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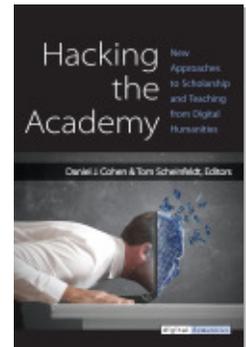
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The Absent Presence

A CONVERSATION

Brian Croxall and David Parry

Brian Croxall didn't have enough money to attend the annual convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 2009 in Philadelphia. He was supposed to give a talk at the meeting, but instead another attendee, Sheila Cavanagh, read his candid paper about his situation to a large audience. His plight sparked widespread discussion.

The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty
  —Brian Croxall

This year was to be my fourth year in a row attending MLA. I spoke in 2006, interviewed for jobs in 2007, spoke and interviewed in 2008, and had hoped to speak and interview for jobs this year as well. When the job interviews did not materialize, I made the difficult decision to not attend the convention given the financial realities of being an adjunct faculty member. I regretted not having the chance to speak—especially on a panel titled "Today's Teachers, Today's Students: Economics"—but the panel chair volunteered to deliver my paper in absentia.

I'm sorry that I can't be delivering these comments in person, and I thank Professor Cavanagh for her willingness to read them on my behalf. Hearing talks delivered by the person who did not write them is only slightly better than having to be the person who is reading a talk she didn't write, so I'll be brief. At the same time, however, I can think of no more appropriate way for me to give a talk in a panel titled "Today's Students, Today's Teachers: Economics" than in this manner.

After all, I'm not a tenure-track faculty member, and the truth of the matter is that I simply cannot afford to come to this year's MLA. I know that we as a profession are increasingly aware of the less than ideal condi-

tions under which contingent faculty members—and graduate students—labor while providing more than half of the instruction that undergraduates receive across the nation: a fact that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other publications have reported on frequently.[1] If we are talking about "today's teachers," then more of them look like me—at least in a professional sense—than look like the people who will be on the dais at the presidential address later on this evening. That means that most of the students in America are also taught by people that are like me. In a very real sense, 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.

Again, I'm not at the MLA this year because it's not economically feasible. I had hoped to be here for job interviews—as well as to speak as a member of this panel discussion. This was my third year on the job market, and I applied to every job in North America that I was even remotely qualified for: all forty-one of them. Unfortunately, I did not receive any interviews, despite having added two articles accepted by peer-reviewed journals, five new classes, and several new awards and honors to my curriculum vitae. According to my records, applying to those forty-one jobs cost me $257.54. I was prepared to pay the additional expenses of attending the MLA—$125 for registration, $279.20 for a plane ticket, approximately $180 for lodging with a roommate: a total of $584.20—out of pocket so that I could have a chance of getting one of those forty-one jobs. I was even luckier than most faculty—remember, most of today's faculty are contingent—in that my institution was willing to provide me with $200 support to attend conferences throughout the academic year. But once it became apparent that I wasn't going to be having any interviews, I could no longer justify the outlay of $400 out of a salary that puts me only $1,210 above the 2009 Federal poverty guidelines. (And yes, that means I do qualify for food stamps while working a full-time job as a professor!)

I can't imagine that I'm alone in this dilemma of not attending this year's convention due to finances and the anemic job market. After all, as the *New York Times* reported on December 17, 2009, the number of listings in the MLA's job information list was down 37 percent from 2008's numbers—the sharpest decline since MLA started tracking job ads in 1974. It's not like 2008 was a banner year, however. The listings a year ago were down 26 percent from what they had been in 2007.[2]

Landing a job in the professoriate has been difficult for well more than

this decade, but the recent economic crisis has necessitated—or allowed, if we're feeling cynical—administrators trimming budgets so that less and less tenure-track faculty are hired. What this means is that more and more contingent faculty are employed to teach the increasing number of students who are matriculating at the nation's universities. So . . . perhaps it's not that employment is going down for humanists with the PhD. Rather, it is sustainable employment that is evaporating. (I'm looking at you, California.) After all, the demand for contingent faculty labor will probably rise sharply as the number of students enrolling in colleges rises due to the nation's recent economic crisis. Since we can't expect other schools to be as generous as mine with travel funds to contingent faculty, there should be fewer and fewer faculty members at the MLA in the future because less and less of the nation's faculty will be able to afford to get here.

"But"—the administrators say—"the MLA is only a conference, one where people read papers at each other. What difference does it make whether you attend or not?" Such questions are of course misleading since it's not as if my department is willing to give me more money to travel to other conferences *instead* of the MLA. So the problem of not being able to afford to attend the MLA is really the problem of attending *any* conference, other than a local one. And attending conferences is critical for one's scholarship since it allows one to hear the latest research in one's field. I especially appreciate how large the MLA is since I can find opportunities to attend panels that represent the full 150 years of American literature that my research covers. Attending this conference—or others—keeps me abreast of the latest scholarship, and helps me produce scholarship that pushes the state of my fields forward. As one of today's teachers, attending conferences helps me be more prepared to teach today's students these new developments, preparing them to be more effective readers of literature, whether they are English or biostatistics majors. Moreover, it is at conferences that I am most likely to have the opportunity to meet with old and new colleagues whose work intersects most closely with my own. Schools only need so many Shakespeare scholars; not so the MLA! Yet attending conferences isn't just about seeing old friends; the relationships formed with colleagues at conferences again help us produce scholarship. For example, the panel that I spoke on last year has resulted in a book-length collaboration among the four panelists, none of whom had met previously. When the majority of faculty—who are, again, contingent faculty—cannot attend the MLA, or any other conference, it results in a

faculty that cannot advance; that does not, in other words, appear to be doing the things that would warrant their conversion to the tenure track. Our placement as contingent faculty quickly becomes a self-fulfilling event.

But having a faculty majority comprised of contingent faculty means a lot more than just conferences being less and less attended. In my case, it means that my students cannot easily meet with me for office hours since contingent faculty don't really have offices. It means that they do not get effective, personal mentoring because I have too many students. It means that I cannot give the small and frequent assignments that I believe teach them more than a "three-paper class" because I do not have time to grade ninety students' small and frequent assignments. It means that the courses they can take from me will not be updated as frequently as I think is ideal because I will be spending all of my spare time looking for more secure employment—or working a part-time job. In other words, when we shortchange (pun intended) today's teachers—the majority of us who are, finally and for the last time, contingent and not present at this year's MLA—we simultaneously shortchange today's students. And those students will be that much less likely to become literature professors in the future. Why should they? It's not currently a sustainable profession; but even more so, they will have had that many fewer chances to have those interactions with teachers that lead to today's students wanting to become tomorrow's teachers.

Be Online or Be Irrelevant:
Brian Croxall, the MLA, and Social Media
—*David Parry*

One of the much talked-about items at this year's MLA was Brian Croxall's paper, or nonpaper, titled, "The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty." I say nonpaper because Brian, who is currently on the job market and an adjunct faculty, didn't attend the MLA; instead, he published his paper to his own website. For several reasons, Brian's paper hit a nerve. Indeed the *Chronicle of Higher Education* picked up the story—a piece which for a few days was listed as the most popular story on the *Chronicle*'s website.[3] His paper became, arguably, the most talked-about paper of the convention.

In part, Brian's story is a story of the rise of social media and its influ-

ence. If you imagined asking all of the MLA attendees, not just the social-media enabled ones, what papers/talks/panels were influential, my guess is that Brian's might not make the list, or if it did, it wouldn't top the list. That is because most of the chatter about the paper was taking place online, not in the space of the MLA.

Let's be honest, at any given session you are lucky if you get over 50 attendees; assuming the panel Brian was supposed to be on was well attended, maybe 100 people actually heard his paper being read. But, the real influence of Brian's paper can't be measured this way. The real influence should be measured by how many people read his paper who didn't attend the MLA. According to Brian, views to his blog jumped 200–300 percent in the two days following his post; even being conservative one could guess that over 2,000 people performed more than a cursory glance at his paper. Brian tells me that in total, since the convention, there have probably been close to 5,000 unique views. 5,000 people: that is half the size of the convention.

So, if you asked all academics across the United States who were following the MLA—reading the *Chronicle,* following academic websites and blogs—what the most influential story out of MLA was, I think Brian's would have topped the list, easily. Most academics would perform serious acts of defilement to get a readership in the thousands, and Brian got it overnight.

Or, not really . . . Brian built that readership over the last three years.

As Amanda French argues on her blog, what social media affords us is the opportunity to amplify scholarly communication.[4] As she points out in her analysis (interestingly enough, Amanda was not at MLA, but she was still tweeting about the MLA during the conference), only 3 percent of the people at MLA were tweeting about it. Compare that to other conferences, even other academic ones, and this looks rather pathetic. Clearly MLAers have a long way to go in coming to terms with social media as a place for scholarly conversation.

What made Brian's paper so influential/successful is that Brian had already spent a great deal of time building network capital. He was one of the first people I followed on Twitter, and was one of the panelists at last year's 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. Besides having a substantial traditional CV, Brian has a lot of street cred in the digital humanities/social-networking/academic world. More than a lot of folks, and deservedly so. It isn't that

he just "plays" with all this social media, he actually contributes to the community of scholars who are using it, in ways that are recognized as meaningful and important.

In this regard, I couldn't disagree with Bitch Ph.D. more—someone with whom I often agree—when she claims on her blog that, "Professor Croxall is, if I may, a virtual nobody."[5]

Not true. Unlike Bitch Ph.D., he is not anonymous, or even pseudo-anonymous; his online identity and real-world identity are the same. He is far from a virtual nobody. Indeed, I would say he is one of the more prominent voices on matters digital and academia. He is clearly a "*virtual* somebody," and he has made himself a "virtual somebody" by being an active, productive, important, member of the "virtual academic community." If he is anything he is a "*real* nobody," but a "*virtual* somebody." In the digital world, network capital is the real coin of the realm, and Brian has a good bit of it, which when mustered and amplified through the network capital of others (Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Dan Cohen, Amanda French, Matt Gold, and Chuck Tryon—all of us tweeted about Brian's piece), brings him more audience members than he could ever really hope to get in one room at the MLA.

Therefore, Brian isn't a "virtual nobody," and he isn't a "potential somebody"—he is a scholar of the digital humanities—one that ought to be recognized. But here is the disconnect. Brian has a lot of coin in the realm of network capital, but this hasn't yielded any coin in the realm of brick-and-mortar institutions. If we were really seeing the rise of the digital humanities, someone like Brian wouldn't be without a job, and the fact that he published his paper online wouldn't be such an oddity; it would be standard practice. Instead, Brian's move seems, in the words of Bitch Ph.D., "all meta- and performative and shit"—when in fact it is what scholars should be doing. The fact that a prominent digital scholar like Brian doesn't even get one interview at the MLA means more than the economy is bad, that tenure-track jobs are not being offered, but rather that universities are still valuing the wrong stuff. They are looking for "real somebodies" instead of "virtual somebodies."

This is the brilliance of Brian's paper, content not withstanding: he made his material more relevant than all the other papers that weren't published, he engaged the outside—even if it was a paper that was a lot of inside baseball on the workings of the academy—because he opened his analysis and thinking to a wider audience, and as Amanda French and Bitch Ph.D. remark, did it with a real-time spin that enhanced the level

of content and delivery. The real influence should be measured by how many people read his paper who didn't attend the MLA. Or maybe, the real influence of his paper should be measured by how many nonacademics read his paper. Scholars need to be online or be irrelevant, because our future depends upon it, but more importantly, the future of how knowledge production and dissemination takes place in the broader culture will be determined by it.

Reflections on Going Viral at the MLA
  —Brian Croxall

Recently, I've had to come to grips with the fact that I've quite likely peaked. The paper that I was supposed to read at the 2009 Modern Language Association's convention went viral.

When I chose at the last minute not to attend the conference, given my lack of job interviews, insufficient travel funds, and the low salary of a visiting professor, I rewrote the paper that I had planned to present at a panel on "Today's Students, Today's Teachers: Economics" to talk about "The Absent Presence" of people who, like me, could not afford to attend conferences. I sent it to the panel chair to read on my behalf, posted it to my blog, and mentioned on Twitter that I had done so. The result was shocking. Within twenty-four hours, some 2,000 people had read my paper, spurred in no small part by an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a blog post by the anonymous academic blogger Bitch Ph.D., and countless mentions on Twitter and other blogs. By the end of the convention, my blog had received over 7,000 page views.

The scope of going viral became more apparent when I returned to campus a week later, for the start of the semester, to discover that every colleague I ran into had read the piece. Instead 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. So there it is: I've had my fifteen minutes.

It's a compelling narrative: A "virtual nobody," as Bitch Ph.D. put it, comes out of nowhere, takes one of the biggest academic conferences by storm, and gets noticed by thousands. He rides off triumphantly into the sunset and even gets to write a follow-up for the *Chronicle*. But if there's one thing that I learned in graduate school, it's that every narra-

tive can—and probably should, if you're looking to get published—get deconstructed. On reflection, it seems to me worthwhile to explore one thing that was said about my paper, and one thing that was repeatedly said to me about my paper.

First is the suggestion that my paper was, as the *Chronicle* put it, possibly the "most-talked-about presentation" at the conference. But let's be honest: The number of people talking about my paper in Philadelphia could only have been very small. After all, the chair informs me that there were approximately thirty-five people who attended the panel. Far more people certainly attended Catherine Porter's presidential address and discussed her call to reconsider the importance of translations and those who create them. My paper could not have been anything more than a blip on the conversational radar. It seems certain that practically no one at the real MLA was talking about my paper. How could they have? They hadn't heard it.

Instead, my paper and the response it generated happened at a virtual MLA. I'm not talking about a conference taking place in Second Life, but rather the real-time supplement to the physical conference that was conducted via social-media tools. The crowd presenting at the virtual MLA was considerably smaller than the approximately 7,400 scholars who came to Philadelphia. For example, Amanda French estimated that only 256 people used Twitter with the official #mla09 hashtag, based on data from the tweet-storage service TwapperKeeper. And while it's nearly impossible to tell how many people blogged about the MLA, one can reasonably assume that they were fewer than those using Twitter, since participation on Twitter takes less time than blogging.

But if the number of those participating in the virtual MLA was so much smaller, how did so many people read my paper? The difference is that it is only the number of people presenting at the virtual MLA that is small; the audience is much, much larger. The virtual MLA requires no registration fee or travel, and when you lower those bars via social media, anyone can attend. That includes not only people like me, who couldn't afford the real MLA, but also scholars from outside the field of literary studies. My website's views really started spiking when my paper was tweeted by two historians: Dan Cohen, Director of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and Jo Guldi, a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows. But it's not only people without funds to travel or academics outside the field who attend the virtual MLA; it really can be anyone. Curious onlookers who might

want to know what exactly it is that literature professors do can suddenly find out; it is that group that caused my paper to go viral.

The virtual MLA suggests a few things about humanities scholarship in the twenty-first century. First, scholarship will be freely accessible online. Online scholarship not only is the next logical step for publication, but also presents a way to address an expanding audience. The much-discussed crisis in the humanities has at its origin the question of what—if anything—the humanities are good for. It has been difficult to answer that question, in part because our scholarship is frequently inaccessible, published in small journals, or contained in subscription-only databases. Making our work freely accessible—whether in open-access journals or on our own websites—means that more people will be able to see what we are doing. While I'm not naive enough to think that access alone will make people see why the study of film or history matters, it seems certain that, as David Parry—an assistant professor of emerging media and communications at the University of Texas at Dallas—recently put it, humanities scholars must "be online or be irrelevant."

Second, scholarship in the age of the virtual MLA will become increasingly collaborative and participatory. We all know that collaboration in the humanities is made difficult by institutional pressures associated with tenure and promotion. Moving scholarship online lowers some other practical barriers to collaboration. Moreover, cooperation will not only be with our colleagues down the hall. We need to be ready to work with knowledgeable hobbyists—aka independent scholars—and to share credit with those partners. We may find that the focus of our work shifts a bit in response to engagement with people outside academia. And, again, we may find that what we as humanities scholars do will be better understood and valued.

Let me extract myself from the unlikely role of futurist and focus on what was said to me in the days following my paper's going viral. In blog comments, on Twitter, via e-mail messages, and even in real life, people repeatedly told me that they hoped the exposure I was receiving would lead to some new career opportunities for me. I naturally appreciated such wishes, and must confess to having thought something similar myself.

But upon further reflection, I think that such hopes—mine included—miss the point of my paper.

What caught people's attention was not so much my personal experience, but rather how it reflected that of an ever-increasing portion of today's faculty members. While I would certainly like to have more secure

employment, the conversion of just one person from contingent faculty to the tenure track will not change any of the conditions that prevented me and other members of the new faculty majority from attending the MLA conference. Naturally, almost everyone who wished me well would have expressed similar thoughts to the rest of the nation's non-tenure-track faculty members had they the venue to do so. I found myself wondering, then, if my paper really had put me in the position of an Everyman, as the *Chronicle* suggested. Were the calls for someone to do something for Brian Croxall reflective of a faint hope that saving Everyman could result in saving the entire profession?

As wonderful as it would be for the wasteland of academic career opportunities to be saved by the revivification of some Eliotic Adjunct King, it just can't work that way. The problems of contingent academic labor are systemic, and perhaps cannot be adequately addressed by a single department or even a university, let alone the blogosphere.

But one solution is to make sure that those who are applying to graduate school know very, very clearly what they are getting into. No one at my undergraduate alma mater told me in 2001 about the realities of the job market, and it certainly wasn't in the interest of the university that accepted me for graduate study to do so. If we humanists want to be humane, we ought to level with our undergraduates.

By chance, I just received an e-mail message from someone who attended my college and is interviewing as a candidate in my graduate department. She wanted to know what she could do to prepare. What did I do? I answered her questions as best I could. I also pointed her to several articles by Thomas H. Benton in the *Chronicle* that outline the risks of graduate school in the humanities, and I mentioned a paper by Brian Croxall. That guy may have peaked, but he made a good point.

Note

1. For example, Audrey Williams June, "Nearly Half of Undergraduate Courses Are Taught by Non-Tenure-Track Instructors," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 2008, http://chronicle.com/article/Non-Tenure-Track-Instructors/1380/.

2. Tamar Lewin, "At Colleges, Humanities Job Outlook Gets Bleaker," *New York Times*, December 18, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/18/education/18professor.html.

3. Jennifer Howard, "Missing in Action at the MLA: Today's Teachers of Today's Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 29, 2009, http://chronicle.com/article/Missing-in-Action-at-the-ML/63276/.

4. *Amandafrench.net*, "Make '10'; Louder, or, the Amplification of Scholarly Communication," blog entry by Amanda French, December 30, 2009, http://amandafrench.net/blog/2009/12/30/make-10-louder/.

5. *Bitch Ph.D.*, "Auld Lang Syne," December 29, 2009, http://bitchphd.blogspot.com/2009/12/auld-lang-syne.html.