



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

Last weekend, I spoke at the American Studies Association convention in Seattle on a panel called "Organizing in the Trenches." It was about the graduate student labor movement with a particular focus on the strike in the University of California system. I was the last speaker, and by the time I came to speak, I had lost my composure. I had just read Elaine Showalter's editorial in the "MLA Newsletter" (Winter 1998) in which she compares the humanities to the sinking Titanic, and I was overwhelmed by a feeling of absolute betrayal by the leadership of my profession.

Instead of going right into my genre piece about using the disciplinary associations to organize disparate groups, I embarked on a rambling, monologue on my own experiences, which those who follow the MLA elections and the *Chronicle's* on-line "Career Network" know something about. Incoherent as I may have been, this was the one speech I have given in which the audience was really with me--not just in the sense of scholarly obligation, but on a real, emotional level.

At a cocktail party later that night, older people came up to me to say that they think the MLA president has compromised many of the ideals she once had, even to feminism. A surprising number of people roughly my own age and status thanked me for what I said. Mostly women, they feel intensely the bitter irony of having wasted eight years of their lives in preparation for becoming secretaries to 26-year-old MBAs. One, nearly crying, told me that she had lost all hope in the profession and had recently been hospitalized for taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

I find that personal narratives provoke such honesty and self-revelation. They expose the cost of abstract principles in human suffering. After what I've heard and the letters I've received in response to my columns, I am appalled by those who remain insensitive and indifferent to the drowning masses in academic steerage. Could it merely be a lack of imagination in first class? Have their consciences been dulled by overindulgence in wine and cheese?

I detest this Titanic metaphor. The ship has been sinking for two generations now, and I think--at the very least--we should stand up together at this year's MLA Presidential Address in a silent vigil to thousands who have slipped beneath the waves. We should let the occupants of the lifeboats know how many of us continue to tread water.

In solidarity,

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To the Editor:

Regarding the "we" of the president's column: I found it patently offensive. The gist--or so it seems to me--of what she's saying is that there's no need for PhDs in English other than to continue providing enough students so tenured faculty can continue in their comfortable positions & so they don't have to teach introductory composition.

In her repeated encouragement to consider, prepare for, & ultimately choose "alternative" careers, the president's implicitly telling us there's no place for us in the academy once we've got our degrees. She's very clearly--via her rhetoric--separating "them" (ie, grad students, those who should seek "alternative" careers) from "us" (ie, the cozy, contented, tenured types). The "we" she uses is nothing but a smokescreen, blown into our faces in an attempt to foster the illusion of solidarity while in fact masking the reality, ie, that there is no "we" of which we can be a part & that we only hold relevance so long as we're students & "apprentice" (ie, exploitable) labor.

Let's be clear: She's not scrambling for any lifeboat--she's got her hand on the rudder, & she & her pals are kicking us like rats back into the ocean. If we are to become journalists or film directors or fundraisers--& that's to what she's imploring us to accede--the vaunted "alternative" careers--then we should bail now, ie, never board the ship in the first place, or debark at the first port, because there are educational programs more fitted (& far less time-consuming) to preparation for those careers than is the study of literature.

Good will my ass. The logical extrapolation of her argument--voiced here, previously, & no doubt, will be at her presidential panel in San Francisco--is the abolishment of doctoral programs in literature--after she & her friends retire, of course.

This may read like overstatement, but I think not. In light of the CPE report--in which program reduction is tacitly suggested as a means to combat the "glut" of PhDs--the president's foisting of "alternative" careers on us, the cuts to education funding, the effective emasculation of the National Endowment for the Arts, & so on, we have to ask the question of exactly what message we are to take from all the rhetoric & all the punitive action. The simple, short answer is that those in power are anything but sincere in their claims to be protecting our "interests."

I read the president's enthusiasm for "alternative" careers as an easy way to save their asses: If they can convince enough grad students to go into "alternative" careers, fewer graduate students will be seeking academic employment & fewer graduate students will then be frustrated in their searches for academic employment. If that happens, you can bet she would be blowing the trumpets to announce that the problem with graduate education in the modern languages is solved: "Look--these recent PhDs don't want jobs in academia, & they're doing so well answering the phones at the foundations & getting the managing editor her coffee & holding the boom mike...." What this amounts to is that they don't want to do the hard work of trying to change workplace conditions such that tenure-track employment in academia can be rendered more than just a pipe dream.

If she (& her pals, the unmasked "we") had been sincere about wanting to protect our place in the Academy, there would have been no reason for us to raise the ambitious legislative agenda that we have this year; the president would have been leading the charge to pass the very things we're proposing--& more.

In short, I've attached a fan to my cap so I can blow away the smoke. I urge everyone else to do likewise.

Peace, [Gregory Bezkorovainy](#) CUNY Graduate Center