broadly common timeline. Since almost all departments were on the same schedule, candidates tended to have enough time to weigh their options before accepting or rejecting an offer. In fact, the MLA has a rule stipulating that departments provide a minimum of two weeks for candidates to make up their mind. Skype interviewing has weakened that pivot point, and desperation on all sides has eroded the norm of giving candidates a respectable amount of time.

Some of the most egregious behavior that has followed really ought to stop. For example, the loss of a consensus timeline has made it possible for some hiring committees to take their pick early and bank on the candidates being so desperate to have a tenure-track job — any job — that they will accept the offer without knowing if they will have other options.

That is truly an abuse of the buyers' market. And I have seen it done by every kind of department — from those severely under funded and under pressure from their administrations to complete the hire quickly to those sitting in comparative luxury at the most elite and wealthiest campuses in the country. The two-week window has gotten as short as three days. Candidates have had to withdraw from searches for jobs they clearly preferred to take offers they have in hand.

There's no reason why that has to be the case. Departments that are fortunate enough to: (a) have tenure-track positions to fill and (b) work with friendly administrations should adjust their hiring schedule to accommodate the candidates. Try to keep loosely to a timetable that turns at the inter-session, if just as a way to ensure that they have all the choices available to them. The job market is bad enough. Why make it worse?

Despite the chaos that it sometimes causes, however, there are good reasons to use Skype. For one, traveling to the MLA and booking a room at a con-

ference hotel are considerable expenses for graduate students and recent Ph.D.s, especially contingent faculty members. That expense was understandable when there were more jobs and when there was no alternative. Many now consider it unreasonable to ask people to spend \$2,000 or more on a trip to the MLA meeting for one or two job interviews.

For another, some think that MLA interviews are more susceptible to implicit biases with respect to race and gender than those conducted over video. The science is still out on that question, but the informalities of greeting and small talk that play a significant role in face-to-face interviews might give an advantage to those with privilege.

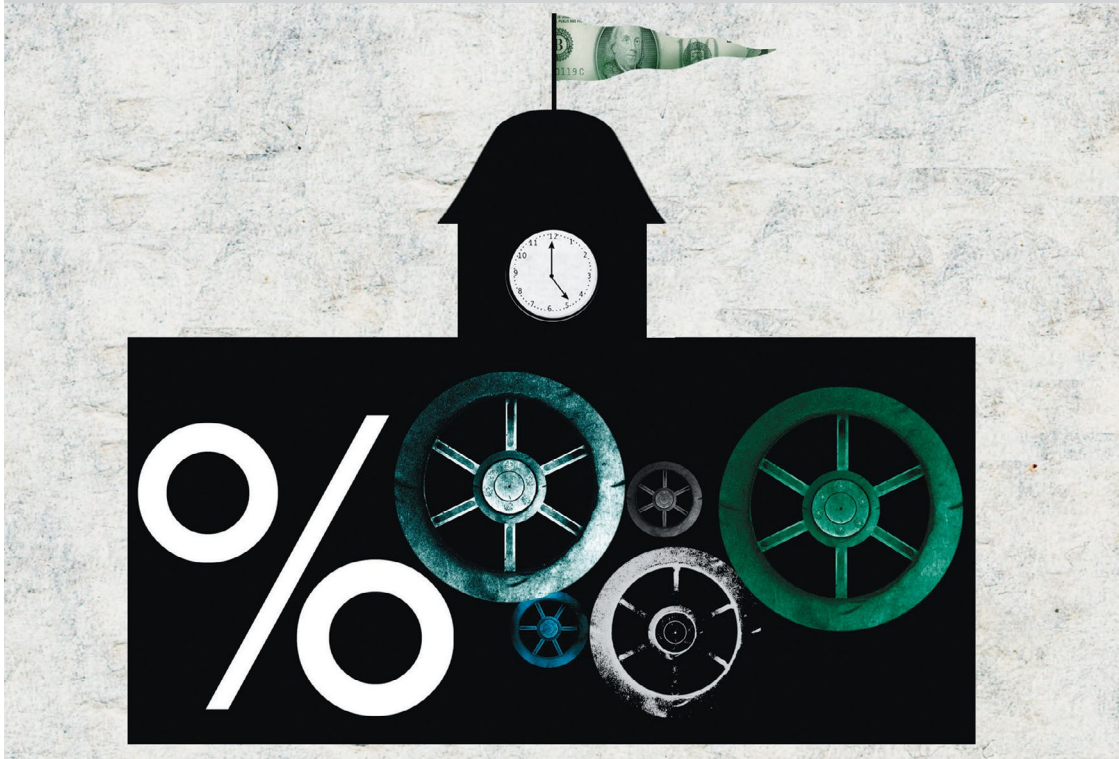
For these reasons, Paula Krebs, executive director of the MLA, urged in April that we stop interviewing candidates at the convention and use Skype instead. Not all departments are going to do that, and many still argue for the importance, given the high stakes, of conversations not subject to the mediation of speakers, microphones, and fickle internet connections. But my hunch is that this intervention from on high will turn the tide even more in favor of remote interviewing. In any case, Skype is here to stay. We need to learn how to live with the technical and ethical problems it poses.

Colleagues should be mindful of these and other tensions unique to the current moment. Most of us are beneficiaries of generational luck. We owe it to those who are not to be kind, above all else, and to be aware of the pace and volatility of change in once-settled practices. Students and recent Ph.D.s facing a market that is at once ever present and diminished need to be always on the ready and have scant margin for error.

In the next column, I'll discuss how those tensions play out with respect to the subfields we are hiring in now. ■

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MICHAEL MORGENSTERN FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Enough With the Crisis Talk!

To salvage the university, explain why it's worth saving

By LISI SCHOENBACH

**T**HE UNIVERSITY of Tennessee, where I teach, has in the past few months been rocked by a series of devastating blows. In March the Tennessee House of Representatives passed the Focus Act, eliminating faculty and student representatives from the Board of Trustees and giving the sole power of appointment to the governor. In early May, as stu-

dents studied for finals here on our flagship campus in Knoxville, the university system's president, Joe DiPietro, suddenly fired our chancellor, Beverly Davenport, by way of a mean-spirited and condescending letter that he simultaneously released to the public.

The legislature, the governor, and the president now speak in a single voice, a voice that many on

the Knoxville campus feel is overwhelmingly antagonistic to the interests and opinions of faculty and students. Chancellor Davenport's firing is widely considered retribution for her steadfast representation of the values of the Knoxville campus on several fronts: her resistance to the outsourcing of facilities jobs to an out-of-state contractor; her efforts to privately fund-raise so that the campus Pride Center, defunded last year by the legislature, could reopen; and her clearly articulated criticism of a white supremacist group whose members came to speak on campus this spring.

The antagonism between Davenport and DiPietro is the visible expression of a much larger battle between the legislature and the university over curriculum, personnel decisions, and values like academic freedom. This will sound familiar to anyone paying attention to the state of public universities nationwide, a pastime not unlike watching the library at Alexandria burn.

How did we get here? In the days leading up to the Focus vote, the *Knoxville News Sentinel* published an opinion piece by a former mayor, Victor Ashe, chiding Tennessee faculty and students because they "have not learned how to be effective in lobbying lawmakers." Faculty, Ashe wrote, "would be wise to employ their own lobbyist as the well paid (over \$180,000 a year) UT lobbyist, Anthony Haynes, reports to DiPietro and follows his orders."

In other words, the university's own lobbyist was hired to work against the interests of its faculty and staff! Ashe's patronizing editorial nevertheless offers a crucial insight: Faculty tend to be ill-informed about the mechanics of university governance. Long encouraged to leave administration to administrators and focus instead on research and teaching, too few are prepared to engage in the sort of advocacy that would have a meaningful effect, much less to do battle with our state legislators over the torrent of ill-conceived and openly hostile bills constantly aimed in our direction. Faculty members have little money to hire a lobbyist and even less practice demanding that highly paid professionals "follow our orders."

It's certainly true that faculty could have been savvier about political lobbying and legislative battles, more resistant to the increasing privatization of our public universities, and more strategic about how we present our work in the public eye. But these political failures have roots in a larger intellectual failure: the failure to acknowledge the real importance of the institutions that employ us. These institutions serve not only as the instruments of our exploitation but also as the enablers of our research, our free inquiry, our intellectual lives, our written work, our collective conversations, in short, everything that makes our jobs precious and valuable despite it all.

I have no illusion that universities somehow

evade the logic of the marketplace. But no other institution is designed so intentionally to provide structures in which free intellectual inquiry can take place. It is no accident that most scholars work under the protection of these spaces. Research in the humanities would be impossible without such protection, just as the disinterested work of our colleagues in the STEM disciplines would be impossible in labs funded entirely by Pfizer. Universities are not perfect, but they are the only protection we have.

Why are we so hesitant to make this case and yet so ready to talk about our problems with such cataclysmic descriptors as "crisis"? This tendency is baked in to our collective intellectual subjectivity. Scholars, especially scholars in the humanities, are adept at diagnosing repressive regimes, imbalances of power, and inequality, and we have been quick to apply this acumen to discussions about our universities. But we are far less adept at defending those aspects of the institution that we value most. Criticisms of the current state of our universities, as necessary as they are, need to be accompanied by

## Ideas of 'crisis' confer excitement and a sense of engagement on people who spend most of their time in libraries, in classrooms, or working at home in their bathrobes.

a robust articulation of why these institutions are worth critiquing in the first place.

The problem is in part stylistic. Revolution, avant-garde attacks, and existential crises are, quite simply, more aesthetically compelling than discussions of infrastructure, bureaucracy, and gradual reform. They confer excitement and a sense of engagement on people who spend most of their time in libraries, in classrooms, or working at home in their bathrobes. Scholars in the humanities turn time and again to a notion of "revolution" to dramatize their own importance in the political and cultural struggles in which they take part.

Yet this vision of transformation places style and emotional gratification before intellectual honesty and rigor. Revolutionary modes of thought applied to our universities too broadly or with too much haste tend to elide important differences between different types of institutions, reject all forms of institutional authority, and fall back on utopic gestures toward an unspecified future. They also tend

to be obtuse about questions of audience and argumentative scale. For instance, it can be true that the university is implicated in neoliberalism while also being true that universities are often the defenders of free speech, anti-instrumentality, and dissent. What happens to our universities also has material consequences for the lives of the faculty and staff they employ and the students and communities they serve. Thus we might find ourselves advocating for fair working conditions on our campuses against the policies of our own administrators one day, and, the next, standing in solidarity with those same administrators in defense of free inquiry and the dignity of teaching and learning.

**U**NIVERSITIES ARE many things at once: bad actors in gentrification, protectors of individual intellectual freedoms, media influencers, producers of a humanities work force, engines of their local economies, pawns of the military-industrial complex, hotbeds of student radicalism, training grounds for local politics. Literature professors like myself, trained to venerate ambiguity, paradox, and

## Faculty are ill-prepared to do battle with legislators over the openly hostile bills constantly aimed in our direction.

negative capability, should be better equipped to grasp this multiplicity of identities. Universities are also institutions whose significance is deployed in different ways at different times by different people; scholars trained to understand rhetoric and the social construction of meaning should be better equipped to shape the cultural reception of their labor.

Our dominant intellectual binaries — between political purity and complicity, revolution and complacency, liberalism and radicalism — have been deeply counterproductive to the urgent tasks we face. Too often, we are seduced by a macho notion of revolution that is impoverished, vague, and uninformed by a robust imagination of the world it's trying to rebuild. The dangerously empty but powerfully seductive appeal of burning it all down has never been the sole possession of the left, as the Republican dismantlement of myriad institutions shows all too well. In place of such nihilism, we need a radical institutionalism — an approach to change that insists on the institutional spaces we need most desperately to preserve.

The Manichean logic on which the fantasy of revolution is founded has rendered the very idea of “radical institutionalism” oxymoronic, illegible as an intellectual and political program. The consequences for universities are all too real. From the activist '60s to the poststructuralist '80s and '90s, the University did not seem especially vulnerable. Attacks on the ivory tower, like all attacks on figures whose authority appears unbreachable, were launched with all the rebellious impotence of an adolescent egging a museum. Universities were stable institutions, GI Bill-funded monuments that could absorb and withstand attacks from within and without. Yet in the era of Scott Walker and Pat McCrory, and as we in Tennessee are quickly learning for ourselves, the landscape is very different. The survival of public universities as protectors of academic freedom and free inquiry is by no means certain. The fight to preserve them will fail before it ever has a chance to succeed if we can't make the case for the institutional values and procedures we are trying to save.

Thinking institutionally may not offer the emotional release or adrenaline rush that we sometimes need to go forward. And it may not offer clear answers. But it will remind us of the ways in which we are a part of the world we describe, critique, and analyze. The days are gone when scholars and teachers could afford to work in ignorance of or disdain for their universities' decisions about budgets, outreach, and lobbying. We need to understand the interrelations between the life of the mind and the lives of our institutions. A better grasp of these relations will give us new grounds from which to fight to make a real education — one that, as W.E.B. Du Bois said, encourages students “to know, to think, to aspire” — available to as many students as possible, not just the children of the rich.

There is a practical consequence of this call to action. We will need to commit more of our time, our effort, and our intellectual lives to activities that place further demands on our increasingly limited resources. For this reason, our efforts need to be widely shared and well coordinated. No one person can move into university administration, generate op-eds, participate in community outreach, and work with unions, lobbyists, and legislatures while also continuing to research, write, and teach. We must continue to defend the values that give our work meaning — including the celebration of the useless, the experimental, and the anti-instrumental. We can't make the mistake of believing those values can flourish without institutions to protect them. ■

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SÉBASTIEN THIBAULT FOR THE CHRONICLE

# The Humanities' Fear of Judgment

Scholars must reclaim the right to say what's good — and what's not.

By MICHAEL CLUNE

**P**ROFESSORS OF the humanities make judgments about value. Art historians, literary scholars, musicologists, and classicists say to our students: These works are powerful, beautiful, surprising, strange, insightful. They are more worth your time and attention than others. Claims like this are implicit in choosing what to include on a syllabus.

Yet such judgment violates the principle of equality. So humanists have to pretend we're not doing it. The entry on "Evaluation" in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* reads: "Evaluation

was once considered a central task of criticism, but its place in criticism is now contested, having been supplanted to a large degree by interpretation." Sam Rose, in his survey of recent work in aesthetics, describes a consensus among critics and philosophers against the "authoritarian," "elitist" character of aesthetic judgment.

This eschewal of hierarchy appears eminently progressive. Who am I to say that one book is better than another? Why should I tell you what you should read? Everyone's taste is equal. No one's judgment is any better or worse than anyone else's.

Thus, in a curious development, progressive English professors have come to join populist Fox News pundits in railing against the elitism of aesthetic judgment. This position looks better on Fox than it does in the classroom. The abdication of professional judgment throws all questions of value into the marketplace. The free market is where consumers, whose preferences are all accorded equal status, exercise their cultural choices.

Perhaps, in this era of regressive populism, Karl Marx's perception of the limits of equality contains a valuable lesson for us. He framed his famous slogan, "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs," as an alternative to an equal distribution. People have different abilities, and different needs; a rigid commitment to equality erases these differences. Marx railed against egalitarian concepts as examples of "dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish." Starting in the late '70s, scholars like G.A. Cohen sought to align Marx with traditional liberal values. But, as a new generation of progressives is reminding us, Marx perceived the limits of the principle of equality. Equality is the liberal capitalist value par excellence. While crucial for the kinds of liberation struggles at which liberalism excels — ensuring equal access to the market and the voting booth — it isn't so useful in the struggle against the penetration of markets into every sphere of life.

Tyler Cowen, in his defense of "commercial culture," quotes Orson Welles to draw a connection between market choice and democratic process: "The audience votes by buying tickets ... I can think of *nothing* that an audience won't understand. The only problem is to interest them. Once they are interested, they understand anything in the world." Welles, Cowen writes, is arguing "for the supremacy of consumer opinion in judging aesthetic value." As an index of the actual choices of individuals, a best-seller list is a far more egalitarian register of value than a literature syllabus, which encodes professional judgment.

In the early 20th century, the critic I.A. Richards already perceived the tension between equality and judgment. "The expert in matters of taste is in an awkward position when he differs from the majority," he wrote. "He is forced to say in effect, 'I am better than you. My taste is more refined, my nature more cultured, you will do well to become more like me than you are.'" By the waning years of the 20th century, professors concluded they needed to reframe their expertise in order to align it with egalitarianism. Therefore, they bend over backward to disguise their syllabi as value-neutral, as simply a means for students to gain cultural or political or historical knowledge.

But this stance is incoherent. It's impossible to cordon off judgments about value from the practices of interpretation and analysis that constitute any

viable model of literary expertise. If I judge that a certain poem contains a historical insight that can't be captured by a history textbook, or that a particular novel knows something about political dynamics that a student can't get from a work of political theory, then I'm making a literary judgment. I'm saying that it has value, not just for me, but for everyone. This belief is what justifies my requiring students to read it. If I think students can get the same insights from a history or economics or sociology or philosophy course, then why should they bother with my class at all? Even a project as ostensibly value-neutral as a study of the material composition of the paper that composes a Shakespeare folio is indirectly dependent on our sense of the value and interest of Shakespeare's writing.

## Our work is to show students forms of life and thought that they may not value, and to help them become the kind of person who does.

But the egalitarian stance isn't simply a case of risking incoherence for good political reasons. Professors' commitment to equality actually undermines their politics. Many professors believe they are trying to contest that intrusion of markets into every sphere of life that goes by the name "neoliberalism." In my experience, the professors most strident about refusing value judgments are also most committed to resisting neoliberalism. But they can't have it both ways. The literary scholar Joseph North has written movingly about aesthetic education. Yet he speaks for many when he identifies "the left proper" with "those whose commitment to equality runs beyond the boundaries set by the liberal consensus," and proceeds to reject judgment in the name of equality. The paradoxical effect of a total commitment to equality is to imprison value within the boundaries of the market.

There's a basic problem with the capitulation of cultural education to consumer preference. Dogmatic equality tells us: There's nothing wrong with your taste. If you prefer a steady diet of young adult novels or reality TV shows, so what? No one has the authority to make you feel bad about your desires, to make you think you should want something else.

Such statements sound unobjectionable, even admirable. But if the academy assimilates this view — as it largely has over the past three decades — then a possibility central to humanistic education has been lost. The prospect that you might be

transformed, that you might discover new modes of thought, perception, and desire, has been foreclosed.

Agnes Callard has given us a wonderfully lucid description of the aspiration at the core of nonvocational education. “When one teaches art history or physics or French at the college level, one is trying to give students access to a distinct domain of aesthetic, scientific, or literary value. We aren’t selling them something they already want; instead, we are trying to help them learn to want something, or to strengthen and deepen a pre-existing but weak desire.” Our work as educators is to show students forms of life and thought that they may not value, and then to help them become the kind of person who does value them.

We must distinguish between a dogmatic view that takes equality as the starting point of education, and a view that sees equality as the goal. The first-year literature student doesn’t begin my class with a capacity to judge literature equivalent to mine. He doesn’t like the Gwendolyn Brooks poem I assign. He’d rather read *To Kill a Mockingbird* again, or better, *Mockingjay*. Hart Crane is not relatable. And Sylvia Plath just looks insane.

My first task is to say to this student: It doesn’t matter if you don’t like Brooks, or Crane, or Plath right now. Their value is independent of your preference. You’re going to spend some time with them because there are things in these works to be seen that will transform your vision; there are thoughts in these works that will make you think differently.

How does the student know that the work I’m showing him really does have the mysterious properties I claim for it? What proof does he have that he will be glad, in the future, that he’s taken this course, that his mind has been improved or transformed?

My authority can never take the place of a student’s experience, nor would I want it to. The point of literary education isn’t to venerate William Shakespeare or George Eliot or Biggie Smalls or Henry Thoreau. It’s to enable you to see things that were invisible, to hear new sounds, to understand what didn’t make sense. If, with my help, the student can’t prove to himself that Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild” was worth reading, then no one else will. But as David Hume wrote: “Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke which is pointed out to them.” Every professor knows the sudden light in students’ eyes as they begin to see, as they begin to feel the contours of a mind, a way of sensing, they hadn’t imagined existed, as they begin to feel that this mind might be their own.

Dogmatic equality blocks this possibility. The doctrine of the market — all desires are equal, all value is only opinion — blocks it. This is only one of the many ways untrammelled markets militate

against better human lives. The struggle against the ills of the market requires the courage to defy the market’s ruling passion, dogmatic equality.

Scholars of politics and philosophy sometimes distinguish between “formal” and “substantive” equality. If you tell me my preference for young adult fiction or reality TV shows is neither better nor worse than a preference for Emily Brontë or Ralph Ellison, you are robbing me of the opportunity to enrich my life. You’re giving me a desiccated “formal” equality. On the other hand, “substantive” equality extends aesthetic education to everyone, regardless of class or race.

I prefer Marx’s term. “Dogmatic” equality expresses the religious intensity, the uncontrollable force of equality, its capacity to consume all differences and distinctions, along with any politics inassimilable to the dominance of markets.

**C**RITICIZING THE limits of equality doesn’t mean ignoring the pathologies of expertise. Many expert judgments of the past bear the ugly marks of racism and sexism. Probably many of our own judgments will seem similarly distorted in the future. To respond to these failures by attempting to eradicate aesthetic judgments seems like the correct egalitarian move. But as Cheryl Wall argued in a classic essay 20 years ago, this risks perpetuating a deeper inequality: “From its beginnings in the United States, black writing has been defined as having *only* an ideological importance.” Rather than rejecting aesthetic judgment, she argues, experts need to challenge our standards of value through the encounter with different artistic modes and traditions.

Wall’s essay suggests a powerful question. How can we distinguish mere authoritarianism from valid professional judgment, judgment that seeks to counter the prejudices and blindnesses of individual experts? How can we know that when an expert tells us Emily Dickinson or Zora Neale Hurston are great writers, she isn’t simply expressing her subjective opinion?

## The first-year literature student doesn’t begin my class with a capacity to judge literature equivalent to mine.

One way to assure people of the validity of expert judgments is by making the reasoning behind them transparent. Yet expertise isn’t generally compatible with the capacity to show just anyone the evidence for our judgment. The opposite is more



often the case. This is why theorists of academic disciplines from Northrop Frye to Thomas Kuhn point to the consensus of the community of experts as the standard for assessing the value of a given work, study, or claim. The fact that 97 percent of climate scientists agree that climate change is both real and human-caused is far more powerful than the description of any particular scientific finding. Even if those findings are described in terms superficially accessible to laypeople, we understand that the expert assessment of their value depends on a variety of background knowledges, practices, and norms that are concealed from us. Recent history has shown that it's quite easy for nonexperts to examine various studies of vaccines, for example, and arrive at conclusions sharply distinct from those of experts.

The claim of an expert community's judgments on nonexperts derives from the background knowledges, experimental procedures, norms of argument and evidence, and often-tacit skills that constitute expertise in a given field. Jerry Z. Muller has described how university administrators have fallen victim to the egalitarian fantasy that we can make the grounds of expert judgment accessible to just anyone. The dogmatic egalitarianism of what Muller calls "metrics fixation" conceals a struggle between administrators and a "professional ethos ... based on mastery of a body of specialized knowledge acquired through an extended process of education and training." Muller describes how the proponents of metrics understand professional judgment "as personal, subjective, and self-interested." If you can't immediately show me your reasons for your expert judgment, it must be because you have no reasons, or your reasons are bad ones. Perhaps you're getting paid by the vaccine makers, or you own stock in wind turbines.

Literary expertise differs from scientific expertise in many respects. But in both cases we can distinguish professional judgment from mere private opinion. And, like scientific judgment, understanding the basis of expert literary judgment is a learning process. I think Basho's poetry is great. But this

isn't just my opinion. I didn't discover the beauty of Basho's work on my own. And no one pointed at a poem and just expected me to get it. When I was 15, I discovered R.H. Blyth's translation and commentary on Japanese haiku as I was bored one day in the library. I opened the book at random and came across these three baffling lines:

"The octopus trap:  
Fleeting dreams  
Under the summer moon."

It wasn't the complexity of the poem that threw me. It was its stark simplicity. The poem didn't seem to be saying anything. I was about to throw the book down, but then, curious as to why anyone would put such a stupid poem in a book, I scanned Blyth's commentary. I read the following sentences: "The octopus lies as if asleep in the bottom of the jar which has trapped him, a float marking the place on the water above. Though the words do not express it, the verse seems full of light and color."

Blyth's brief gloss combines a useful piece of historical knowledge — the fact that 17th-century Japanese octopus traps were open jars — with the description of something that he notices about the poem. "The verse seems full of light and color." How could this be? What is the source of the color in this extremely plain poem? How does the octopus relate to the summer moon? What is it like to be an octopus?

Over the following days and weeks, the poem recurred to my mind, along with Blyth's gloss. Within me, Blyth's teaching slowly passed Hume's test of aesthetic expertise. Many people, "when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who are yet capable of relishing any fine stroke which is pointed out to them." Something that for me was unimaginable — what is it like to be an octopus? — became something I could begin to imagine. ■

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SÉBASTIEN THIBAULT FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Who Decides What's Good and What's Bad in the Humanities?

Judgment can't be handed down from on high.

By G. GABRIELLE STARR and KEVIN DETTMAR

**I**N HIS recent *Chronicle Review* article, “The Humanities’ Fear of Judgment,” Michael Clune argues that the humanities in general, and literary study in particular, are in trouble because we don’t want to talk about value. Au contraire. Sit in on any English class and you’ll hear a lot about value — about the value of literature in pushing the boundaries of empathy; about the effi-

cacy of poetry in encouraging thorough, expansive engagement, rather than minimal, uniform assessment; about the moral weight of fiction in a world that may be post-truth. Value is certainly front and center, but not the value that only belongs to a few initiates in a small, narrow sphere.

Clune approvingly invokes the early-20th-century literary critic I.A. Richards channeling the au-

thority of the expert: “My taste is more refined, my nature more cultured, you will do well to become more like me than you are.” This is not the grounds for expertise vis-à-vis our students that we wish to claim. Rather, we’ve learned a style of self-awareness regarding our critical processes, and we encourage our students to do the same. Not to adopt our values, but to better articulate and support their own. Clune fears that under neoliberalism, market forces are supplanting expertise; we’re concerned, rather, to prepare our students to contend with some degree of success in the marketplace of ideas.

Liberal-arts education is not force-feeding: We are not telling our students to sit down, shut up, and eat their vegetables. (See! Poetry is good for you!) We are instead guiding our students in learning how to nourish themselves — and their communities — through feast and famine. Take the teaching that scholars of literature do. We encourage students to think aslant; to find both what seems clearly written in a text and what may be hiding just out of view. This is not a question of force-feeding. It is a practice of reciprocal thinking, questioning, and exploring perspectives very different from those you came in with. It is, as Henry Fielding wrote, about coming to a table that’s laden with many different foods and learning about hospitality, about culture, and about your own and others’ voracious need to understand.

It’s high time, Clune insists, that we acknowledge that literary value can be taught. His example, learning to admire a translated haiku, suggests that learning involves value instruction from an expert who can tell you how, and can teach you just how to DIY. The sentiment echoes that voiced by William Wordsworth in *The Prelude*: “... what we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how.” The danger in such a position should be obvious — the suggestion that the goal of education is to reproduce our taste in our students, by setting them up to be challenged ... in exactly the ways we were challenged. (After all, it was good enough for us: and just look at us!) It’s tantamount to forcing your students to sit and watch a movie with you — but it’s a movie you’ve already seen. And you’re going to ruin it for them.

Taking pleasure in something is a reliable sign of having found it valuable; but you can equally take pleasure without knowing why you value what you do. When Clune claims that he learned to take pleasure in something he didn’t initially find at all appealing, he is not saying what he thinks he is saying. It is not, as he seems to think, that he had to be shown the way. Rather, his anecdote points up the fundamental fact that people differ in their pleasures. He came to find pleasure where there had been only confusion. And just as individuals differ in our pleasures, we differ in our values and in how we prioritize them.

We learn what we value because pleasure points the way. We have eaten, and find it to be good. These pleasures aren’t fully natural, or inherited, or found — and certainly, they’re not universal. Those values, those pleasures — what Richards calls “taste” — are, to invoke the familiar cultural studies formulation, not natural but cultural. The expert, of course, has a vested interest in professing the dispassionate nature of his taste: There’s no agenda here — it’s just that some things are better than others. For sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this gesture is symptomatic of the cultural field writ large, which has “an interest in disinterestedness.”

Hence the Olympian pronouncements of a figure like Matthew Arnold, the most influential English-language critic of the 19th century. In “The Study of Poetry” (1880), Arnold argues that the proper valuation of new poetry rests on its being compared (but how?) to poetic “touchstones,” “lines and expressions of the great masters.” And how are those touchstones themselves to be mined? On this Arnold is strategically vague, but the word “tact” does a lot of work — according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “a keen faculty of perception or discrimination.” We’re not far from Richard’s “taste” (which, in a telling substitution, he calls “nature” in the very next phrase). It’s not quite “I know it when I see it,” but it’s very close. And what if you don’t know it when you see it? Then, I’m afraid, you were probably never meant to see it.

**C**LUNE’S PHRASE “pathologies of expertise” — by which he means the exclusions wrought by the prejudice of experts — is striking. But he seems to think that simply by uttering it, he’s vanquished it. We’re not so sure. Plenty of evil has been done by experts in the name of expertise, even in the relatively “harmless” realm of literary criticism. Harold Bloom, perhaps the most celebrated critic of his generation, has used his expertise to promulgate and shore up canons that largely exclude women and writers of color, betraying a callous indifference to difference. In his most comprehensive and best-selling statement on these questions, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994), he uses the second sentence of the 500-plus-page tome to proclaim that “aesthetic value” is “sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant’s rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading.” Bloom can’t define art, but he knows it when he sees it. And he doesn’t see it in, for instance, Toni Morrison, or Maya Angelou, or Adrienne Rich.

So we are arguing, in part, that value is both situated and multiple, in stark opposition to Arnold’s transcendental Value. When it comes to the liberal arts, then, what are we doing? Are we teaching pleasures? Are we teaching value? Perhaps what literary scholars can help us to understand is why

we value what we value. They can teach us to make room for others' views, values, and pleasures alongside our own. And to acknowledge that our own can change — even teachers'. Call it aesthetic empathy.

We don't care whether our students value what we value. We're both people of faith: that faith provides the bedrock value system in our lives. We don't try to teach that to our students — we would never so presume. But we do want them to be deliberative about their own values, and to be ready always to give an answer for them. To paraphrase Wordsworth, what's central is not what we have loved, but how.

The popular-music writer Carl Wilson's short book on Céline Dion is a great example of this kind of aesthetic empathy. Wilson seeks to understand his own powerful dislike for Dion's music, but also to understand the powerful emotional pull she exerts on millions of others. Wilson never comes to appreciate the soundtrack to *Titanic* — but that wasn't really the goal of the project (which he subtitled, tellingly for our argument, “a journey to the end of taste”). Rather, he comes to appreciate the fans' appreciation, to understand some of what this music, so meaningful to so many, means for them.

The disciplines of the liberal arts teach disciplinary procedures and habits of mind. We can't enforce them, ensure that they're followed (Enjoy Shakespeare! And James Baldwin! And Zora Neale Hurston! And James Joyce! NOW). We can show you new pleasures and new ways of valuing things — we can embody them — but we can't make you feel them. We model a style of engagement, of critical thought: we don't transmit value.

Teaching and learning in what we call the liberal arts matter because they help us approach some seemingly universal truths about what it means to be human. But that universality encompasses a heck of a lot of difference. And if you learn one thing in the liberal arts, it's that you need to be a student of difference. You need to recognize the divergences among us and the diversities we bring to life. You need, one might say, to value them. The liberal arts don't teach value — they teach us to value values.

Our disciplines aren't primarily important for teaching their rules, whether they are the rules of English, politics, or neuroscience. The liberal arts are good because disciplined thinking (a.k.a. “critical thinking”) is transferable across domains. Clune quotes Agnes Callard approvingly, arguing that a

teacher “tr[ies] to give students access to a distinct domain of aesthetic, scientific, or literary value.” We're surprised to read that description of our vocation — if that's what we're supposed to be doing, we've been doing it badly. When Silicon Valley types say they want to hire humanities majors, it's not because they want coders who know Gwendolyn Brooks poems. It's because they want to hire lively and curious minds with analytical skills that transcend the occasion of their teaching. Very few would have used Brooks as an example 50 years ago, and we are proud to say it loud: Thanks to real struggle, this year marks the 50th anniversary of Africana studies and Chicana/o and Latina/o studies at our institution.

## Liberal arts education is not force-feeding. We are not telling students to eat their vegetables.

What we teach matters because the substance counts. Indeed, we teach metacognitive skills — and we teach them to people. Both historically and in our present moment, institutions of teaching and learning have not always fully acknowledged the breadth of humanity. It matters that the canon has changed from what Bloom and others envisioned, because we seek to be true to the breadth of human experience.

So while we may be teaching a set of rules that reflect disciplinary values (science is progressive, accumulates knowledge, and disputes it; humanistic inquiry is divergent, proliferates knowledge, and argues the heck out of it), that's not the ultimate value of liberal education (the Aristotelian end or good, as opposed to, for the picky among us, the Kantian end or good that Clune embraces). No. The liberal arts — and our beloved humanities — are good because we help students learn that values are discovered through disciplined thinking. And pleasure draws us endlessly on. That's worth something. ■

*G. Gabrielle Starr is president of Pomona College, and Kevin Dettmar is the director of the college's Humanities Studio.*

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SÉBASTIEN THIBAULT FOR THE CHRONICLE

# The Hypocrisy of Experts

The eschewal of judgment is arrogant and irresponsible.

By MICHAEL CLUNE

A NUMBER OF readers of my recent Chronicle Review essay, “The Humanities’ Fear of Judgment,” doubted the existence of literature professors so enchanted by the pseudo-equality of consumer culture as to reject literary judgment. Therefore I’m grateful that G. Gabrielle Starr and Kevin Dettmar are so explicit on this point. When I suggest that teaching a great writer like Gwendolyn Brooks to resistant students is worthwhile, they retort: “When Silicon Valley types say they want to

hire humanities majors, it’s not because they want coders who know Gwendolyn Brooks poems.”

Starr and Dettmar reject the “authority” by which a literature professor presumes to show students works worth reading. Who are we, they argue, to tell students that James Baldwin, Shakespeare, or Gwendolyn Brooks are good? As a first-generation college student, I learned to be wary of professors loudly forswearing their authority, approaching students as buddies, just wanting to have a friendly conversation. Such a stance typically

concealed a far more thoroughgoing play at authority. And of course Starr and Dettmar immediately reveal their suspicion of authority to be hypocritical. These literature professors modestly disavow any expertise in literary judgment in order to claim expertise in empathy, morality, and “metacognitive skills.” Such expertise, they tell us, will “prepare our students to contend with some degree of success in the marketplace of ideas.”

But what exactly qualifies a literature Ph.D. as an empathy expert? Why should students attending Pomona College — one of the wealthiest institutions on the planet — go into debt to learn how to be moral from the authors of scholarly books on 18th-century literature and Bob Dylan?

Starr and Dettmar compliment my phrase, “the pathologies of expertise,” and graciously proceed to illustrate one of the worst such pathologies — bootstrapping from a delimited sphere of professional authority to self-appointed arbiter of broad swaths of students’ experience. By pretending to sacrifice literary judgment, the Pomona English professor gains the right to moral and “metacognitive” judgment. Nice work if you can get it.

Their bargain looks even better once we realize that they aren’t actually giving up literary judgment for a moment. Starr and Dettmar argue that they don’t “force” students to understand the value of James Baldwin or Shakespeare. Whatever the students like is good enough for them. But then what’s on these professors’ syllabi, and how does it get there? Perhaps they have taken a page out of the Silicon Valley playbook and used algorithms to construct syllabi based on the empirical preferences of their students — gleaned from their Amazon or Google accounts. But more likely they’re putting works on their syllabi they think the students will benefit from engaging. And that’s literary judgment.

Starr and Dettmar claim they teach “difference.” Doesn’t this imply that they are showing students something they don’t already like? If so, they’re practicing judgment. They’re saying that certain works make available certain kinds of valuable insights and experiences. If not — if Céline Dion or *The Apprentice* are just as good at illustrating difference as Gwendolyn Brooks or Basho — then what reason do they give to the student who reasonably inquires: Why do I have to read what’s on your syllabus?

A similar question arises with respect to empathy. Is every work equally good at inculcating empathy? If not, then Starr and Dettmar are practicing judgment. If so, then they are claiming a truly

extraordinary authority. It doesn’t matter what works we teach; the professor’s total mastery of empathy, morality, and “metacognitive skills” itself is sufficient to enable Pomona students to thrive in the marketplace. Like all varieties of market egalitarianism, surface equality here conceals deeper inequalities. The more Starr and Dettmar tell the students how equal they are, the more they celebrate the equality of all consumer choice, the greater their own authority grows. Yet this comes at a cost. Pomona’s English majors are at historic lows. These professors are finding fewer and fewer subjects for their moral authority.

## By pretending to sacrifice literary judgment, the English professor gains the right to moral and “metacognitive” judgment. Nice work if you can get it.

There are many serious questions about the expertise associated with literary judgment, and the kinds of checks necessary to counter prejudice and authoritarianism. But none of these arguments are necessary to demonstrate the emptiness of Starr’s and Dettmar’s position. They protest my authoritarianism, but they claim a professorial authority far greater, and far less grounded, than any I imagine. They pretend they don’t tell students what works they should value, and then claim they are showing students works that transmit the values of difference and empathy. The obvious contradictions of their response to my essay are dispelled by their identification of Silicon Valley as the destination of their pedagogy. Its combination of an egalitarian approach to consumer preference with a hostility to any value not assimilable to the market finds two faithful advocates in Starr and Dettmar. The power of this ideology renders them blind to its incoherence as an educational program. ■

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# Academe's Extinction Event

Failure, Whiskey,  
and Professional Collapse  
at the MLA

By ANDREW KAY

*Illustrations by Jan Feindt for  
The Chronicle*



CHICAGO

**A**LL AT once it hit me: a shudder. I'd been doing fine all day — merrily, even. Fresh off the bus to downtown Chicago, eased by a steady titration since breakfast of Maker's Mark, I'd fairly danced down Wacker Drive, rolling suitcase in tow. I had this. It was brazen and ballsy, what I was doing, and I was to be commended for it. But then I got to the Hyatt Regency, and the automatic doors at front opened before me like a sort of maw, and I ventured in. In an instant it failed me — my Stuart Smalley self-talk, my diligent pregaming on bourbon — and I stood there in the lobby effectively naked, a gibbering infant exposed to the light.

I was back: I was at MLA (short for “Modern Language Association”), the annual pageant for literary studies, my old vocation. Here scholars gather every January, performing the time-honored rite of solemnly chanting 20-minute papers before one another in hotel conference rooms. And here, until recently, the field held interviews for its ever-dwindling pool of tenure-track professorships. They've largely switched to Skype now.

I went to four of these conferences on my own dime from 2013 to 2016, interviewing fruitlessly. Along the way I developed an anxiety problem and several exotic tics — my blinking got sort of messed up; I started baking compulsively. At last I left, publishing an essay that likened the academic job market to Tinder, but somehow more depraved. It felt like walking out of a place and tossing a Molotov cocktail over my shoulder.

Academe, as anyone knows who's tried to leave it, is like a partner who is wrenchingly hard to quit. When it was good, it was amazing. God, the highs! The horizon of your happiness seemed unbounded. But the partner turned out to be a nut job who demanded nothing less than all of you. Move to a different city every year, they stipulated. Subsist on bread crumbs. Completely debase yourself. They constantly evaluated your “performance.” On a whim, they dressed you up in a sailor suit and beat you.

It was finally too much to bear. I got out to save myself, starting life anew as an essayist and journalist. And I landed a part-time job at a private company, teaching writing to students with disabilities. I could hardly believe my good fortune in escaping.

The touch of an ex-lover, though, is not so easily forgotten. Swimming happily along in your new life, you are swept back by an undertow of remembered joy that draws you to its source. At work in the evenings, standing at a whiteboard desk and helping a student with a paper, I found myself scrawling lines of Blake onto the desk's surface with a marker, dreamy and distracted. “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires,” went one. The line gleamed like a talisman from another world.

But then a *Chronicle* editor reached out, asking whether I had any ideas for stories, and I said innocently, “I had sort of a funny thought that I might cover MLA 2019.” It was as if I'd held onto academe's number in spite of myself.

My stated reasons for going were the ones everyone gives for reconnecting with an old flame: I craved closure. I felt a desire to be vindicated in my decision to break things off, and with it a morbid curiosity about what the profession had been up to since I left it. But perhaps this was all so much gauzy self-deception, a heap of self-flattering fictions beneath which lurked the real, unvarnished motive behind most such meetings: I was parched, and I missed it.

**H**OW CAN I conjure MLA 2019 for you?

Have you ever seen that viral picture from 2017 of a party of Oregon golfers calmly putting while, in the near distance, a wildfire consumes the landscape? Trees blacken; smoke, pinkish-gray, shrouds everything in impasto blots; nature itself seems to creak, groan, and at last give way. But the golfers go blithely on. The conversion of this Edenic place into Dantean incandescence won't interfere with the genteel game they know and love — or, if it will, they are determined to get in one last round before the region is razed. “Eye on the ball, Chet!” one can hear them saying. “Not on the cataclysm!”

Thus MLA 2019. In conference rooms located in the depths of the hotel, the field's most vigorous minds — Lauren Berlant! Bruce Robbins! — teed off powerfully before hushed spectators, launching fresh takes on everything from satire to the nature of critique. They often began the same way: with the stated intention to “trouble” or “disrupt” the existing paradigm by staging an “intervention.” A windup would follow: “If, as Foucault suggests, ...” the speaker would say, gathering might. Then a swing, swift and superb — the intervention sailed through the intellectual firmament, and, with luck, found its critical mark to the dazzlement of those present: birdies of theoretical acumen, eagles of originality.

**Academe, as anyone knows who's tried to leave it, is like a partner who is wrenchingly hard to quit.**

Other scholars opted for modest putts, readings of Coleridge and Coetzee greeted by polite clapping. Now and then a bogey: A reading would be



less than convincing, and the author would, during the Q&A, “get a little push-back” from one or more listeners (that’s academese for “I’m not buying this”). It was all mannerly and urbane. People were getting in one last round.

Upstairs, the lobby served as a kind of clubhouse. There was a bar at the center with a restaurant beside it, and, at the outer edges of the room, furniture on which people lounged. In between was an open space populated by islands of academics who shared a self-conscious aesthetic that, in the case of the men, might be termed *formal-flippant*: hair mummified with product; scarf; sport coat; too-short khakis; and, like a bit of irreverent punctuation dropped at the end of some sartorial sentence, New Balances. A dozen women unwittingly wore the same suit from Ann Taylor, while myriad others went full flight attendant.

Old friends bumped into one another, clutching at lattes, trading news, dropping casual references to the “capitalocene.” A scholar described some new project or life development; her friend nodded, wide-eyed and hypercaffeinated, uttering that trending expression of assent among the grotesquely overeducated: the rapid-fire “YahYahYah!”

All around them, the humanities burned. The number of jobs in English advertised on the annual MLA job list has declined by 55 percent since 2008; adjuncts now account for all but a quarter of college instructors generally. Whole departments are being

extirpated by administrators with utilitarian visions; from 2013 to 2016, colleges cut 651 foreign-language programs. Meanwhile the number of English majors at most universities continues to swoon.

None of this shows any sign of relenting. It has, in fact, all the trappings of an extinction event that will alter English — and the rest of the humanities — irrevocably, though no one knows what it will leave in its wake. What’s certain is that the momentum impelling it is far past halting; behind that momentum lies the avarice of universities, but also the determination of politicians and pundits to discredit humanistic thinking, which plainly threatens them. They have brought on a tipping point: The stories they have told about these disciplines — of their pointlessness, of the hollowness of anything lacking entrepreneurial value — have won out over the stories the humanists themselves have told, or not told.

“Have I stayed too late at something that is over and done?” asked Sheila Liming, an assistant professor at the University of North Dakota. Owing to enormous state-budget cuts, Liming told me, tenured and tenure-track faculty in her own department have lately been diminished by more than half. She likens herself and her colleagues to guests who have arrived at a party after last call. “That characterizes the morale of the people who come to this conference now. The project of academia might be over.”



**B**Y EVENING I was down in the lobby hanging around the bar. I inhaled some offensively priced cut of grass-fed beef, charging it to *The Chronicle*, and became loosened by a trio of Bulleit Ryes. Numb-faced and cheerful, I decided it was time to start ambushing the academics at the bar. This seemed a decent way of taking the profession's pulse.

So I looked about for victims. I spotted a pair of men sitting across from each other in a booth, talking animatedly. One looked older than the other — roughly 80, hoary-headed and clad in a blazer. The other, though upward of 70, struck me as more boyish even from afar. He had a giddy laugh, a piercing glissando that spanned at least two octaves and sliced through the room's ambient noise. It wafted me to them.

"Hi, guys!" I slid in beside the younger of the two and introduced myself as a reporter. Their dialogue died immediately. The older man winced. I was a midge alighting between old friends, short-circuiting conversation. But I didn't care.

The younger guy introduced both of them: he was John Schilb, a professor at Indiana University at Bloomington and former editor of the journal *College English*. The older guy — who continued to eye me skeptically — was none other than Gerald Graff, a former president of MLA, author of numerous books on writing and the history of the profession, and a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He was once a big deal. "Gerald Graff," his website reads, "stands as the profession's indomitable and indispensable Arguer-in-Chief."

Graff went on studying me in silence, with a pained, almost pitying expression. "Hey, I'm not just some schmuck," I said finally. "I did a Ph.D. in English."

"That," Graff replied, "might actually make you a schmuck." I admit I was caught off-guard: it was as if a much older dog, one who had been sizing me up suspiciously at a distance, had now approached and mounted me. Two seconds of mute awkwardness ensued. But then Schilb released one of his shrieking glissandi, and I started laughing at that, and our overlaid laughter defused the moment, which passed.

Graff — who turned out to be a teddy bear — recalled his early days in the profession, during the 1960s. He described a field at once deeply flawed and more civil than it is now. "When I started out, the profession was very much an old boys' club," he said. "The big thing was, could you hold your liquor? That was a factor in hiring." As a new Stanford Ph.D., Graff found himself in a strong seller's market: "When I went out for a job, in '63, you had to really fight off employers. You got [solicitations] in the mail — from the University of Hawaii, USC — good, high-profile places."

It was a time of dumb-delirious plenty, during which refined men — men who had leapt unim-

ped into careers of contemplation and comfort — politely debated the nature and import of poetry, drama, novels. An old historical scholarship, one that took a philological approach to literary works, vied with the New Criticism, which saw those works as transcendent objects, harmonized unities that rose above historical circumstance and aspired after universal meaning. "They were rivals in their writing," Graff remembered, "but they were actually social friends. Everyone was a gentleman then."

In the decades that followed, expansiveness of all kinds — the increased inclusion of women, the advent of a range of approaches that brought literary-critical methods to bear on every aspect of culture, from sexuality to disability — coincided with the shrinking of the field itself, its available jobs and funding. Already by 1977, when Schilb went on the market, there were signs of future collapse: "This job-market crisis now," Schilb emphasized, "has roots in the early '70s."

The fall from that time of ease and abundance — what might be termed Peak English — was a 50-year process stunningly accelerated by the 2008 recession. But the mere fact that there was a Peak English helped explain why so many older professors had difficulty grasping the magnitude of the current collapse — and why they have happily gone on accepting new Ph.D. students and grooming them for a future that doesn't exist. That these faculty came of age during Peak English — or closer to it, anyway, than their millennial counterparts, in a time of relative plenty — meant that many retained a maddeningly deluded vision of the market.

"My students get jobs," I recall being told by an older faculty member in my graduate department. "The market is bad," another coolly remarked once, "but it's not *that* bad." There was a beguiling hubris behind those words, bound up with these academics' need to reproduce themselves through their grad-student protégés — and, of course, to reap the benefits of cheap teaching labor. Far easier to inhabit these fantasies than reckon with the profession's extinction, and your own.

Graff, Schilb, and I shook hands in the end, fully friends, and I resumed wandering. At some point I looked up and saw, at a distance, a member of one of the many search committees that had rejected me over the years, surrounded by friends and talking jovially. It seemed to me that our eyes met for a moment. I turned aside with a start. Had she spotted me? Surely it didn't matter — but seeing her had thrown off my dopey-drunk equilibrium. I walked a lap around the lobby, ordered another neat rye, and went back to ambushing strangers.

**I**T was past 9. I headed toward the men's room to freshen up. I had to get lucid; in 15 minutes I had a meeting with Caroline.

I stood at the bathroom sink splashing water onto my face, then peered at that face in the mir-

ror. I was 36, nearly a decade older than when I'd first met Caroline Levine, the Victorian-literature scholar who became my dissertation adviser at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. It happened as I wandered through a Walgreens one day. I entered an aisle and saw this person I recognized from the department website, who looked laughably out of place in the store's crude, glaring light — this red-haired, Pre-Raphaelite figure standing among Starbursts and Herbal Essences. I blundered up and introduced myself, and we chatted easily.

"We should meet!" she said, meaning at her office. She said it with such homey, unaffected warmth, it was as if she were inviting me over for brownies and Capri Sun. I went. The meeting led to an independent study on Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet and Jesuit priest, which led, in turn, to a dissertation on 19th-century poetry.

It was immediately apparent that she wasn't normal. Her feedback on my written work was instantaneous and staggeringly profuse. She sent me spontaneous emails "just checking in," or recommending a book, or observing that I'd looked downcast at some meeting we'd both attended, and was everything OK? She signed all these missives "C." — as if we'd attended 4-H Camp together. You could call her maternal — many did — but then you'd have to note that she was upsettingly insightful and prolific. In that tension lay the essence of Caroline: on the one hand, a Girl Scout den mom chairing departments and dissertations, ever cheerfully exhausted, ever proffering career advice like Thin Mints; on the other, some next-generation academic whose productivity, when you paused to think about it, scarcely made sense, obeyed some calculus that was other than human, and faintly disturbing.

At the time we met, I was still very much this dumb kid who played beer pong and poked people on Facebook. Yet here was a prominent academic on her way to the top of the profession, who'd discerned something in me and was determined to bring it out. So many high-powered professors couldn't care less about graduate students — scarcely know they exist — even though their 2-1 and 1-1 teaching loads depend on those students. That Caroline did was bewildering. What had she seen in me?

Email by email, meeting by meeting, she was building me up, like some sage trainer whipping a novice into fighting shape. Her praise was transfiguring; I came to believe it. I landed an article in a major journal, nabbed a fellowship or two — and felt myself changing: each essay or chapter was a new lap run, a fresh foe bested. The time came to go on the market. We did mock interviews, sat at her house poring over sample syllabi I'd drawn up. The market was brutal, we both knew — "But you'll land on your feet, of course," she predicted.

Except I wound up supine on the mat.

The thing you have to understand is the wrenching strain placed on these relationships when the advisee doesn't get a job. If your adviser cares deeply, they watch from your corner as you endure this drawn-out bludgeoning, watch your life's prospects shift and attenuate; they watch as your worldview turns rancid, as the nature and meaning of the time you spent together, all the numberless hours, curdle in hindsight. All this they see from a place of secure employment, having themselves the thing you need. You may even come to resent your adviser for a time, even if they've funneled untold amounts of unpaid labor into your work. It's irrational, of course, but you may do it all the same, because the alternative is to shift your gaze inward and confront this ghastly wound that's opened inside you.

At the very end, in summer 2016, I drove to Caroline's house. She'd gotten an endowed chair at Cornell University and was moving. I went bearing a pear torte I had baked, along with a card thanking her for her tutelage over the years. (I'd taken to making baroque desserts to keep my hands busy and my mind occupied, the way some people immerse themselves in odd jobs after someone close to them has died.)

I rang the doorbell and Caroline answered and invited me in, and we stood talking amid a sea of U-Haul boxes. It was one of those conversations that consist entirely of small talk, but behind the small talk lurk a million implicit meanings. By sheer indirection, I managed to convey that I wasn't going on the market again and had no precise plans moving forward.

There was a long pause. I turned to leave. "I'm still your adviser," Caroline suddenly said. It took me aback. I smiled weakly and thanked her, but instead of hugging her I reiterated how important it was to keep the torte refrigerated. She nodded kindly, and I left.

A couple weeks later, I took a job as a bartender, listing Caroline as my reference. I hadn't seen her since — until now.

**M**INUTES AFTER greeting each other, we were seated at a table and chatting away. We leapt back into our old, easy rapport. I fell anew for her ready laughter and warm, artless charm, her exaggerated nodding after I said a thing, coupled with a loud and nasally "Mmmmmmmmm-hmm!" How reassuring these tics had been to me once!

Beneath that good cheer, though, she was melancholy. She had ascended to the top of the profession precisely as it collapsed. "I've always prided myself on being part of this large scholarly formation that has longevity and collective input, this glacial —" She caught herself. "I can't even say 'glacier' anymore, now that the real ones are melting!" We both laughed ruefully. "And now I feel like we might die altogether. So what are we contributing to, exact-



ly?” Whatever remained of English departments after the extinction event, there would be “less stuff,” she said. “Fewer texts will emerge as the ones we read.”

I weighed this. Glaciers of accretive knowledge, the products of decades, were melting. Something was sweeping across the literary-studies landscape, and when it was done, that landscape would lie despoiled, its biodiversity starved to sparseness. In 40 years, English departments, if they existed at all, might manage to cover the grandest specimens — Morrison and Milton, say. But what of more-exotic fauna, like Victorian poetry?

I drew a breath and switched gears. “Are you ... cool with what I’m doing now?” I said. I’m perfectly aware that this sounds needy and boyish: Who cared how I’d gone on to make ends meet after academe coughed me up? I could have become a pole-dancer and wouldn’t have owed my Ph.D. program any explanation. And yet I found I wanted to know.

She looked at me unswervingly. “I am *totally* cool with what you’re doing now. It seems really meaningful and valuable, and it draws on your training in interesting ways.”

“All those hours, though!” I said, more desper-

ately than I’d meant. Hours unspooled from both our lives, irretrievable now: a yardage of years.

“But that wasn’t wasted time!” she said. “I don’t ever think intellectual inquiry is wasted. I actually think a Ph.D. is a great thing. Provided you’re not in debt, you’re spending six or seven years creating knowledge.”

I thought a moment. “Had you known from the very beginning that I wouldn’t get a tenure-track job — that I would end up doing this — would you still have agreed to be my adviser?”

**The humanities are in the midst of an extinction event. No one knows what it will leave in its wake.**

“Absolutely,” she said. “I like the idea of this kind of knowledge dispersing into lots of institutions and corners of life. I mean, as long as you didn’t

ultimately *want* this thing that you didn't — that this world around us couldn't give you, then yes. There's no question in my mind, I would've agreed to."

I had to admit I was happy that a Ph.D. had been a potent prologue to my current life, disciplining me into a more patient thinker, a slicker architect of arguments. Asinine and medieval it had certainly been, in many ways — prelims! The dissertation itself! — and had taken time, tracts and tracts of it. But the tracts of time — seemingly an endless postponement — had turned out to be their own reward, not least because I'd gotten to spend them with the person across the table, who'd built me up and modeled a new intellectual intensity for me.

"I brought a poem," I said, taking out my phone. It was "God's Grandeur," the Hopkins poem about industrialization and its ruinous impact on a natural world suffused with holiness — a timely lyric for 2019. (It was the first poem we'd read together during that independent study in 2010.) I read the first of its two stanzas aloud, then handed the phone to Caroline, who read the second, and when she finished we stood up. This time I hugged her. "Thank you for everything," I said.

I WOKE THE next morning with a hangover. I looked at my phone: it was the three-year anniversary of my finished dissertation.

The occasion always reminded me of Samuel Pepys, the 17th-century English diarist. He suffered from a hideous bladder stone — the best metaphor I know for a doctoral dissertation. Daily it accumulated inside him, drop by drop of minerals that hardened into a little globe. At last it grew impossible to live with, so he underwent surgery sans anesthesia: multiple men held him down while a physician incised his perineum and tweezed it out, a mass the size of a tennis ball. It had no purpose; it was a useless curiosity. Pepys kept it in his house as a grisly souvenir; I keep my dissertation in a bedroom drawer. He commemorated the removal with an annual party; I raise a glass each January to my freedom and lightness.

I showered, dressed, and headed to the elevator, where a young man from Seton Hall University effused to a peer: "If you practice dialectic in the antinomian way that Adorno lays out, then you can't achieve the synthesis Hegel envisions." I stared straight ahead.

Downstairs, wide-eyed scholars skipped to panels, kids let loose at Six Flags. I wandered among them, surrounded but unrecognized, like a ghost come back to a world once its own. I followed the current to a panel on Romanticism, where a presenter argued for "the now-ness of Foucault's *Archeology*." I was relieved to discover that I didn't give a damn. All I could think was how strange it was that this was the endpoint of falling in love with, and dedicating your life to, poems about peo-

ple striding through the Alps and glimpsing sublimity: you wound up in a hotel room far below the ground, where the air was awful and people talked at you in a weird, creepy language — a language that had somehow attached itself to poetry the way the titular creature clings to John Hurt's face in *Alien* and won't let go. That language washed over me anew: *palimpsest*, still the only term academics have managed to come up with for shit with layers; *imbrication*, which sounds like a malady preventable by eating bran muffins.

I ducked out during the Q&A. So far, so good: I was unaffected, I still hated conferences. I started hitting up more panels, developing a formula I would follow in the course of the event: drop into panel, claim spot in back corner, take in talks with manspreading complacency, daring someone to move me.

At one panel, an eminent professor of comparative literature, speaking at roughly 600 words a minute and in a manner reminiscent of those old Micro Machines commercials, suggested that while language was obviously a flawed medium — handmaid of ideology, prison house of signs — we might be circling back to a place where we can comfortably say stuff. He advanced this claim with surpassing caution, all the while making use of a prodigious amount of language. At another, a British academic clad in a winter jacket, assuming a bearing akin to that of the Dos Equis guy, imagined a more equitable academy for the future: "The pluriversity," he breathed, emanating mystery like strong aftershave, "would exist as a networked decoloniality."

And yet many of these scholars were trying, with poignant earnestness, for dynamism and accessibility. At a pair of featured events called "Humanities in Five," academics were challenged to present their research in the form of five-minute elevator speeches shorn of jargon. One presenter — Michael Bérubé, a scholar of American literature and a sort of ersatz Alec Baldwin — spoke of the liberating potential of science fiction that featured people with disabilities, and of the virtues of "making stuff up." "Who the hell fell asleep and let the business theorists lay a proprietary claim to the term *creativity*?" he demanded, with Baldwin-esque abrasiveness. "Excuse me: Creativity is *our* gig."

It was a panel on "The Persistence of Ideology Critique" that threw me. On my browser, I had open the academic-jobs wiki, the site where anonymous applicants make updates to advertised positions in higher education, and where interested parties can go to track the real-time progress of those posts. Below each job listing are subheads representing the various stages of the hiring process — "Preliminary Interview," "Campus Interview," "Job Offer," and so on — and if candidates get, say, a campus interview or offer, they write an update alongside the relevant subhead. (Seeing others' fa-

vorable updates to jobs for which I'd interviewed had, during my days on the market, been a bit like doing shots of Roundup.) On a whim, I started making fake updates. I accepted tons of offers: offers in the 18th century, offers in early American literature, offers in my old specialty area. Offers in political science, in piano pedagogy. All the offers. "Offer accepted, motha\*\*\*\*aas!" I wrote below one.

You could say I was coming unraveled. At some point, though, a presenter began reading a paper that caused me to look up at once from the wiki. This was Anna Kornbluh, of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her paper was written in the same language as the others, but scythelike; she plied the language with weird skill, as if slicing a path toward some promontory of insight — and I found, to my surprise and unease, that I wanted to follow her there and stand and look out.

Her thesis was unsparing. "We have rhapsodized demolition as liberation while literally laying ruin to the university," she argued, "a horror to be beheld by future historians — in the unlikely event there are any." Literary theorists, by prizing an ethos of destruction in the name of freedom, had ironically aligned themselves with the external forces — political, administrative — that had for years conspired to obliterate the institution in which they work.

"Human beings," though, "are essentially builders," she noted, channeling Marx — "architects of ideas" as well as toppers of norms. Both gestures, affirmation and dissent, are "life-sustaining"; ideally they coexist, equipoised, twin components of a fulfilled life. A reconstructed university — and wider world — would depend on recovering the constructive and visionary impulse, which the profession had too long devalued in favor of critique. "Get building," she enjoined the room.

I sought out Kornbluh afterward. "What does it mean," I asked, "to be 'essentially a builder' in an institution that's burning? Isn't it too late for building at this point?"

"There's no more urgent time than 'too late!'" she said. "We need to build up animating stories about how reading, writing, and thinking support human flourishing. And we have to build up the university by unionizing, by fighting administrative bloat, and by committing more to service work, which too often gets belittled and falls to women." She thought for a moment. "The threat of extinction — not just academic extinction but human extinction in worsening ecological conditions — is a vicious one that calls for wild imaginings, which is exactly what the humanities enable."

I walked off grappling with this — and grappling, too, with the wider implications of all I'd seen. I saw a guild struggling, with tragic belatedness, against something furious and overmastering that was baked into their future and would go on

ravaging them until they were changed, perhaps beyond recognition. Whether they themselves had helped set the devastation in motion — by espousing an ethos of demolition that backfired; by failing to communicate themselves to a wider world and thereby leaving a vacuum in the public discourse around what they did and why it mattered, which their enemies eagerly filled — seemed a question infinitely debatable. But there was terrible pathos in the lateness of their confronting the threat, and in the threat's sheer hopeless scale, which dwarfed their tools for combating it. It was too late. But then there was no more urgent time than too late.

I RETURNED TO the lobby filled with an unwelcome nostalgia: I was antsy with all the elevated talk of poems and novels. So I went up to my room to do a hit of something and settled on Hart Crane, the modernist poet whose verses — ecstatic, transporting — are like verbal speed. I put on a recording of Tennessee Williams reading "The Broken Tower," Crane's best poem, sat back and absorbed it, veritably snorted it, letting its high-flying stanzas hit my brain. I did line after line.

Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to talk about it with someone. There were perhaps 50 people in the world who were intimately familiar with "The Broken Tower," and I imagined that half of them were in this hotel. By Sunday they would be gone, returned to their far-flung lives. Should I look for an amateur book club when I got back home to Wisconsin, one where retirees sat about analyzing extremely difficult poetry over Rice Krispies Treats and Yoo-hoo?

The conference seemed, like the profession itself, to have run out of steam. In hopes of completing my pulse-taking of the field, I set about talking with a few people at the bottom of it, followed by one at the very top. Among the former — contingent academics, that is — the prevailing mood was, of course, far from sanguine. I had the sense that, overshadowed as they were by this unfolding calamity, all were trying to determine how to live with and feel about it.

"Something sociological is happening that's larger than any of us," said Jacob Tootalian, a scholar of early modern literature who recently served as a digital teaching fellow at the University of South Florida. "It's mind-boggling, the sheer ideas that are being pushed out. Academia feels like the opening lines of Ginsberg's 'Howl.'"

Later I met with Anne Ruggles Gere, at the time president of the MLA. She received me in an empty conference room, where we talked amicably of the extinction event: Gere noted that her home department, the English department at the University of Michigan, had witnessed a drop from 1,000 English majors to 200 during the previous eight years.

"Do you feel a bit like the captain of the *Titanic*?"

I said.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I tend to take a more positive view. I think the changes that I’m seeing in the way MLA is functioning are cause for hope. I think we need to do a lot more educating of faculty, and of English departments, about how to rethink what they’re doing. But I think it’s

possible. We’re talking about smart people.”

“So what are some of the other things that are now being done to make this a more humane experience for young scholars?” I asked.

“Which is ‘this’?” she said.

“The experience of being at MLA, or just being on the market.”



“The first thing to say is that interviewing at MLA is no longer the thing,” she said. “And that, I think, changes the environment here.” She recalled her first MLA, in the 1970s, just after Peak English: “The sort of dominant scene was these frantic people clutching their briefcases, and looking at their watches, and hoping to God that somebody was going to call them, because they had come maybe with one interview,” she said. “I haven’t seen much of that here.”

It was true: Most preliminary interviews had migrated to Skype, though I still encountered plenty of interviewees who’d flown to the conference on their own dime. But while this change saved interviewees much time and money, it was hard to ignore the fact that this was a surface-level fix — that academe remains one of the few professions that produce their own work forces, and that, wherever the interviews are happening, there are still immeasurably fewer of them than there are Ph.D.s.

“Do you have any advice for people like me who’ve left the profession and are seeking to make meaning of their time in academia, and looking to find fulfilling lives outside of the academy?” I asked.

A long pause ensued. “I — I don’t think I have any basis for — no,” she said finally.

**T**HERE WAS one thing I had left to do.

I made my way back to my room, where I took out my phone and opened an app called Zoom. I had arranged a video conference call that was to start momentarily.

One by one they arrayed themselves before me on my phone’s screen, in tiles that bore their faces *Brady Bunch*-style. They were the finest souls with whom I had grown acquainted in grad school. And they were suddenly, all of them, gazing at me and blinking.

In one tile was Gary, a Renaissance scholar and my beloved office mate. Gary had no life to speak of beyond literature; all his internet passwords were “Renaissance.” Many were the mornings I arrived at the office to find Gary asleep with his head on his desk, having spent the night there. He lived on Nutri-Grain bars and Haribos.

Another tile contained Wes: a stout blond man eternally in gingham, possessed of a falsetto laugh and quicksilver temper, and one of the world’s authorities on *Paradise Regained*. In the afterlife, Wes and Gary will wander through Hades together, desecrating on Milton and *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

A third tile showed Katherine, who had a serrated wit that could flay you in an instant and make you giggle at your own peeled body. A hummingbird aflutter with nervous energy, she spoke in breathy mumbles, so that you had to strain to hear each witticism. Her hair was electric.

A fourth displayed my roommate for the best stretch of grad school, an American-literature

scholar. Irritatingly handsome, this guy, and an emotional savant who could’ve been a therapist but happened to really like Robert Frost. I’ll call him Ken.

None of us had gotten a tenure-track professorship.

“God, you guys have no idea how much I’ve needed you!” I said. “This conference is such a debacle, and no one here knows me, and my GI system is a wreck. I’ve slept hideously.” I felt like crying.

“You do everything hideously,” said Katherine.

“What about a therapeutic Keats suppository?” said Ken.

I felt my health flooding back.

We fell to reminiscing about the best of grad school: the most exhilarating seminars; all-night parties like frenzied Maypole celebrations wherein we’d dressed up as Prufrock or Flannery O’Connor, irrigated ourselves with martinis, leapt onto one another’s backs.

“What do you think was the most powerful thing about it all, in hindsight?” I asked.

“The cohesive group thing,” said Katherine. Everyone concurred. “For me there’s never been that same ensemble-y dynamic, though I’ve looked for it,” she went on. “It’s just so hard to separate academe from friendship. There were times when I thought about quitting the Ph.D. program, and told other grad students, and they were like, ‘Aren’t you worried about losing your friends?’”

“So true,” said Wes. “There was something almost militaristic about grad school, and not necessarily in a bad way. We were all thrown into the trenches together. We were really *doing* it! There was this sense that we were being broken down and built up again as new people, as these high-powered minds — only without the groupthink that gets enforced in a barracks. Do you guys remember how weird it felt to go home for a visit after that first initiation?”

**“I’m not just some schmuck,”  
I said. “I did a Ph.D. in English.”**

This struck an immediate chord with us all. The triviality and isolation of life “on the outside,” with its strip malls and Snapchat, had nothing to rival academe’s camaraderie, its shared intellectual fervor.

“Everyone calls the academy a cult,” I said. “But it might just be a community.” I thought back to my own experience quitting — how I’d spent nights wandering the maze of streets around my



house: a threadless Theseus. I saw now that I had been mourning not simply the death of a career I thought might be mine, but an intellectual community. I had come back to MLA unconsciously searching for that community, and had caught glimpses of it — at the bar, at the best panels — but recognized that it was closed to me now.

“I’m realizing,” said Gary, “there’s another thing that links all of us: the 2011 protests and all that followed them.” He meant the convening of multitudes at the Wisconsin state Capitol to decry then-governor Scott Walker’s “Budget Repair Bill,” which aimed to deprive state employees of the ability to collectively bargain. The intent behind the bill was to decimate the public sector, the university system included, by breaking its unions and thereby preventing its workers from staging any unified opposition to the mandates of the state.

At least 60,000 demonstrators descended on Madison at one point, deluging the Capitol — beating drums, playing bagpipes, chanting. There were all-night sit-ins in the Capitol itself. One night I walked through the building’s marble corridors in the small hours, taking it all in. I slalomed through sleeping bags, past protesters working on signs, strumming guitars. I saw Wes, Gary, and another peer huddled together reading *The Faerie Queene* by the rotunda, discussing it quietly and grading. The stakes of reading Spenser had never seemed so great, nor the power of poetry to magnetize.

The bill passed despite all the resistance. Hard on its heels, Walker enacted a series of budget cuts that resulted in a loss of \$362 million for the UW system from 2012 to 2017. And in 2015 he sought furtively to edit the system’s mission statement (the “Wisconsin Idea”), deleting phrases like “search for truth” and replacing them with “meet the state’s workforce needs.”

In the wider context of the extinction event, this stands out as an especially grievous disaster. “The melancholy thing,” Gary said, “is that it took the

GOP assault on the UW to get me to realize how important the education I was getting was, and why it was significant for me to bring that to others. My moment of recognition was precisely when it was becoming clear that only a few of us would move on to the secure professoriate.”

In retrospect, these losses seem like the death throes of the quaint monastic world to which we briefly belonged. Now it was hastening toward its end — and I saw that I’d come to MLA to compose a mental elegy for that world and for my time in it. At its best, it had cultivated that sense of togetherness we all remembered so wistfully, offering invitational spaces — classroom, conference, seminar — where people of every stripe might gather around works of verbal art in shared experiences of wonder. There they could assemble, at reservoirs of eloquence and vision — mingling, puzzling, praising — then filter back into lives transfigured and refreshed, reminded that they belonged to something larger.

At its worst, this world was synonymous with egotism and the isolation that is egotism’s endpoint: scholars with tumorous self-regard bragging about never attending a conference panel other than their own; writing opaque and narcissistic prose in love with its own argot; disdaining service work; forgetting — or blocking out — the grad students and adjuncts who rendered their privileged lifestyles possible.

Time was running out. “I have to go, you guys,” said Katherine.

“Me too,” I said. I had a bus to catch.

“This has been surprisingly cathartic,” said Wes.

“It really has,” said Ken. “How come we’ve never done it before?”

We made plans to do it again. ■

*Andrew Kay is a writer living in Madison, Wis.*

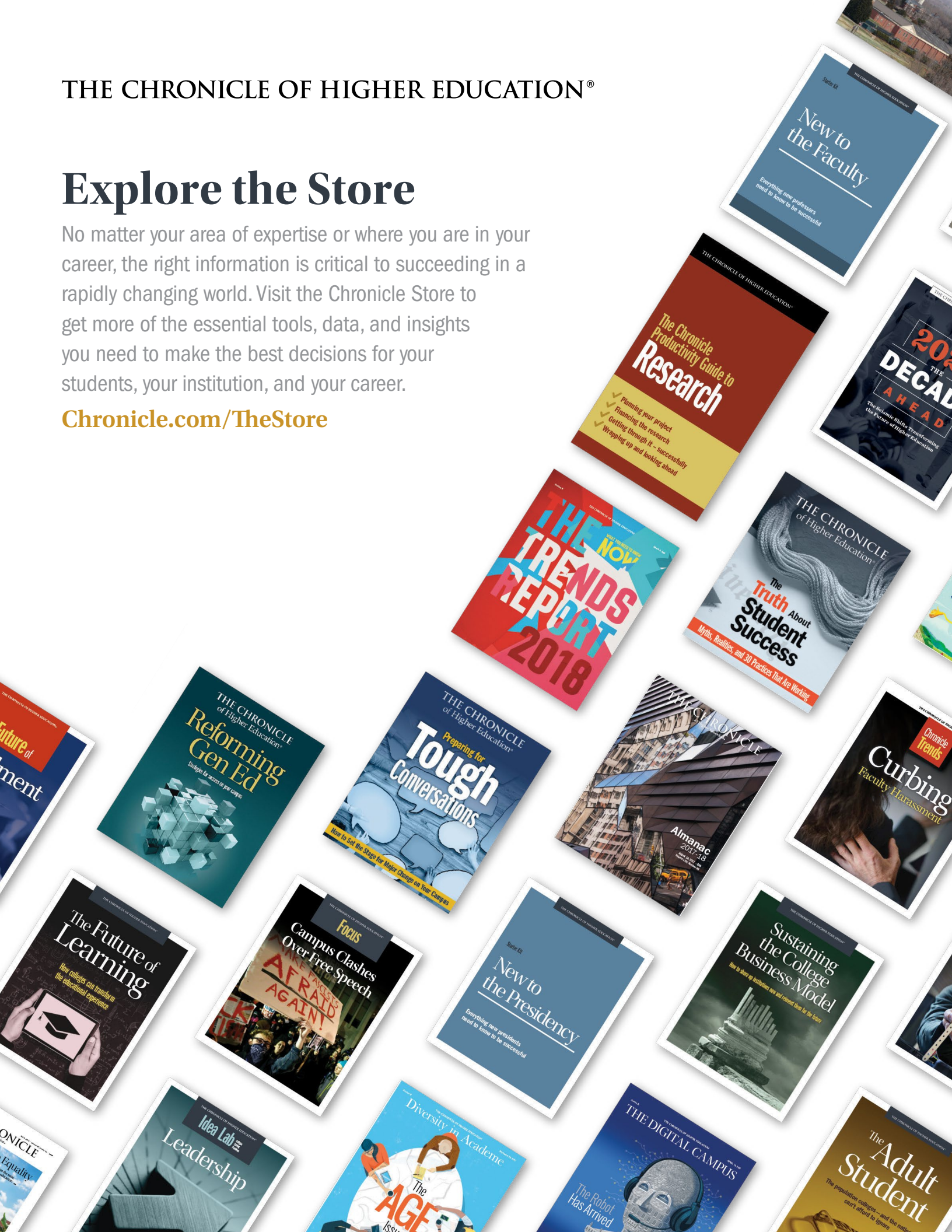
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