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Manifesto for the Humanities

Smith, Sidonie Ann

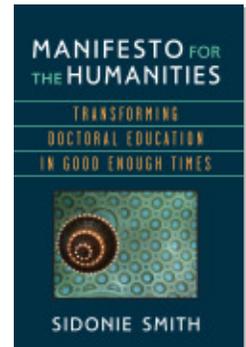
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The Upside of Change

As a conclusion to this section on posttraditional doctoral education in the humanities, I want to circle around to the troubles with higher education explored in Part I. I do so by foregrounding two potential benefits to transformation that will contribute to the future vitality of humanities programs and the validation of humanities faculty, and humanistic inquiry, more generally. These are the potential upsides of more fully diversifying the professoriate and shrinking the pool of ABDs and PhDs available for exploitation in non-tenure-track positions.

Diversifying the Humanities

As noted earlier, the overriding goal for faculty entrusted with educating future humanists is ensuring and sustaining excellence in doctoral education, and passion about its pleasures, commitments, and efficacies. That excellence is an effect of how doctoral education promotes and values intellectual excitement, analytical heft, depth of scholarly habits, imaginative elasticity, reach of influence, the flexible mobilization of scholarly voices crafted for multiple interlocutors. It is an effect of the prodigious set of skills doctoral students take with them onto the job market.

That excellence is necessarily an effect of diversity of questions and approaches. It is about attracting students with diverse lived experiences to the programs and breaking apart a social and intellectual milieu that reproduces procrustean models of professionalization. It is about valuing the potential diversity of the futures toward which it drives. It exists as a critique of the market value of utility by insisting that humanities have utility unaccounted for in the utility of the corporate imaginary, that the framework of utility begs the question about what professions are understood to have what kind of utility and for whom and for what. Doctoral education is key to addressing the higher education accessibility deficit here and abroad, and the key to ensuring a culture of intellectual curiosity, scholarly boldness, and pedagogical

innovation as cornerstone to evolving and building 21st-century knowledge institutions.

As Evan Watkins eloquently argued at a symposium at Michigan State University titled “Futures of the English PhD,” humanities graduate programs need to attract applicants not solely for the prestige they represent (that is, the universities they turn down) but for the diverse lived experiences, heritages, and knowledges they bring with them.¹ The former value overprivileges those who have learned the rudiments of doing research and thinking like a professor. It is deployed in admissions committees to make less risky calls. It reinforces, as Julie R. Posselt argues, the normativizing application of the concept of “fit” to candidate profiles.² The latter value impels admissions committees to seriously consider those candidates who may think outside the box, take risks, try different ways of approaching a research question, demand different theoretical frameworks; candidates who come from less elite universities and colleges, or whose route has taken them from community colleges to regional universities or small colleges; candidates with interesting work histories. The future of the humanities lies in the diverse range of faculty interests, angles of analysis, theoretical investments, and imaginative disruptions of fields; it lies in the diversity of the professoriate.

Doctoral programs in the humanities have long been challenged to attract and admit a diverse cohort of students. There is, of course, the issue of the pipeline for underrepresented minorities: not enough students of color imagine themselves as future professors of literatures and languages, philosophy, history. That is true, as well, for first-generation students. Academic leaders have been tackling the problem of pipeline with special summer programs designed to excite potential candidates about graduate study in the humanities and to model for them the kinds of historical, theoretical, and textual work that humanities scholars do. Valerie Lee at Ohio State University and Paula Krebs, formerly of Wheaton College, have been inspirational advocates for summer immersion opportunities. But pipeline initiatives can be only one strategy in a time when educational inequality is widening at the primary and secondary level; and the cost of higher education continues to impact accessibility and the high opportunity cost to students and their families in a years-long doctoral program that may also bring with it significant debt.

Another strategy for tackling this challenge is to open up the kinds of work students might pursue in their doctoral studies. Certainly, the robustness of ethnic and feminist studies, disability and queer studies, indigenous, global and postcolonial studies, and other emerging fields such as computational studies and the study of algorithmic cultures attracts students with diverse commitments and scholarly passions to doctoral study. That robustness signals openness to studies of marginalized subjects and communities,

to new theoretical approaches to historical fields, and to histories of knowledge production itself. To this end, being flexible about how students configure their dissertation project signals that faculty aren't interested in exercises in only one kind of knowledge paradigm, in only one way of demonstrating readiness for the professoriate.

Observations by students responding to an earlier draft of this manifesto stressed how critical the sense of flexible openness can be to doctoral students from underserved and marginalized communities. They spoke eloquently of how some students work hard to gain admission to elite schools, only to discover that many on campus don't believe they belong, only to experience the microaggressions of daily encounters. They commented that there are students who don't want the academy to alienate them from their families and communities, and the humanities to alienate them from certain community values and local knowledges. Savvy in the ways in which higher education is part of "the system" through which inequities are reproduced, they know that doctoral study doesn't just have to do with the kind of job one might get in the future but also with being disciplined into normative values.³ While introducing greater flexibility and more opportunity for innovation in a doctoral program may not address all the complex issues captured in this description of aspiration and everyday reality, it will shift values away from a one-model-fits-all ethic.

And there are more strategies. Designing programs that can be completed in five or six years, a recommendation of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study, encourages students concerned about opportunity costs to imagine a degree that won't require large loans and incur high debt. Offering more robust funding packages with significant fellowship support to offset the attraction of other disciplines would make the commitment to humanities doctoral education more feasible. Further diversifying the curriculum within humanities departments would signal commitment to attracting diverse faculty to the professoriate. Conceptualizing job descriptions that don't reproduce rigid notions of period and field and approach would signal openness to a diverse range of candidate profiles. And offering competitive salaries with start-up packages would seal commitment.

More variety of scholarly activities, products, and venues; more flexible program models, funding and curricular offerings; more collaborative sociality; and a more inclusive environment of commitment to a diverse future—the effects of these shifts would radically transform the climate and systems of support in humanities doctoral education, positioning programs to attract a more heterogeneous range of students. Expanding the diversity of experiential histories that students bring to programs would multiply and complicate the intellectual, affective, and social perspectives that energize the classroom,

the seminar table, the student lounge, the student interest group, and the offices of faculty. Doing so, graduate education contributes, however incrementally, to the project of educational justice.

There is another demographic challenge confronting the academic humanities; and it has to do with the demographics of those in the field of digital humanities. Many academic activists have been pressing to “transform DH,” by advancing queer, critical race, ethnic studies, and feminist theories, ethics, praxis, and projects within DH fields and DH communities; and by producing scholarship on the history of computational logics. As Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips note, activist scholars have illuminated the “less marketable histories of engagement with technology that have emerged from standpoints that critique the privileging of certain gendered, racialized, classed, able-bodied, Western-centric productions of knowledge.”⁴ They have “unpack[ed] the politics inherent in the force of the digital, the powers that shape the hardware and software that shape our scholarly work.”⁵ And increasingly, they are addressing the gendered and racialized makeup of the digital humanities community, calling for the advancement of white women and men and women of color in academic DH positions.

According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates for 2012, women are now earning just over 50% of humanities doctorates, though percentages are distributed asymmetrically across humanities disciplines.⁶ The balance here is to be desired, as is the gradually increasing number of women in the humanities who are reaching the rank of full professor. Women, however, remain disturbingly underrepresented in the field of the digital humanities, where the signature of belonging is facility in coding and easy familiarity with the languages and discourses of humanities computing. Indeed, in disciplines where the number of women exceeds the number of men, some might see the process of feminization taking hold, coinciding with the public discourse about the “softness” and “inutility” of humanities degrees. The digital humanities, it seems, is the masculine redoubt of the humanities, networked to those in mathematics and computer science, in computer architecture and software design.

Further, the digital humanities, as Tara McPherson has argued, is “so white”; and to understand why that is so, she explores how

certain modes of racial visibility and knowing coincide or dovetail with specific ways of organizing data: if digital computing underwrites today’s information economy and is the central technology of post–World War II America, these technologized ways of seeing and knowing took shape in a world also struggling with shifting knowledges about and representations of race.⁷

McPherson elaborates how racialized logics of the post-civil rights era and logics of computational technologies were imbricated in one another. In addition, knowledge systems projected through coding—hidden data, granularity, filters; modularization, standardization, and the simplification of complexity—paralleled the increasing specialization of humanistic scholarship since the 1960s—the compartmentalization of disciplines and subdisciplines, the routinization of critical projects, and the “patterned isolation” of “bureaucratic standardization.”⁸ Her call is for more work at the intersection of critical code and critical race studies, and for more familiarity with “code languages, operating systems, algorithmic thinking, and systems design”; in other words, for computational literacy, expanded ensembles of inquiry, and new kinds of graduate programs.

More flexible, hybrid, innovative options for pursuing a capstone project, more opportunities for collaboration, more attention to building competencies—such changes in doctoral programs would contribute to unsettling the digital humanities, by, for example, decolonizing the database and archive and expanding the demographic range of its communities of practice. Further, decolonizing the database and archive and expanding the demographic diversity of its community of practice would have an impact on another troubling feature of work in digital humanities fields. In “Toward a New Deal,” Bethany Nowwiskie observes that “imbalances in gender, race, class, and ethnicity among people working in tech-oriented humanities fields have arguably reinforced a digital archival focus on canonical texts and reified homogenous perspectives.”⁹ Again, this is a matter of consequence because it concerns diversity of the professoriate, of intellectual projects, and of the climate in which work gains validation.

Intervening in the Economics of Contingency

As noted earlier, the trend to shift teaching load from tenured and tenure-track faculty to contingent faculty is decades old, and by now a prominent feature of the restructuring of the professoriate as costs have skyrocketed, public funding diminished, and facilities expanded. To reprise: the American Association of University Professors reports that “non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for 76 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education”; and across institutions of higher education in the United States “more than 50% of all faculty hold part-time appointments.”¹⁰ Across higher education institutions there are large numbers of adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty in humanities units, especially in English and other language departments, where people off the tenure track, and often in contingent positions, provide service courses for the general educa-

tion curriculum. A large percentage is employed in part-time positions without adequate compensation, benefits, and working conditions. This dramatic imbalance in the distribution of teaching across tenure-track faculty and non-tenure-track faculty is an effect of the intensification of the research mandate across large universities and even small liberal arts colleges starting in the 1970s; the economic constraints on institutions increasing the number of students they serve as state support diminishes; and the increasingly corporate strategies for gaining budget savings and efficiencies. It depends on the available pool of MAs and PhDs for whom the prospect for tenure-track positions remains grim, and, as Marc Bousquet argues, the opportunistic exploitation of graduate student and lecturer labor by universities and colleges looking to find faculty for service courses.¹¹

The data on graduate education tell a haunting story of the link between the continuing casualization of the academic workforce and the extended time-to-degree of eight and more years for many. There is the radically differential funding support for students across different institutions; there is the growth in debt levels, especially for students of color; and there is the diminished prospects for a tenure-track position upon completion. The best-funded doctoral students in the elite schools often move through programs in a timely manner because of funding packages made up of fellowships rather than teaching assistantships. They take up a disproportionately high share of the tenure-track positions at elite schools and the flagship state universities.¹²

The large number of students whose support requires teaching face the daunting task of preparing themselves to be successful in the classroom and meeting the high demands of classroom teaching. Yes, teaching experience is a critical component of doctoral education; and these students gain invaluable experience in the classroom. But without fellowship support along the way, the time to completion can stretch out six or seven or eight or more years. Moreover, the institutional reliance on teaching assistants in the classroom contributes to the casualization of the academic labor force: administrators maintain their reliance on non-tenure-track positions, and the rise in the ratio of non-tenure-track faculty adversely impacts the job situation doctoral students enter.

Addressing the significant cascading effects of this situation requires a multipronged set of strategies. One strategy for improving the conditions of non-tenure-track faculty has been the route of unionization. At Michigan, lecturers voted to unionize in 2003. Union contracts here have eventuated in better working conditions, a clear pathway to multiple-year contracts, an improved set of procedures for evaluating and rewarding excellence in the lecturer ranks, and a minimum per course threshold. Other strategies are locally organized—the gradual shift of some non-tenure-track positions to tenure-

track ones; or demands by non-tenure-track faculty for improved working conditions, adequate office space and access, institutional support for professional development, multiple-year contracts, and living wages.

As noted in Part I, adjunct organizations, the New Faculty Majority, the Coalition for Contingent Academic Labor, the Adjunct Action Network, and other activists have joined in a national campaign to bring the conditions of contingent faculty to the broader public and to press for more fairness in academic compensation. Adjuncts testified before Congress on the exploitative conditions under which this growing sector of university faculty work; they are unionizing; and they are producing scholarship on the effects of the insecure conditions that characterize the everyday life of non-tenure-track faculty in the academy.¹³ And professional organizations in the humanities have joined together in the Coalition on the Academic Workforce to advocate for change in the balance of non-tenure-track and tenured/tenure-track faculty and produced invaluable studies on the makeup of the faculty and on part-time faculty members.¹⁴

Another strategy for addressing the exploitation of contingent faculty is presented in this manifesto and its plan for envisioning a 21st century graduate education. A percentage, though not the majority, of non-tenure-track faculty are ABDs, and PhDs seeking tenure-track appointment. Expanding forms of the dissertation and opportunities for exploring alternative career paths will impact the current imbalance in the academic workforce. Introducing alternative forms of the dissertation and weaning programs off the proto-monograph as the only indicator of promise, readiness, and dedication to scholarly work will be one contributor to decreasing time-to-degree and eliminating time-to-attrition. Arguably, enabling alternative dissertation options may eventuate in a shorter time-to-degree, say five to six years, which could mean that doctoral students would not be forced by financial exigency to seek part-time teaching as they linger on to complete a monograph dissertation beyond the fifth or sixth year.

In sum, looking forward to a 21st century doctoral education, programs are likely to attract more diverse cohorts. Incorporating opportunities for doctoral students to think more broadly about career paths ahead, and to gain a broad repertoire of skills and experiences, programs prepare doctoral students to imagine and pursue positions outside as well as inside the academy. Those who advance to alternative positions in the academy and careers outside the academy thus become unavailable for recruitment into low-wage positions in higher education. Those who advance to tenure-track positions benefit from what David M. Ball, William Gleason, and Nancy J. Peterson term an “expanded conception of professionalization.” Through such opportunities, they opine, graduates will become “cognizant of the changing face

of the profession, the threats to it, and the skills they possess both within and beyond higher education” and thus will become “more forceful critics of the systemic structures they inherit.”¹⁵ In other words, future faculty will be better prepared to advocate within the academy for greater diversity, more capacious portfolios of scholarly work and pedagogical impact, and higher wages and better benefits for non-tenure-track faculty.