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Publishing from the Margins

Angelic Rodgers

In the meeting with my Dean, I mentioned that I have not published anything academic in some five or six years. “I used to try to get in one or two articles a year, but with the focus on meetings and travel and my position being 100% teaching, I let it slide.” I was mainly venting, not really expecting much of a response.

“Ok. That’s going on your yearly plan, then. I want you to get at least one article abstract submitted this academic year.”

I was surprised. And a little scared because that meant I had to do something. I left his office thinking to myself that it seems like a fool’s journey to add more to my plate; after all, publishing isn’t going to lead to a promotion at the job—there is no tenure track and no actual English department.

I was not sure what to expect as I sat across the desk from my new Dean. I had been with the school longer than he has, but I’ve only been full-time for two years. He’s been full-time for three, coming on when I was in my fourth or fifth year as an adjunct. We were meeting to talk about changing roles in the English department that we don’t officially have. The online campus doesn’t offer degrees in English, although some of the campuses within our system offer English education degrees. Online does provide support for those students seeking courses that will allow them to teach English at the primary or secondary level, as well as offering those same courses as electives to a variety of majors. My only work with those majors is through the undergraduate general education courses I teach, where a few are sprinkled in from time to time.

I’d come to talk about my role specifically; I’m a remote faculty member with a PhD in American Literature. The Dean called me a couple of weeks before this

meeting to tell me the school decided that it was in the best interests of the school to hire locally for his old job as Director of College Writing. No remote faculty need apply. While it would have been a lateral move for me, I had hoped that, if I got the position, one of my colleagues might be able to move up into my position as full-time.

I left the regular “I’m going to get a tenure track job and have a great office where students come and sit on my couch to hear me babble on about great writers” mindset almost ten years ago, but not without a battle. The shift started when I was still working on my dissertation. The program where I was a TA would only fund candidates for four years, so I got a full time position as an instructor at Auburn University, very much against my dissertation director’s advice. To complicate matters, I started a long distance relationship with a friend from graduate school. As a result of that relationship, I applied for jobs mostly on the west coast in 2002 or so and actively planned on going to MLA. I received no interview calls that year, despite having a pretty good track record that included some publications already, a teaching award, and great recommendations. I landed a couple of campus visits in 2003. I went to one, as did my significant other at the time. Neither of us got the job. The other interview I didn’t go to, as the relationship ended before the campus visit, and I decided that I needed to reassess my situation.

By this point I had finished my dissertation and successfully defended it. With a PhD in hand, I was making a yearly salary that was a bit shy of my student loan debt (and only that if I was teaching year round and was lucky enough to get a summer course). The clock was also running out on my 100% teaching job at Auburn, meaning I would be shifted to the adjunct pool at about 75% of my already very low salary. When I started the job in 1999, there was a three-year limit on the full-time

position. I jokingly said that was no problem, as I would be out of there before year two started. They extended the full-time eligibility to five years. I stayed for all five. In 2004, decision time arrived; if I stayed, I would be cut back to adjunct status. I decided I needed to get out of the place I was in, both physically and mentally. In order to supplement my income as a full-time instructor, I had taken on part-time jobs on the side, tutoring for a private company online first, then adding adjunct courses at a couple of online schools. I decided that I would give online teaching a real try—I left the brick and mortar with my first outrageously priced laptop at the end of 2003. It was one of the few things that I declared a necessity when I left Auburn. I moved in with an old friend who had stayed with me for a year or so after she completed law school and had a similar existential crisis.

I woke myself up crying the first week after the move. I had left behind anything that wouldn't fit in my Honda. I was a PhD living in someone's spare bedroom. It was difficult to figure out what to tell people when they asked where I worked or what I did. Online schools were not considered a good thing, certainly not in my field. For whatever reason, I decided to keep publishing, and I got in a couple of pieces over the next couple of years, but then, like most adjuncts, I became overwhelmed by many things: the instability of adjunct work that made me seek more class assignments than one person can reasonably teach at one time, the waves of freshman composition essays, the cynicism that publishing and presenting are just for those poor folks caught up in the fantasy of the tenure track job.

Having been in 100% teaching positions since 1999, I lost sight of my own voice when it came to academic writing (or any writing). In the early days after leaving that full time position, it had been important for me to keep writing academic pieces as a way to convince myself that I was still a legitimate PhD and to define myself. After all,

telling someone I was in the beginning stages of research work toward a critical biography of Octave Thanet was a more comfortable answer for both of us than explaining that I taught classes online out of my best friend's condo. More than that, though, continuing to write literary criticism kept me anchored to that world I had lived in for so long and helped with the depression linked to going adjunct and, what seemed even worse, going adjunct online.

As I started my life as an adjunct, I remembered a conversation I had with a coworker, Barber Bancroft, who was a long-term adjunct at Auburn. I'd seen him on the elevator shortly before my move, and he had a dress shirt in hand. He was headed to his other teaching job some 45 minutes down the highway and he didn't have air conditioning in his car. If you've been in Alabama in the early parts of summer, you can understand the need for a fresh shirt when he got there.

"Aren't you tired?" I asked.

"Coal miners are tired." That was his reply. Through the next few weeks, I started talking to him more about adjunct life. I found out that he had a pretty good academic pedigree, having been a student at University of California at Irvine when Derrida was there. He also mentioned that he was a prolific writer with five novels finished and sitting in a desk drawer. So, I started my own adjunct life with a sense that I could do this—heck, some folks even find time to write while they teach. Now, in 2014, tales of ill-fated adjuncts living in their cars and not being able to make ends meet are even more common, or at least more readily available thanks to the power of the Internet, than they were when I had that conversation in the elevator. Yet, as recently as 2013, Katina Rogers of the Scholarly Communication Institute presented information at a roundtable session at the annual MLA conference that showed that the dream is still alive: "As may be expected, a large majority of students

enter graduate school expecting to pursue careers as professors—a total of 74%. What is perhaps more interesting is their level of confidence: of that 74%, 80% report feeling fairly certain or completely certain that this was the career they would pursue. Keep in mind that the survey respondents are **all** working outside the tenure track” (Rogers, 2013). As she notes, the challenge becomes how to best prepare graduates for the actual marketplace. The 2014 conferences of both the MLA and AHA were to include panels that focus on alternative career awareness, both groups were given \$85,000 grants in 2012 toward developing information and resources for graduate programs that want to help prepare students for alternative employment tracks, and MLA has and will feature non-academic employers at their annual meetings (Groves, 2013). Even as I’m about to celebrate my tenth anniversary as an outsider to the world of literary criticism and studies, I still fumble when people ask me what I do for a living. It’s awkward. There are many of us in the margins. I’ve been asked to perhaps come to my alma mater to speak to graduate students about my less than traditional career path, but have yet to do so. I haven’t really followed up on the request because I feel like there are really more of us in the margins than there are in the so-called traditional spots. As a full-time non-tenured faculty member, I am painfully aware that my position is better than those of my adjunct colleagues in terms of stability of employment, but I’m also aware that publishing is often seen as the realm for those on the tenure-track.

Living like this, one might think that if I were to advise students about the choice to pursue graduate study that I might show them YouTube videos mocking undergraduates who want to go on to graduate school so they can write about death in literature. Or maybe that I would crack jokes about how they better learn how to say “would you like fries with that” or else that they should start learning now how to

teach to the test. That's not the case. In my fantasy, if I were to advise a student who came into my office about whether English is a good field for them to study beyond the undergraduate level, and if they do so what to expect as their life work, here's what I would probably tell them:

Do it because you can't not do it. The novelist J.A. Konrath gives this advice to fiction writers on his blog, but I think it's applicable here. I've known many people over the years who studied English because they liked to read, but the studying of it as a discipline made them stop reading. Likewise, many of the people I knew in graduate school don't write anymore and don't read for pleasure. Often, it turns out that those people pursued graduate courses because they didn't know what else to do. If you dread writing things that no one will read or if you hate that you have to (or automatically do) dissect what you read, looking for the larger importance of literature, perhaps graduate study is not for you. I never had that problem. A student once said to me during a conference "this is like a game for you, isn't it? You actually enjoy this stuff!" He was fascinated by me. I guess it hadn't dawned on him that there were people who studied, taught, and wrote about literature out of sheer love. I would argue that on a very basic level those are the only reasons to do it.

My earlier example of Barber Bancroft applies here, too. In my fantasies, he was discovered and got much acclaim as a fiction writer and had enough money to only teach when, what, and where he wanted to. The fall after I left, Barber dropped dead in front of his morning class. Bancroft was 48. While the story may sound like a cautionary tale of how adjunct work will wear someone out to the point that they literally lose their lives to teaching, I also think that we can learn a lot from Bancroft—he did what he wanted how he wanted to do it, because he couldn't not do it. Whether

it was teaching or writing novels, his goal wasn't what those activities would do for him in terms of the next rung on the job ladder; the doing was the goal.

Know that you will teach a lot of composition and that doing so is a worthy activity. We tell students all the time that peer review is about not just helping someone else, but that we learn as much from the process about our own writing as we do other people's writing. This is true even as someone who teaches composition. In teaching students the fundamentals of writing, we reinforce those ideas for ourselves. Even when I was on the job circuit the first time with my MA in hand, I remember telling interviewers that even though I think of myself as a writer with a reading problem and a specialization in literature, I cannot imagine not teaching composition. And that's true not just because that's what I teach most of the time, but also because every time I teach an upper level literature survey, I realize that it all goes back to the basics. If we don't care about composition classes, why would anyone else? Also, publishing academically means that your students see that you aren't just teaching writing because you are a failed writer yourself. In a job market that values faculty with real-world practical experience, publishing literary criticism takes on a new purpose by fulfilling that "working scholar" idea.

Know that engaging in writing yourself—fiction, non-fiction, or literary criticism— informs your teaching, even if you're not teaching your students from what you write.

The writing we do makes us better teachers of writing, not only because we can identify tools and strategies that we can teach students, but also just on the basic level of giving us empathy with our students. Face it, when we're consulting a style sheet for a publication we're submitting to, we probably mutter some of the very same epithets that our students do when we make them check their own style and citations in an academic paper.

Literary criticism fulfills the need to go beyond the literal and for grown up time.

Because most of us will likely spend the majority of our time teaching undergraduates in those composition courses or in basic literature surveys, we need an outlet that keeps us excited about literary studies. I don't have children, but I imagine that my need to publish literary criticism is a lot like people with small kids needing time with adults in a kid-free environment. I value my time with my students, but they don't always get as excited as I am about what Charlotte Perkins Gilman has to say about doughnuts and how the doughnut figures into 19th century women's regionalist writing. By writing about it, I get to engage in conversation with like-minded people in the field.

Literary criticism and other forms of writing you do should be about your own validation, not outside validation. In some ways this goes back to the empathy idea; publishing is scary. I've served as a reader where other authors have cited my work. Even though some of those used my work to argue I was wrong in my analysis, I didn't feel the need to respond to their criticism; I was just really excited that someone read my work. And, after all, we all know what Wilde said about it all being good press. The rockstars of literary criticism are few; I have no aspirations to be among them. My employer is happy that I'm publishing again, but I know that it doesn't directly impact my position at the school. There's no tenured position waiting for me, nor is there a support given in the form of a sabbatical from teaching to allow me to work on that critical biography I have wanted to work on for the past ten years. On the flipside of that, I know that I have no worries that they will ask me to write a biography of someone who is more in vogue right now. I also don't have anyone else's tenure review schedule to consider as I set up my research and writing schedule.

As the June anniversary of my tenth year in the margins approaches, I am happily making research and writing schedules, revision timetables, and writing abstracts. Why? Not because it holds any promise of a better job or of acclaim in the academy, but simply because I am happier this way. It also seems from where I'm sitting that academia overall is experiencing this same shift; people are taking MOOCs at record levels, even taking courses that don't offer certificates. I'm signed up for some this spring that are related to teaching online, but I'm registered for just as many that are just for me. After all, a course on Buddhism and meditation may lead to a calmer instructor, but it probably won't give me practical application ideas for the online composition classroom. But, maybe that's where publishing and literary scholarship is headed, too. Perhaps this is just a stage in our evolution—perhaps we are returning to a time before the Westernized idea of publish or perish to a happier place of publishing as actual dialogue and conversation.

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