Whitson, R. (2013). How to Survive a Graduate Career. *Workplace, 22*, 58-70.

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HOW TO SURVIVE A GRADUATE CAREER

There's a powerful scene in the film *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) when several members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) remember learning that their disease was in remission due to a new combination therapy designed with researchers. "They were calling it the 'Lazarus Effect'," explains Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of AIDS Research for the National Institutes of Health. "People who were deathly ill get put on this drug and all of a sudden they were working again. That was a phenomenal feeling." The thrill of survival, however, soon turns into guilt and trauma. Greg Bordowitz mentions that even today, he's "still finding it hard to plan for the future and/or accept that I will have a long life. Which is unfortunate because I've had a long life. I've been living with AIDS for twenty years, but it's hard for me to relax into life." "Yunno, just losing so many good people" Peter Staley recalls, "and like any war, you wonder why you came home."[1]

How to Survive a Plague is particularly poignant because it shows how communities react to a crisis. Several members of ACT UP die during the course of the events, and their bodies become objects used in clinical trials and protest-funerals against the ineffective AIDS policies enacted by the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations. By using their bodies in this way, ACT UP transformed individual tragedy into collective action. Stories and lives became tools and weapons. Vulnerability was made into a symbol of strength. "We could do it because we could deliver hundreds and sometimes thousands of bodies," Jim Eigo recounts, "we had people with AIDS putting their bodies on the line, flopping out on the streets saying fine, this is my body, take me away." Politicians like North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms had used AIDS infection as a reason to condemn the lives and the sexual identities of people afflicted with HIV. Yet ACT UP's most powerful gesture in the film is, to me, its ability to subvert the rhetoric of these politicians, and use their own infected, suffering, and dying bodies as sinews to help knit their community together.

The graduate students and adjuncts currently suffering from a continually depressed and dysfunctional academic labor market can learn a lot from ACT UP. They, too, have their share of trauma, guilt, death, and survival stories. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is filled with them. I'm reminded of Sally

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[1] In a review of the film, Jim Fouratt accuses David France of "pick[ing] and choos[ing] his facts that pushes his narrative but [he] violates the search for truth and integrity that is essential to documentary filmmaking." Foremost among Fouratt's critiques is the way *Plague* represents the formation of TAG, a group splintering off from ACT UP, and TAG's efforts at changing the rules of clinical trials. Fouratt argues that the new rules had the effect of speeding up the process whereby AIDS patients could try new drugs, but it also resulted in the deaths of many people – a fact that *Plague* fails to mention. Other critiques of the film, such as the fact that it mostly represents gay white men and fails to show the truly multicultural and multigendered face of ACT UP also exist. I agree that any viewing of *How to Survive A Plague* should be complemented with the other films of the AIDS crisis such as Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman's *United in Anger* and David Weissman and Bill Webber's *We Were Here*. I have seen and enjoyed the latter film, but while writing this piece *United in Anger* was unfortunately only screened in select cities.

Racket's 2011 essay "Survivor's Guilt," where she admits that when she received the offer of a tenure-track position, she did not run "down the halls of the institution [...] shouting the good news to everyone and anyone who would hear it." Instead she says that she knew "one of the other candidates. That person had a spouse and a baby and, like me, had been living through rejections the last two job seasons and then working hard to do more and then even more. [...] What would it mean for both of them, and even for the profession, I wondered, if they had to sprint forward to another marathon or drop out of the race altogether?" While many graduate students are frustrated by a graduate curriculum in the humanities that does not emphasize job training and sets up a chasm between their ambitions and the reality of their future professions, the lucky few who do get a tenure-track position and can teach in their area of expertise feel like survivors - and wonder why they were able to get the lives they envisioned for themselves.

For others, the dysfunctional nature of graduate school and the job market create very real existential crises. One of the stories that will always stick with me comes from education writer Audrey Watters. In a post titled "The Real Reason I Dropped Out of a PhD Program," Watters recounts the summer of 2004, when her husband started having severe heartburn and nausea. Since the symptoms started during the summer months when neither she nor her husband's health insurance were covered by their graduate stipend, they decided to wait until the Fall to see a doctor. When they did, they learned that the heartburn was in fact liver cancer. Watters's husband died a little under a year after that. Even after his death, she received little institutional or emotional support from her program. In fact, she received a horrific letter that warned her about the end of her current support.

> I'd used up all my funding and there'd be no more teaching appointments available for me. (I was welcome to apply for positions in other departments.) I got a note from the grad school too: I'd have to finish my dissertation ASAP or apply for a special extension as I was coming up against the seven year deadline to complete a PhD.
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> So I quit.

Watters's experience is both terrifying and depressing, and yet it also points to a larger trend. According to data compiled in December 2012 from Joshua Boldt's *The Adjunct Project*, only 318 of 1891 adjunct and Non-Tenure Track (NTT) programs covered by the project offer health insurance. I would speculate that even fewer still offer the kind of emotional and institutional support needed by families and individuals undergoing health crises. These numbers underline the importance of speaking out about the impact not having health insurance can have on the livelihood of graduate students. We need more professors, adjuncts, and graduate students who are willing to stand up and talk about how health issues impact graduate careers. For this reason, I'm deciding to tell my own story. I haven't ever been diagnosed with cancer, or any life-threatening disease, but I have had health setbacks that give me a unique perspective on some of the issues facing graduate students today. I feel it is important to tell my story: both for the sake of solidarity with my adjunct, graduate student and NTT colleagues and to show that all of us are vulnerable to episodes that — without health insurance — could ruin or kill us.

It is important to be reminded how sharing our stories and expressing our vulnerability can be a method of survival. Vulnerability can form new expressions of solidarity, imagine new ways of working and living, and remind us of how much we can learn from one another. I see this essay, and the genre of writing it represents, as belonging to a line of personal critical narrative shared by figures like Ann Cvetkovich, Michael Taussig, and Avery Gordon. Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling*, for instance, uses her personal narrative of struggling through the condition as a flexible model for "articulating the relation between the macro and the micro and new forms of description that are more textured, more localized, and also less predictably foregone in their conclusions about our dire situation" (12). For me, the critical arguments about academic labor undertaken in journals like *Workplace* are often contrasted by (mostly anonymous) first-hand accounts of struggling adjuncts on *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The New York Times*. This article bridges my personal narrative of illness with broader questions of institutional vulnerability while identifying figures and movements who are using their shared contingency as a means for creating community alongside or outside traditional understandings of academia.

Chronic Disease and Higher Education

I had my first attack during an undergraduate study abroad program in London. A friend of mine and I travelled to Europe in March 1999 for Spring Break, and we were on our way home when I started to feel dizzy and nauseous. I vomited on a railroad track in Calais, France, boarded a ferry to Dover, and continued to vomit over the water, on the train from Dover to London, and on the Tube as I made my way back to Regent's College around Baker Street where I was staying for the semester. The dizziness I would soon learn was an attack of vertigo. The world spun around me in a counter-clockwise motion and my nausea felt very similar to motion sickness. The nausea never stopped except when I laid on my bed completely still, not moving at all.

Vertigo is a non-specific symptom. Everything from a relatively common condition called *Benign Paroxyismal Positional Vertigo*, where "a small piece of bone-like calcium breaks free and floats within the tube of the inner ear" causing confusing messages to be sent to your brain; to *Vestibular Schwannomas*, small benign tumors that arise from "the nerve that connects the ear to the brain" and impinge upon the inner ear, can cause vertigo. After lying in bed for five days, doctors thought I had contracted viral labyrinthitis. I didn't seem to have any further symptoms - apart from almost complete hearing loss in my right ear, which can happen in labyrinthitis. When my vertigo had ceased, I forgot about the incident.

Seven years later, I had a second attack; this time I started losing hearing in my left ear. I had just finished my oral exams, was beginning the research that would lead to my dissertation, and everything fell apart. I went to an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist (ENT), received steroids, and was diagnosed with Meniere's Disease: a poorly understood condition defined not by a disease process but by a complex of symptoms - vertigo, hearing loss, and ear fullness - and treated with a combination of hope, a low salt diet, a diuretic, and surgery only if symptoms become debilitating. I was told that the vast majority of people with Meniere's Disease live near to normal lives with occasional episodes. Some of them, however, experienced nearly constant vertigo and were forced to live at home on disability. I corresponded with more than a few academics who had been diagnosed with Meniere's and either had vertigo so severely that they were imprisoned in their homes or whose hearing had degraded to a degree that they no longer could effectively conduct classes. Adjuncts with sudden hearing loss caused by conditions like Meniere's are particularly at risk, since departments need no real excuse to get rid of contingent workers. A former adjunct professor, we'll call her Ericka Kalin, who corresponded with me over email during one of my episodes mentioned getting the full accommodations she needed for her hearing loss, but she ultimately was treated poorly by her department chair who assumed she was unintelligent "after she learned of my disability and my contract wasn't renewed."[2] Students also became increasingly difficult to manage. "The more visible it [my hearing loss] became due to the use of captioners and inability to converse with students directly," Kalin recounts, "the lower my evaluations, though they were never bad. After I was laid off, I never tried to teach again because I didn't believe anyone else would hire me knowing they would have to pay a full time captioner."

For someone who, in 2006, was beginning to face the realities of a crumbling academic market, my condition added another layer of contingency. I had failed to purchase health insurance for the summer months, due to a lack of funds, and was now faced with a pile of medical bills built with MRI scans, nerve conduction tests, balance tests, hearing tests, and specialist visits. I owed over $7,000, and this figure combined with the tens of thousands of dollars I had already borrowed as student loans and on credit cards. Even after some monetary help from my parents and a sympathetic group of physicians who helped me create a payment plan, I found it difficult to make the monthly payments on my medical bills with the stipend from my teaching assistantship. Further, my hearing had degraded to the point where I could barely make out what someone was saying even when they stood five feet in front of me. My anxieties

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[2] Ericka Kalin is a pseudonym for the adjunct professor who corresponded with me. She asked to not be named.

were concretized in the words of a roommate who asked me "How are you going to be able to teach?" I had no idea. I imagined myself using one of the many assistive devices I found online. I read about Michael Chorost's cochlear implant journey in *Rebuilt: My Journey Back to the Hearing World*, and wondered whether I would have to face the same kinds of struggles he writes about in the book.

I finished my Ph.D. degree due to the fact that several mentors revealed to me that they too suffered from hearing loss, and their successes encouraged me when my anxiety became difficult to handle. Chorost emailed me personally and reminded me of the many possibilities that existed due to technology. He had left graduate school before losing his hearing and was now earning money from his many publications about the science behind hearing and Cochlear Implants. *Rebuilt* was a source of continued comfort to me. I read that book at least five times. His experience calling for a rental car after losing a significant amount of hearing on a business trip to Reno mirrored the alien world of hearing I had been introduced to. After trying to get a yes or no answer from the attendant on the other line and hearing what amounted to static, Chorost tries patiently to explain his situation:

> 'I'm sorry. I'm deaf and can't hear you. Could you please just say *yes* or *no*? Just say whether you can send a cab. Just one word, please. I'm at the Enterprise Rent-a-car near the Reno airport, on' - I look around desperately, my ears ringing like chimes as my head swivels - 'Mill Road.'

> 'S*ssss* burumm bmm pmmb erumm bmm pmm arumm emm er berumm bmm erumm burumm.'

> Human beings are not binary creatures. You can ask as clearly as possible for a single syllable, *yes* or *no*, 1 or 0, but the instinctual apparatus of social communication is not easily turned off. [...] To people who hear normally, complete deafness seems to be inconceivable. (5-6)

Chorost's insight that complete deafness is inconceivable to hearing persons resonated with me. Most levels of hearing loss are inconceivable and frightening to normal hearing people. Sound is not simply a tool we use to communicate. Sound envelops us; it's an essential and intimate part of our *being-in-the world*, so much so that losing it feels like a form of diaspora or forced relocation.

H. Dirksen Bauman illustrates this feeling of displacement when recounting the experiences of one of his students who went to bed hearing and woke up deaf. Bauman argues that the student had an entirely different sense of self. "I felt like a ghost," he quotes from his student, "Like I wasn't even there. I had to keep touching myself to make sure I was there." This experience is common amongst sufferers of so-called *sudden hearing loss*. Psychologists call it disassociation or depersonalization, in which the psychological mechanisms that create a coherent sense of self and world break down. A 1991 description of depersonalization written by Marlene Streinberg lists an association between depersonalization and Meniere's and defines the illness as "a feeling of being unreal, of being dead, of parts of the body being disconnected, of observing or watching a movie of the self, or of being an automaton; frequently they complain of a lack of all feelings" (223). Megan O'Rourke describes a form of depersonalization when explaining that her experience with autoimmune disease left her feeling "categorically fraudulent […] everything was wrong, and that wrongness was inside of me; only I wasn't sure anymore what that 'me' was" (34). Certainly, losing hearing felt unreal to me. As I lost the ability to communicate with my friends and my community, it felt as though reality departed from me — as if the sharpness, clarity, and intimacy with which I embraced the world was becoming fuzzy, muddled, and estranged.

Social isolation is common to people who are deaf. This is one of the reasons that deaf communities remain central to anyone who uses sign language. Despite philosophies of "mainstreaming" coming from scientists like Alexander Graham Bell, who thought deaf children should be forced to not sign, deaf culture has emerged as a vibrant, close, and passionately political community — perhaps because so many

of its members know what it is like to be ignored and rejected by society at large.[3] Community became increasingly important for me as well. I started dating a child of deaf adults (CODA) and her parents have reminded me on several occasions that life exists after hearing. The entire family remains an important part of my life, and I can see some of the politics of deafness being played out in front of me. Even though all of the adults, for example, know how to sign, there are moments when the separation between hearing members of the family and deaf members is acute. Yet, the family also advocates strongly for the rights of deaf persons. I've been chided, quite appropriately, for not learning sign language.

I recovered most of my hearing in 2006. I was lucky the steroids given to me by my ENT helped me recover hearing before it was permanently lost. After a third attack in 2009, doctors finally realized that I had an extremely rare disease called Autoimmune Ear Disease - one that could potentially be treated with an immune drug called Humira. Humira is part of a group of medications known as Tumor Necrosis Factor inhibitors (TNF). TNF is a protein molecule that signals cells to promote systemic inflammation. When TNF is out of balance, several different chronic conditions develop. I learned since 2006 that I have many of these conditions: Crohns Disease, chronic inflammation of the colon; Ankylosing Spondylitis, chronic inflammation of the joints between the bones of the spinal column; and Episcleritis, chronic inflammation of the white sclera of the eye. If a patient gets one or more of these conditions, she or he is more likely to be afflicted with another. Autoimmune Ear Disease is another immune condition mediated by TNF in which the inner ear is attacked by inflammation.

I continue to take Humira. Luckily enough for me the enormous cost of Humira ($15,679 per year, according to a 2004 study by J.B. Wong) is largely covered through health insurance.[4] Of course, I am dependent upon the drug and consequently upon health insurance and its coverage for my life and well being. My previous attacks convince me that, without a drug like Humira, I would quickly become disabled. Shortly before going on the drug, my symptoms from Ankylosing Spondylitis had progressed to the point where I could not sit, ride a bike, or run on an elliptical without intense and continuous pain. Living without Humira would considerably reduce my quality of life. My point, however, is not simply that graduate students need adequate health care - though they do. In a larger sense, I was able to struggle through my ordeal because I had networks of mentors, friends, and family members who showed me that I could get through my pain, and that it was incredibly important for me to do so. Academics and graduate students need a better sense of community. We need to see how dependent we all are on each other's work, ideas, and activism. We need to understand that - in an era of budget cuts, continuing casualization of our workplace, and the integration of online teaching — we are all in this together.

Solidarity, Vulnerability, and Community

My experience with disease and the potential for disability taught me to be forthcoming about my illnesses. Foremost among my fears as I experienced my hearing was a feeling that I would be completely isolated. I had no idea that my struggles would teach me valuable lessons about how to experience

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[3] Many histories of the deaf community exist, and most of them include Bell's participation in the development of the hearing aid and his arguments against sign language. Perhaps the best film documentary of deaf culture and its history is PBS's *Through Deaf Eyes*, which explores the past 200 years of struggle for deaf persons.

[4] One of the reasons that Humira has traditionally been an expensive drug is due to the fact that, as a specialized drug known as a monoclonal antibody, it isn't covered by the 1984 Hatch-Waxman Act. This act provided the legal means for companies to develop generics for chemically derived drugs, not biologicals like Humira. Abbott Laboratories has argued that it cost $800 million dollars to research the drug, and these costs necessitate that they be able to make profits off of the drug longer than most companies. As Bruce Japsen argues in an article for *The Chicago Tribune*, the development of so-called biosimilars made possible by the 2011 Affordable Care Act, won't have much of an impact on Abbott's profts off of Humira. First, biosimilars are not the same as chemical generics, since they are more expensive to make and more difficult to replicate. Second, Humira's first patents don't expire until 2016. This means that the drug will probably remain expensive for some time.

solidarity through loss, pain, and fear.[5] I realized how quickly lives can change and, though I don't like to admit it, how dependent I am on other people. I realized that I could achieve much more for myself and my discipline if I – likewise – admitted that I relied on other people for my scholarly career. As most of us know, academia is not exactly a place where people forge close relationships. Graduate school, on one level, promises a kind of community. Students often arrive in cohorts, but underlying every friendship is a feeling that you might be competing with these people on the job market sometime in the future. I've had so-called colleagues trick me into not taking important courses for fear of competing with me. I've also heard stories of students hiding books from one another. I've felt twinges of jealousy when friends received jobs that I assumed were created for me. Of course, I worked the hardest. I looked for the most publication opportunities. Why wouldn't I be the one who succeeded and landed the tenure-track job?

In a larger sense, many scholars in English departments see solidarity as anathema to the practice of individual research that is central to much of our work. Aaron Brady argues that the rejection of solidarity by English departments is "more like a kind of unthinking liberal phobia against any form of collectivity, the feeling that anyone saying any variation on 'We're all in this together' is not to be trusted." Yet, he argues, the right way to think about solidarity isn't that we are all the same "nor should we be. But, since we share the same location, we should think with each other in mind."

We can locate our common space in the vulnerability and the trauma that many of us share — in different ways and to different degrees. In a reflection on the Occupy Wall Street movement, Judith Butler identifies a protest of dispossession in which the vulnerable body becomes a site of communal struggle.

> Our claim does not refer merely to individual, individually owned, self-sufficient bodies, but rather to the relationality of these bodies. Taking part in the multi-layered and multi-sited gatherings involves the corporeal vulnerability of fatigue, weariness, exhaustive obligation to pay the debt to capital, the life-threatening violence of profit extraction, exposure to police repression and brutality (including massive tear-gas and chemical exposure), but also a shared affective economy of motivation, endurance, changeability, and vitalization. (178)

In the years I struggled finding a diagnosis for my condition, I had made many friends in online support groups. I learned about new treatments from worried parents. I comforted teenagers who woke up with vertigo and didn't know what to do. I watched as patients who dealt with conditions similar to mine express their frustration as their dizziness increased and their hearing declined. My life became an experiment in finding new ways of relating to other people. I knew what it was like to wade through one peer-reviewed article after another for hours on end, looking desperately for a diagnosis and hoping that — whatever diagnosis it was — it was relatively treatable. I knew just how much a short forum post from someone who had been through my experiences alleviated my fears and gave me the stamina to wait for the next report from the doctor. And I knew how invaluable having another patient review lab work could be, especially when doctors seem more interested in getting to the next patient than in fully explaining what is happening to you. I knew it was worth it to see the struggles of other people as my own, because I knew that struggle had been (and one day will be again) part of my life. New forms of connection emerged through my vulnerable body. At almost the same moment I started participating more fully in medical chat rooms and message boards, I came across an article that would change my perspective on academic life.

Many people have read Brian Croxall's "The Absent Presence," and yet his title uncannily mirrored the depersonalization and disassociation I felt, first, as someone suffering from sudden hearing loss, then as a graduate with a Ph.D. who had few options in an atrophying job market. The vast majority of real English teachers often do not visit the MLA conference, since they don't have the money or the department support to do so. This creates an uncanny split between the "real" MLA (the one occurring in Chicago,

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[5] I don't mean to suggest here that my illness was a positive experience, or that anyone who suffers from hearing loss should consider it a life lesson. I merely argue that my experiences included both great hardship and great opportunity for me.

Seattle, or any of a number of places) and a virtual MLA occurring online - possibly filled with graduate students and adjunct faculty who cannot physically participate in the discussion. The reality of the MLA is, therefore, between a physical presence embodied in the panel discussions and a virtual online discussion happening in relative absence. For those of you who don't remember (or haven't heard of) Croxall's 2009 talk, Brian had decided not to visit MLA in 2009 because he could not afford to travel to the conference when he had no job interviews. "In a very real sense," Croxall argues in his talk, "I—and the people situated in a similar professional and economic quandary—are today's teachers of today's students. And for the most part, we're not at the MLA this year." Croxall's piece identifies a form of institutional depersonalization occurring within English Departments. As Croxall points out, the vast majority of teachers whose labor enables the University to function do not have a livable income, benefits like health care, or job security. Further, graduate students are pulled between expectations that they teach two or three (or more) sections of what is usually freshman composition every semester, and research that has very little to do with the work they perform every day. This occupational parallax is so strained that it has become commonplace for job committees to ask how candidates use their research in their teaching - and for candidates to have to think before answering the question.

Croxall's piece is also an example of the power of individual vulnerability and testimony to inspire larger social movements. Croxall's absence was powerfully visible at the MLA conference, and the number of anxious graduate students and NTT faculty who read his article (like myself) made the audience of his article much larger than any of the other presentations at the MLA. In a reflection on his article and its reception, Croxall mentions that "[i]nstead of being heard by a small group of people who attended the panel at which I was to speak, my paper had been read by more people — and colleagues! — than I could ever reasonably expect to read any article or book that I might write in the future." David Parry accounts for the popularity of Brian's piece by mentioning the mechanisms of social media he built over a long period of time. "[Brian] was one of the first people I followed on Twitter," Parry says, "[he] was one of the panelists at last years MLA-Twitter panel. He teaches with technology. I know several professors who borrow/steal his assignments. I personally looked at his class wiki when designing my own."

On one level, of course, Parry is correct. Brian is extremely active on Twitter and the blogosphere even today. Yet, his article also fundamentally changed the ethos that I felt was part of the academic experience. For the majority of my graduate career, I had been told to keep my trials to myself, to watch for any evidence that someone else might be stealing my work, and to be extremely careful about the friends and colleagues who looked at my work. But Brian not only freely shares a good bit of his own research, he is also able to articulate the fears and vulnerabilities of an entire generation of contingent faculty by openly showing his own vulnerability.

Brian is currently a major proponent of the alternative-academic community (#altac), a group of NTT professionals who work in libraries, museums, cultural heritage institutions, and other organizations. I worked with him at the Digital Scholarship Commons (DiSC) at Emory University for a year and identified myself as #altac. I also wrote about my own experiences leaving that community when I landed a tenure-track appointment at Washington State University. My central point in "Altac and the Tenure-Track" is that academics can no longer afford to separate themselves from movements like #altac that seek alternative employment opportunities for graduate students. It's one thing to consider graduate assistantships as a form of exploitation in which Universities get cheap labor, often without benefits, for the promise of a future degree. It's another thing entirely to understand that every academic position — tenured, tenure-track, and NTT — is in jeopardy as the University system considers how perpetually dwindling public funding will change its practices. "As long as faculty members view #altac jobs as consolation prizes for the golden ticket of a tenure-track job," I argued, "graduate students won't be able to see the value of thinking about the humanities in different — and more productive — ways." I still believe this. Brian's vulnerability as a non tenure-track faculty member caused him to seek a community beyond the traditional boundaries of the academy, just like my own vulnerabilities forced me to reach out to people I would otherwise not know and seek connections. The tenure-track partly insulates academia from the changes, vulnerabilities, and opportunities of thinking emerging in the wake of budget cuts, job crises, and anxieties over online education. While I would never argue against tenure and job security,

indeed I feel that we need to fight for more job security for the most vulnerable of our students and colleagues, my own contingency enabled me to find a community and explore issues that would otherwise be invisible.

For me, this is the beauty of the #altac movement: instead of simply sinking deeper into the depression and anxiety of a job market that is — by all accounts — not getting better, #altac professionals turn their problems into opportunities for engaging with scholarship in an entirely different way. Vulnerability causes them to rethink scholarly community and encourage their more vulnerable colleagues. It makes them interested, for example, in "building" more than "critiquing." Natalia Cecire recently argued against Tom Scheinfeldt's invocation of the "niceness" of the digital humanities by saying that "[i]t is easier to be 'nice' when once is not routinely met with casual racism, for example, and the cost of niceness — and of refusing to be nice — are distributed unevenly across race, gender, class, academic status and rank, and other social factors." Certainly, she is right. However, due to my own experiences, I see the situation quite differently. The scholars who emerged as members of the #altac movement and as casualized scholars and teachers acted nicely to one another because they could not afford not to. Years of contingency, failed promises of security, racism, homophobia, ableism, and misogyny forced them to seek new forms of community born through a common vulnerability. Niceness is not convenience. It is a method of community-building, a survival mechanism.

Para-Academia

Disability and mental illness narratives also use writing to expose vulnerability and build. Ann Cvetkovich, for example, uses her depression narrative to "depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action" and to argue that "these feelings, moods and sensibilities become sites of publicity and community" (2). For me, personal anxieties about health allowed me to connect with other people. I argue that a critically-informed approach to memoir can help "depathologize" feelings of inadequacy felt by many contingent teachers in higher education, while engaging in a more powerful critique of a neoliberal University system that exploits contingent labor to make up for losses in state funding. The cycling feelings of anticipation, stress, disappointment, guilt, stress, more anticipation, more stress, and still yet more disappointment are common to both graduate students and patients suffering from a chronic illness. Further, there are ideological parallels between those few, "lucky," scholars who land a tenure-track position and bad films about disability that depict disabled supercrips who overcome their illness.

Disability studies defines a supercrip as, in the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a disabled person "who amazes and inspires the viewer by performing feats that the nondisabled viewer cannot imagine doing" (60-1). Eli Clare explains that the problem with supercrip stories is that they

> never focus on the conditions that make it so difficult for people with Downs to have romantic partners, for blind people to have adventures, for disabled kids to play sports. I don't mean medical conditions. I mean lack of access, lack of employment, lack of education, lack of personal attendant services. I mean stereotypes and attitudes. I mean oppression. (2-3)

Similarly, we need to demystify the figure of the academic who lands the tenure-track job. I can't count how many tenure-track professors visited my classrooms to evaluate me when I was working off the tenure-track and said "[y]ou have nothing to worry about. You'll be a professor." Academia is still seen as a meritocracy, despite all of the writing and the numberless examples that say otherwise. When I accepted my job at Washington State University, I remember my graduate school colleagues telling me that I had become - in the eyes of the faculty - the "golden child," the "one who made it," and several graduate students started writing me for advice.

Supercrips play an important function in the ideology of ableism. First, they reassure those of us who are anxious about having a chronic disease. We can look at the film *A Beautiful Mind*, about the famous mathematician John Nash's struggle with schizophrenia, and see how he overcame his hallucinations and

went on to win the Nobel Prize. Even if we are diagnosed with schizophrenia, the film argues, we can overcome it and get back to normal life. We can read the comic *Daredevil*, in which the hero's blindness is effectively negated by his heightened touch and hearing, and by a radar sense that is often illustrated as being just like sight. The comic shows us that even blind people aren't really blind, or they have other powers that erase their disability and effectively make them normal.

Second, supercrips serve ableist ideology by demonizing disabilities that cannot be overcome. "You're so inspirational!" the ableist says to the person in the wheelchair, "I don't know how I would be able to thrive like you do. I think I'd just kill myself." Certainly, people with chronic illness and disability suffer from depression and many contemplate suicide. Nancy Mairs explains that every person imagines "a boundary of suffering beyond which, he or she is certain, life will no longer be worth living. I know that I do. I also know that my line, far from being scored in stone, has inched across the sands of my life. [...] Meanwhile, I go on being, now more than ever, the woman I once thought I never could be" (121-2). Inspirational statements and expectations of overcoming adversity have the effect of reinscribing impossibile requirements of normality. Christopher Reeve's public statements about his determination to walk again after suffering a spinal fracture in 1995 is analyzed by many disability scholars as belonging to the supercrip ideology. Robert McRuer cites both Reeve's 2000 Superbowl commercial, in which computer graphics are used to give the impression that Reeve has been cured and can walk; and an interview he gave to Diane Sawyer in which he identified the biggest problem facing disabled persons as "people who have been in a chair for a very long time because in order to survive psychologically they have had to accept 'Okay, I'm going to spend my life in that chair.'" To the contrary, McRuer argues that the biggest problem "is an able-bodied society systematically structured to privilege certain bodies and deny access to others," that sends messages that "either one can 'talk about miracles,' or one has given oneself up, in a sort of death-*like* move of resignation, to 'spending the rest of your life in a wheelchair'" (229). The supercrip reinforces the oppression of the differently abled by focusing attention on normality, rather than on imagining what kinds of life are possible in the wake of disability.

In an analagous fashion, the scholar who despite the challenges of budget cuts and the increasingly common casualization of the academic labor force lands a tenure-track position reinscribes the fantasies of normative academic life. Academic job applicants emulate academic supercrips in the hopes of recreating the same set of almost random circumstances that created their job: a department whose needs magically mirror their research interests; a college budget that is stable enough to offer a line to the department; a job ad that is written clearly enough to catch the attention of the job applicant; an application that catches the eye of someone who is, likely, reading hundreds of applications that look almost identical; a search that isn't halted midway through the year due to some unforeseen emergency; a search committee whose interests mirror those of the larger department; a department whose infighting is not acute enough to threaten the search; interviews and job-talks that don't get derailed by any of a number of reasons; and a negotiation process that satisfies the applicant, the department, and the college. Applications leave the hands of eager scholars with a mixture of fear, anticipation, and hope. The message of the academic supercrip is either you can dream about miraculously getting the tenure-track position and living your fantasy or you've totally given up, you're an embarrassment, and you'll probably live the rest of your life like the people who aren't in academia: boring, ideologically blind, even stupid.

Abandoning our fantasies and living our crippled lives takes courage, imagination, and embracing vulnerability as a mode of thinking and being. Disability studies critiques the body as a site of normativity and uses vulnerability to imagine new ways of being; the critique of normative tenure-track jobs must also imagine alternatives. One of those alternatives exists in the #altac movement. The para-academic movement is another. The thinkers emerging in the para-academic movement are not only embracing the edges of the academic profession, they are transforming their thinking as part of their scholarly practice. Para-academia is a unique response to an increasingly casualized work force made of scholars who refuse to give up their research program because they have less job security and teach more courses than their privileged colleagues. Para-academics often find inspiration in Collin Community College Professor Levi Bryant who, despite not receiving any credit to publish from his institution, has published three monographs and become a leading force in the object oriented ontology movement. The majority of

scholars in para-academia emerge from the speculative realist and object oriented ontology fields in Philosophy, and yet what interests me in this movement is not their philosophical reflection but the way their contingent status within the academy inspires their thinking and their scholarly output. Jamie Allen, in a panel discussion about "The Aesthetics of (Para)Academic Practice" in Basel argued that most para-academics have a "[w]eird relationship to academia" and exist as a "burgeoning community of DIY scholars, authors, writers, and philosophers who are aside from, reacting to, subjugating, and trying to tear down different aspects of academia in the traditional sense." Combining political and theoretical interventions on the level of scholarly communication, professional association, and even pedagogical work, para-academics construct spaces that specifically contest the increasingly corporate space of the University.

Paul Ennis claims that "[t]he University, the 'home' of the academic, is altering and we find more and more academics positioned outside the gates." While the University uses its gatekeeping power to police certain kinds of thought, "we can clone some of its functions" and take "some of that power [...] away" ("Discussions"). The Para-academic movement reminds us that the University structure is a site of power that enables certain work and discourages other forms. Yet, like the #altac movement, para-academics use social media to create new sites for scholarly exchange. Punctum books, for example, changes the traditional systems of peer review and dissemination of scholarly texts by publishing open access and print on demand. For Eileen Joy, one of Punctum's editors, the name is no accident. "[I]n the idioms of the middle ages," Joy explains, "[punctum] is simultaneously the moment [...] the *pricks* and *punctures* and *perforations* made by awls punching holes in vellum [...], and also the 'pointed instrument' that disturbs the studium, the *sting*, the *speck*, and the *cut*, into and out of which everything might fall or emerge, and by which we feel ourselves *pierced*" ("Disturbing"). The punctum, from a philosophical perspective, interrupts scholarly communication but also makes it possible - perhaps in a different, yet also more inclusive way.

Para-academics embrace new forms of pedagogical expression, apart from University accreditation and funding structures. The Public School, based in Los Angeles, uses a Drupal site to act as a hub where anyone with an account can propose a class, these proposals are reviewed by a group who organizes classes and sets meeting times. The Public School does not have a set curriculum. Students do not receive credit for the courses they take. There are no fees, and it has "no affiliation with the public school system." In many ways, like Punctum, the Public School responds to the desire by para-academics that education exist in ways that do not support the corporate interests of the increasingly private investors and grant-recipients who fund public projects. The public in Public School is not mediated by government control or funding structures and this creates new opportunities for its teachers and students to study philosophy and radical political theory. "The transactional nature of teaching and scholarship as it happens most commonly now [...] creates a whole host of misinformed assumptions," notes Jaime Allen. For Allen, the idea that learning is cumulative and that multiple advanced degrees mean something is one of these assumptions. [A]t the university level, what we learn, critique and interpret should not be and is not cumulative at all—it's cyclical, hermeneutic, impossible, continuous, ongoing" ("Discussions").

Surprisingly, there has been very little communication — either in terms of pedagogy, institutional changes, or scholarship — between the #altac and para-academic communities. This is unfortunate, since both can learn from the other. They both have vulnerabilities, despite what either group may claim in their work. Para-academics, as we've seen, have started developing a powerful set of critiques and visions for operating alongside or outside of traditional academic practice. However, they seem to have few solutions for graduates who want jobs. What, for example, separates The Public School from a face to face version of a MOOC, or even worse, a well-organized book club? Since, the organization has no accreditation and does not give out diplomas or credits, it's difficult to see what they provide except a community service for people who are curious about the world. If this is all the para-academics want to accomplish, then obviously there is little to my critique. However, if para-academics want to engage in a larger or more transformative movement of University systems, they would do well to study the ways #altacs have suggested to shape curriculum according to skills that can be used to gain employment outside of the educational sphere.

Further, while the #altac movement can be vulnerable to a Marxist critique for embracing some forms of the corporatization of the University, para-academic publishing remains tethered to traditionally academic forms. In her discussion of Punctum, Joy somewhat derogatorily labels Anvil Academic's dedication to post-monograph, born-digital publishing as "non-book." For Joy, this post-monograph publishing is symptomatic as it allows "institutional structures (whether corporate, academic, or even ideological) [...] determine in advance what is and isn't (supposedly) possible and what is (supposedly) necessary *now*." She also mentions the fact that Punctum is generally staffed with medievalists who have "some serious love of the book as a material object" ("Disturbing"). And while Joy and her staff are extremely open to new ideas as they emerge, it is clear that Punctum publishes certain kinds of books: speculative realist, medieval, and philosophical books make up the majority of their catalog. I am not arguing that Punctum is consciously repressing particular forms of thought, but instead calling for both authors submitting to Punctum and their editors to explore different kinds of scholarly topics and modalities. To what degree, in other words, are already entrenched University structures unconsciously guiding Punctum's publishing and editing decisions? What, for example, would a monograph from a business professor look like if published by Punctum? Or even more radically, what would Punctum do with a database, a digital archive, a film, or a GIS application?

All of this is just to say that building an academic body without institutional organs is difficult and takes time. Primarily, it takes a willingness to use our vulnerabilities to our advantage. Are you an adjunct lecturer and not paid for anything but the hours you spend in the classroom? Then, as Karen Gregory did, provide that information on your syllabus and refuse to respond to the title "professor" to educate your students about the plight of contingent workers in the University.[6] Do you want to engage in important scholarly debates but do not have the status of the tenure-track? Form your own communities and publish in open access journals, like para-academics do and show your colleagues how scholarly communication can happen outside the University. Gather your uncollected notes, restructure them as a collage of aphorisms and floating thoughts, and submit them to Punctum's "Dead Letter Office" imprint. Are you stuck within what seems an unending cycle of contingent jobs, your home covered in unpaid bills, and your skills as a graduate student seemingly wasted? Study the experiences of programmers like Patrick Murray-John, librarians like Amanda Watson, and administrators like Miranda Swanson in Bethany Nowviskie's *Alt-Academy* collection online. There are many routes beneath, around, through, within, and without the University. The trick is to build the one that works for you.

When experiencing hearing loss and chronic pain, one quickly learns that reality is simply not as important as what works. In one of our email conversations, at the height of my anxiety, Michael Chorost told me to "keep in mind that bodies tend to sort themselves out over time. Your ears are going through a lot of weirdness now, but the syndrome will run its course and you will stabilize somewhere." Bodies want to stabilize. This doesn't mean that they will look or be normative. But they will feel comfortable. Similarly, it's important to remember that you don't survive by recovering what one imagines to be normal. Trauma changes lives, and each of us should honor those changes. When describing the AIDS activists in *How to Survive a Plague,* director David France says "I think just about everybody who lived through [the AIDS crisis] is wounded, [...] It's especially true of the people who were on the medical front lines. Because the work they were doing was life and death." A *New York Times* article profiling France mentions that he knew he couldn't "save those that had fallen, but he at least thought he could honor them." None of us is unscarred by the changes occurring in higher education. If we are serious about intervening to make academia more equitable for workers and thinkers alike, we need to start learning from each other's vulnerabilities, while crafting – out of pain – the crip academics we never thought we could be.

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[6] In her syllabus, Gregory asks that [t]o ensure that we remain conscious of the adjunctification of CUNY, we ask that you do not call us 'Professor.' We are hired as adjunct lecturers and it is important that you remember that. You deserve to be taught by properly compensated professors whose full attention is to teaching and scholarship."

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