The Unpopular Profession?

Graduate Studies in the Humanities and the Genre of the ‘Thesis Hatement’

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‘Don't do it. Just don't! [...] Graduation school lasts at least six years and will ruin your life in a very real way’. This is the bottom line of a 2013 article by Rebecca Schuman in the online newspaper slate.com. Noting that she is not the first to issue this warning, Schuman adds: ‘well-meaning academics have already attempted to warn you, the best-known screed in this subgenre being William Pannapacker’s “Graduate School in the Humanities? Just Don’t Go”. But this convinced no one. It certainly didn't convince me!’ Looking back, she explains: ‘In 2005 when I began my own Ph.D., I should have known better, but I didn’t. Now that you know better, will you listen?’

At the time, Schuman’s piece attracted considerable attention, not least from people procrastinating away in front of their computers while writing on or researching for their own Ph.D. theses. It quickly garnered Facebook likes and shares (over 38,000 to date), it invited comments on slate.com (over 1,800 by now), it was shared, tweeted, and retweeted, and it was responded to in blog posts and other articles. Writing about Schuman’s text in The New Yorker, Joshua Rothman remarks that the responses were so multiple that it was ‘as though a virtual symposium [had] been convened’. Looking at the social media interaction, however, one could observe that, ironically, Schuman’s message was ‘liked’ by exactly those people who had reason to dislike it; or, more precisely, that the people most vigorously engaging with it through likes, shares, and comments were precisely those people who, according to the text, most emphatically ignored its content: practicing graduate students, who read the text, shared it, and then continued to work on their Ph.D. The social media circulation thus suggests that the text’s audience did not read the article as intended, that they did not take the advice to turn one’s back to academia, and it thus underscores the point that Schuman’s article self-reflexively makes with regard to other, similar texts against graduate school: they ‘[convince] no one’. The tension between the text’s decidedly, self-avowedly unpopular message and its mass-circulation—a tension between the texts self-proclaimed meaning and its pragmatic effect—thus parallels the contradiction Schuman herself
openly performs when she says that warning people against going to grad school most likely is a futile task—in the very moment of engaging in exactly this task.

These interlocking moments of contradiction, present in Schuman’s essay as well as in other, similar texts, mark a particular paradox of un/popularity that warrants further exploration. Going to graduate school arguably is an unpopular life decision in several senses of the word: it is a decision that only comparatively few students will make, an elite decision, and it is one that is often emphatically and ostentatiously disliked. When asked, graduate students will quickly speak of the hardships of graduate school, not of the pleasures of learning and of grad school life. Yet, according to the logic of the texts by Schuman, Pannapacker, and others, getting a Ph.D. remains too popular a decision. Indeed, their texts work hard to tell people that they should like it even less, that even fewer people should do it, that it should be even more unpopular. These texts, in their circulation and in the images, stereotypes, and sentiments they invoke, constitute a popular genre advocating for the unpopularity of the humanities Ph.D.; clearly, they are shaped by complex and contradictory affective dynamics.

This paper will focus on these conflicted affective dynamics to argue that they are indicative of the role the humanities play in ‘Western’ society more broadly. My argument will proceed in four larger steps. I will first present Schuman’s ‘Thesis Hatement’ in greater detail and will contextualize it with regard to the larger body of similar texts it is representative of, suggesting that they constitute a particularly precarious form of (mis)communication marked by irony and hyperbole. As part of my discussion of this genre of writing, I will, secondly, provide a brief discussion of the politics of these texts, arguing that they engage in conflicted and contradictory discussions of labor, class, income, and academia. In a third step, I will then trace these contradictions on a textual level. To do so, I will attend to the somewhat limited set of metaphors this genre of writing typically employs in the attempt to express and come to terms with a presumed popularity paradox: if they convince no one, if they are advice literature that does not give advice to be followed, they have a particularly insincere, tropical quality, and this quality gets expressed and exercised in the tropes they use; attending to these tropes will thus help unfold the contradictions they negotiate. In a final section, I will look at the larger textual performance of thesis hatements to discuss in how far and how exactly these texts undermine their own presumed project. Thesis hatements, I will thus show, are a deeply conflicted genre. They do not mean what they say, they use metaphors to talk about this dynamic without talking about it, and they speak about
conflicted social constellations. As texts about the academy, they are indicative of the conflicted role the humanities play in contemporary US society.

1 Thesis Hatements as Genre

Rebecca Schuman’s ‘Thesis Hatement’ is part of a larger body of texts that all advise students against going to grad school, and this body of texts, in turn, ties in to larger discourses on the subject position of the graduate student, on the university, and on education. Accordingly, I will briefly describe Schuman’s piece and discuss how both its content and its particular sardonic tone connect it to larger textual environments.

Rebecca Schuman’s ‘Thesis Hatement’ is a strange product all the way down from the two titles it bears, both of which already have a distant ring of (self-)ironizing mockery: one is ‘There are no academic jobs and getting a Ph.D. will make you into a horrible person: A jeremiad’, and the other is ‘Thesis Hatement: Getting a literature Ph.D. will turn you into an emotional trainwreck, not a professor’. The text describes Schuman’s frustration at not getting a tenured position after completing her Ph.D. in German, a frustration that, she diagnoses, stems not least from the way in which academia has conditioned her to regard all non-academic work as inferior. Throughout the text, Schuman laments the exploitative, damaging environment of academia, the way in which she was ‘broken down and reconfigured in the image of the academy’, and she concludes that this stole her years of her life and did not set her up for any kind of reward but only for disappointment and low-income adjunct positions. The text is organized around Kafka’s ‘A Little Fable’, the story of a mouse that discovers that its path is leading to a trap and, standing in front of the trap, is advised by a cat behind it to ‘only change the direction’. She uses the fable to suggest that her current predicament is not the result of a recent decision of hers, but that she had understood far too late that she had been ‘walking cat food’ all along. Surprisingly, then, turning around is exactly the advice that Schuman presents to her intended audience of prospective and current graduate students at the beginning and end of her essay, thus underlining that her text, presented as a piece of advice, is actually not that.

In its (self-)deprecating, semi-playful disdain for the humanities education, ‘Thesis Hatement’ is representative of a larger ecosystem of texts all denouncing going to grad school as a bad life decision and all painting graduate education, the Ph.D. degree, and the humanities as corrosive to a happy life. This corpus of texts can be defined narrowly, covering the
“don’t go” advice market’ alone (Cottom), a segment or sub-genre I will refer to as ‘thesis hatements’ from hereon, or it can be understood more broadly, covering a larger body of texts portraying graduate education with a particular ironic, sardonic twist and thus echoing (and propagating) the ambivalent feelings American culture holds toward higher education and intellectualism. Such texts take many different forms across various media, often mockingly playing with clichés of what the typical graduate student is like and often foregrounding a distinct, semi-ironic pathos of suffering. Typically, they present graduate students as such an overdrawn spectacle of suffering, poverty, self-exploitation, and nerdiness, that it is impossible to not read their disdain as partly a caricature that at once invokes and mocks a set motif of US pop-cultural lore. To name just some examples: there is a grad student Barbie, complete with ‘black circles under her delightfully bloodshot eyes’, there is a famous Simpsons clip where Marge admonishes her son: ‘Bart, don’t make fun of grad students, they just made bad life choices’, and there is the well-known series of Ph.D. comics, which was also made into a movie. But there is also ‘So you Want to Get a PhD in the Humanities’, a viral Youtube clip about a professor destroying a young grad student’s illusions about academia, which more squarely falls into the segment of thesis hatements. The more serious of these texts, however, emanate from a US university context, they are published in The Chronicle of Higher Education or in Inside Higher Ed, and they address their audience with the gesture of offering well-meaning, serious advice—advice, of course, not to go to grad school.

Thesis hatements, those pieces of academic advice literature that tell students not to pursue a doctoral degree, thus participate in a larger and deeply ambivalent discourse about what it means to be a graduate student in the humanities and about what the humanities are. As a sub-genre, they share in how they warn students against pursuing a Ph.D. or an academic career more generally. Most typically, this warning comes from someone who has ‘made it’, someone who has tenure and who warns young students that getting tenure is nearly impossible, especially now. The most famous, most canonical of these is Thomas H. Benton’s ‘now-classic article’ (Cook 30) ‘Just Don’t Go’. With a tenured person explaining the impossibility of ever getting tenure, one can immediately see how this is a dysfunctional and in itself contradictory act of communication that sets up its audience for a significant double-bind: it tells readers that tenure is near impossible to get, but it suggests that knowing and ignoring this is part of getting tenure in the end. However, there are also thesis hatements by people who do not have tenure, who have left academia (or at least have given up the
quest for tenure) and who are now warning others to enter into it, their bitterness, again, often complicating their message. Rebecca Schuman's ‘Thesis Hatement’ is a representative of this type.\textsuperscript{8} In either case, already in terms of authorship, thesis hatements are marked by a particular affective double-bind, and this double-bind, that I will trace in the next three sections as well, sits at the heart of how they negotiate the un/popularity of the humanities Ph.D.

2 The Politics of Thesis Hatements

As a body of writing, thesis hatements have a political quality that resides both inside and outside the academy: most immediately, they provide an arena to discuss changes to the job market that are particularly poignant in academia but that impact society at large. At the same time, they allow for and engage in displaced conversations about class in US society, most visibly so by discussing the relationship between income, education, habitus, and identity. Lastly, thesis hatements are about the role of higher education in US society, and in how they position the value of education they come with a politics of their own that is intimately tied to the social role both of the university as an institution and of the humanities as a particular configuration of practices and knowledge. These three different sets of politics first and foremost focus on a US cultural context, but some of their aspects travel widely and find resonance in other national (academic) cultures, their mobility giving evidence both of the transnational compatibility of what it means to be an academic and of the global(ized) reach of the neoliberal changes of the university they respond to.\textsuperscript{9} Accordingly, I will use this section to outline these three dimensions of the politics of thesis hatements.\textsuperscript{10}

First and foremost, thesis hatements are a response to a particular, ongoing reconfiguration of the job market in US higher education. As such, they speak of the decline of tenured, permanent positions and of the rise of low-income, no-benefits, non-permanent teaching jobs. At the core of each thesis hatement thus stands the realization, often positioned as a painfully honest moment of truth-telling, that the level of education and the intellectual capabilities of Ph.D. students will not end up giving them a reasonable chance at a tenured position—simply because there are fewer and fewer such positions. In this sense, thesis hatements speak of two different, interconnected, and abusive labor markets: one, the adjunct market that most graduate students, despite having spent years and years on their degree, will end up working on, employed, paid, and valued far
below their qualification. Two, the economic situation of graduate students during their studies: they delay their entrance into the job market, delay their (potential, private sector) careers, fail to build retirement funds, and often provide underpaid teaching labor to their university, all as part of an investment in their own future that, due to the decline of tenure, for the vast majority of them will never pay off.\textsuperscript{11} Read thus as part of a conversation on the defunding of the humanities, on the reconfiguration of teaching, and on the need for a realistic assessment of what that means for Ph.D. students, thesis hatemets serve a valid double function: they warn students of these two abusive labor markets, and they constitute a public discourse on these developments of the academic labor market.

In more abstract terms, however, thesis hatemets are discussions of class. More specifically, they attempt to negotiate the relationship between income, wealth, social capital, and lifestyle/habitus, a configuration that is particularly murky in academia.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, if William Pannapacker can ‘only recommend graduate school in the humanities—and, increasingly, the social sciences and sciences—if you are independently wealthy’, the particular, scandalous quality of his point to his audience lies in how it associates the humanities with a wealthy class position: doing a Ph.D., in this perspective, is not ‘legitimated’ as a career choice by the prospect of earning money; it is a leisure activity for the wealthy. It is not something you do to earn more, it is something you do if you have enough money to not worry about money at all.\textsuperscript{13} This concern about the relationship between income, class, and education is even more pronounced in the particular imagery Larry Cebula evokes in his advice piece not to go to grad school: he contrasts, as two alternative roads to a fulfilled life, the (plausible, attainable) income of ‘the manager of a Hooters’ and the (implausible, unattainable) life of a ‘happy mid-career faculty member who biked to work yesterday and met you in her sunny office with the pictures of her European vacation on the wall’. By setting up the contrast like this, with the barely decent Hooters on one end and biking and European holidays on the other, Cebula makes clear that there are two (upper-)middle class identities at stake: one based on income, an income that is solid enough to make up for the low social capital of operating a Hooters restaurant, and one based on habitus.\textsuperscript{14}

The contrast, however, not only speaks about two different ways of marking class that students might choose for their life, it highlights the contradictory class configuration of being a graduate student in the first place: in terms of social capital, work ethic, habitus, and self-image, graduate students clearly align with an upper middle-class position (and part of this habitus precisely is not being in it for the money). In terms of income, most
often they do not. In terms of their daily work, research and teaching, they perform work that is highly valued, at least discursively, by society. In terms of the income this work earns them, they do not. Set against the background of the particularly unclear class designations in academia, thesis hatements thus engage a doubly contradictory class discourse: society’s feelings toward graduate students are contradictory, and the graduate students’ own situation, with the disparity between social and economic capital is, too.

Lastly, and in addition to the social issues they speak of, thesis hatements also in themselves pursue a politics of sorts. The politics of these texts and their circulation reside in how they individualize the social problems of graduate education and the adjunct market, how they depoliticize the social role of the university and the humanities, and how they thus participate in a project of delegitimizing the humanities (in the sense in which the humanities have claimed legitimacy since the 1970s). These politics begin with thesis hatements’ generic move of telling students not to pursue a degree. As Andrew Kalaidjian points out, this advice constitutes a form of ‘opting out of the conversation’, and it prevents a more ‘sustained critique of the state of intellectual labor as a problem of modernity and a cause for social activism in its own right’. Telling graduate students to ‘Just Don’t Go’, in other words, foregrounds a private ‘solution’ to something that could and should be treated as a social problem instead. Indeed, Paul Cook makes a more fundamental point about the larger body of academic advice literature (under which he subsumes thesis hatements) and about the disciplinary and disciplining work it does: these texts not only ‘delegitim[ize] the possibility of large-scale change’ (30), and they not only preempt any perspective that imagines the university as a starting point of social change. Instead, academic advice literature, as it is in circulation right now, ‘constructs, constrains, narrows, and normalizes the way graduate students think of themselves as individuals constantly in need of introspective work on themselves in order to remain [...] employable’ (Cook 25). It ‘promotes a „turning inward“ that has a way of deflecting attention away from social projects that require collective action’ (Cook 25).15 There is, in other words, a double impulse toward depoliticization here: thesis hatements tell graduate students that their economic situation is a private, not a social problem, and they, more generally, depoliticize the humanities/the university as a site of introspection rather than of social change. Schuman’s ‘Thesis Hatement’, then, as Tressie McMillan Cottom writes, may be ‘on the far right extreme of the ‘don’t go!’ advice market, but it is indicative of what that advice entails. It’s some combination of an assessment of the academic labor market, the odds of getting a tenure-track appointment, the high cost of graduate
school, and the emotional toil’. It is in this particular configuration that the depoliticizing politics of thesis hatements as a genre lie.

As a genre, thesis hatements thus not only speak about exploitative labor markets, about the relationship between income, habitus, and class, but they have a politics of their own, more often than not delegitimizing the study of the humanities as neither good for one’s wallet nor for one’s self. They use the academy as a setting in which to discuss the contradiction between how US society values intellectual work and how it pays it, between what counts for upper middle class and what constitutes an upper-middle-class income, and they constitute an attempt at understanding (and regulating) what the academy is and what the humanities are. While this political dimension of thesis hatements, or of academic advice literature more generally, has received some scholarly attention, it is substantially complicated by the texts’ internal contradictions.

3 Metaphors and the Popularity Paradox

A particular and in the context of this essay particularly telling moment of contradiction in Rebecca Schuman’s ‘Thesis Hatement’ is her observation that previous similar texts had failed to convince their readers. Notably, she is not the only one to make that observation, and there is even one text explicitly about this aspect: Nate Kreuter’s meta-article in Inside Higher Education, an ‘Essay on why Graduate Students Ignore Warnings about the Job Market’. Kreuter argues that, by the time they enter graduate school, students are well-conditioned to ignore warnings that a task might be difficult. Pursuing a graduate career, to him, has much to do not simply with over-estimating one’s own abilities (though this might be a factor), but with overestimating the role that merit plays in academia and with underestimating the role of luck, a point that I will come back to later. While such explicit meta-awareness is rare, most thesis hatements do visibly struggle to come to terms with the fact that students keep pursuing a degree against what, in their logic, would be the students’ best interest. Rather than using this as a vantage point to question their own logic, thesis hatements perceive the alleged popularity of the Ph.D. degree as paradoxical and in need of explanation. Most often, this explanation comes in the form of the limited sets of metaphors these texts employ.

Not surprisingly, the first set of such metaphors is financial in nature. Typically, it frames graduate school as either a form of lottery, with the odds so insane that one should not gamble on ever getting tenure (or any
other job adequate to years and years of working on a Ph.D.), or it tries to cast academia as a form of Ponzi scheme, an economy that works only as long as enough gullible people keep buying in at the bottom. While the comparison does not work out on all levels, its central allegation, of course, is plausible enough to do the work: it takes for granted that students perceive graduate school as an economic decision, an investment into a particular socio-economic future. It then proceeds to shock its audience by maintaining the larger framework—graduate school as an investment—while simultaneously shifting a metaphor to that of ‘unreasonable’ investments, investments that are almost guaranteed not to pay off financially. Not surprisingly, an article in *The Economist* (which was published without an author designation in the Christmas edition 2010 under the title ‘The Disposable Academic’) puts forth the Ponzi scheme, whereas the lottery paradigm finds use, among others, in Benton’s ‘Just Don’t Go’. In both cases, the popularity of graduate school, its ability to attract students despite being a bad decision financially, is cast as a cognitive mistake within a framework of investment and return, thus validating the question of financial return as a particularly legitimate frame of reference.

The second dominant set of metaphors pathologizes graduate school as either a form of addiction or as a cult. In both cases, the texts note a form of dependency, an addictive quality of academia that, much like substance abuse or membership in a cult, leads people to disregard their normal lives, their non-academic friends, and their self interest. If people manage to (or try to) leave academia, they accordingly need to detox, to rediscover a meaning in things nonacademic, to readjust their values and discover a new sense in life. In fact, many post-academia blogs trace this particular form of recovery. Poignant examples of this paradigm of pathology would be Thomas H. Benton’s much-cited ‘Is Graduate School a Cult?’ published in the *Chronicle* in 2004, and a blog, published anonymously, under the title *Chronicles of a Recovering Academic*. Schuman, in her text, likens academia to cigarettes: highly addictive, highly carcinogenic, and ultimately lethal to almost all. When written in a first-person perspective, texts operating within this tropical paradigm often read like autobiographical illness narratives. They tell stories of illness, of survival, and of recovery, sometimes even offering a hint of ‘survivor guilt’.

The third major metaphoric paradigm attempts to rationalize the presumably irrational decision for graduate school by portraying it as a mistaken decision of the heart. Operating the metaphor of a bad relationship, these texts portray graduate students as taking all kinds of abuse—long working hours, blows to their self-esteem, and low income (at best)—with very
little reward. Looking at the situation this way, graduate students seem to be masochistically attracted by the bad treatment they receive from their partner, academia. And no matter the pain, no matter the disappointment, they keep going back. What to outsiders looks like abuse apparently seems to them like an emotionally gratifying relationship, and this blindness to the abusive nature is at the core of this third metaphor. As one blog post, responding to Schuman’s article, put it: ‘We cut the same heartbreaking figure as a woman who has become attached to a cold man, sacrificing more and more to win his love, willfully ignoring signs of his indifference because the alternative has become too terrifying to contemplate’ (‘In Valley and in Plain’). Indeed, as a metaphor, love does particularly interesting work. As, once again, William Pannapacker aka Thomas H. Benton observes, linking ‘work’ and ‘love’ is characteristic of particular sectors of the job market, and the rhetoric of love typically ‘supports the transfer of resources from one group to another, typically from women to men, from minority to majority’. Love, in other words, is a highly gendered and gendering metaphor, typically reserved for sectors that are marked by economic exploitation. At the same time, it does describe a manifest and positive experience. As Benton explains, people often stay in graduate school because they perceive the ‘so-called bohemian lifestyle’, the thrill of discovering new knowledge, the conversations, the mentoring, and even the focus on immaterial gain as a whiff of a good life. In fact, Benton’s piece is a particularly telling example of the ‘ambiguous meaning’ (Pannapacker) of love, and of how the feeling comes back even in the process of writing about it critically.

All of these metaphors are similar in that they try to explain why graduate students cannot be swayed away from academia. Implying a particular understanding of why people should or should not pursue an academic career, one that is rooted in individual, economic gain, they suggest that it would be in the students’ best interest if they simply quit. Not quitting, in this logic, is a weakness, a sign of impaired agency. In other words, these metaphors try to resolve the presumed and presumably unjustified popularity of the Ph.D. degree by reading graduate students as mistaken, intellectually or emotionally, and in need of treatment, psychological or intellectual, so that they can make a better decision for themselves. Notably, in using (a limited set of) metaphors, these texts attempt a ‘tropical’ solution to the problem they have as texts. Giving advice that ‘convince[s] no one’ (Schuman), struggling, in other words, with a disconnect between their textual project and their textual effect, between denotation and pragmatics, these texts use metaphors of mistaken self-perception to explain this very failure.
The Pragmatics of Unpopularity

In this last section, I want to use a different angle to speak about this disconnect between thesis hatements’ textual project and their textual effect and about the discrepancy between graduate students’ presumed unhappiness, the presumably mistaken quality of their life decision, and the alleged popularity of the Ph.D. in the humanities. To do so, I will look even more closely at the discrepancy between what ‘thesis hatements’ say—‘Don’t do it’—and the effect they have—‘they convince no one’. This discrepancy between denotation and pragmatic effect, this textual schism, is crucial to understanding the complex and contradictory affective dynamics at stake, dynamics that inform not only this genre but also the cultural meanings of academia as a social institution. Accordingly, I want to use the next few paragraphs to explore moments in which these texts end up being affirmative of the Ph.D. in the very moment in which they claim to reject it.

The first (self-inflicted) challenge to the argumentative effectiveness of thesis hatements lies in the straw man nature of the argument they set up: their graduate students are usually ridiculously naïve. In Schuman’s text, this dynamic comes to the fore in the first paragraphs already: ‘Who wouldn’t want a job where you only have to work five hours a week, you get summers off, your whole job is reading and talking about books, and you can never be fired? Such is the enviable life of the tenured college literature professor, and all you have to do to get it is earn a Ph.D. So perhaps you, literature lover, are considering pursuing this path’. Clearly, no graduate student will actually think that this is what a professorship is like. The effect of disillusionment, accordingly, does not happen, because the reader does not feel addressed. Instead, the text presents a foil of particularly naïve students that, ultimately, do not deserve success because what they are after is a utopian illusion to begin with. I will come back to this straw man argument below. In any case, it marks a first instance in which the textual work of a thesis hatement defies its presumed pragmatic purpose. If thesis hatements project such ridiculously naïve implied readers, they cannot meaningfully convince their actual audience and instead open up a subject position from which to look down at such naïveté.

A similar yet slightly more complex dynamic can be traced via genre: Schuman’s text self-identifies as ‘a jeremiad’, and many commentators agree that this is exactly what it is. This designation draws attention to a form of textual performance whose pragmatics has been analyzed prominently by Perry Miller in his seminal ‘Errand into the Wilderness’. Regardless of
whether Schuman's text is a jeremiad, strictly speaking, Miller's observations hold for thesis hatements as much as for the jeremiad:

If you read them all through, the total effect, curiously enough, is not at all depressing: you come to the paradoxical realization that they do not bespeak a despairing frame of mind. There is something of a ritualistic incantation about them; [...] in [the realm] of psychology they are purgations of soul; they do not discourage but actually encourage the community to persist in its heinous conduct. The exhortation to a reformation which never materializes serves as a token payment upon the obligation, and so liberates the debtors. (11)

For their authors and, more importantly, for their readers, thesis hatements might indeed constitute 'purgations of the soul'. If they 'convince no one', this might be because their purpose is not to trigger actual 'reformation'—quitting academia, quitting the Ph.D.—but to perform a 'token payment' to anybody 'outside' of the logic of grad school. By reading, sharing, or subscribing to thesis hatements, graduate students, in other words, might perform a particular ritualistic, symbolic gesture that replaces action in the real world.

Indeed, rethinking the genre affiliations of the thesis hatement helps unlock yet another layer of how the textual pragmatics are at odds with the denotation of the text. Thesis hatements presume to offer advice, and they arguably fail to effectively do so. However, as Joshua Rothman points out in an insightful article in The New Yorker, 'advice helps people when they are making rational decisions, and the decision to go to grad school in English is essentially irrational. In fact, it's representative of a whole class of decisions that bring you face to face with the basic unknowability and uncertainty of life'. Other texts similarly assert that one cannot know whether this is a good decision. As Thomas H. Benton aka William Pannapacker confesses: 'I realize that nothing but luck distinguishes me from thousands of other highly-qualified Ph.D.s in the humanities who will never have full-time academic jobs' (Benton, 'Is Graduate'). So, clearly, advice is not in order, but why is it given anyway? The reason is that it constitutes a textual performance that goes beyond the content of the advice: when thesis hatements cast this decision, that is characterized by the frightening 'unknowability and uncertainty of life', in terms of rational knowability, they reintroduce, ex negativo, rationality into the game. Even though advice literature on the Ph.D. hardly ever gives good, rational reasons to pursue a Ph.D., it thus reinscribes rationality, if only so that it can be discarded.
In other words, via thesis hatements graduate students are able to understand, embrace, and affirm that their decision is ultimately not rational. About to do something that may—by normal, mainstream, popular, economic standards—most likely be a ‘bad life decision’, graduate students can use thesis hatements to make this ‘irrational’ decision a conscious one. Indeed the foil of the naïve graduate student who has ridiculous ideas about the profession, the straw man I spoke of before, feeds into this dynamic. It allows authors and readers of thesis hatements to discursively Other these naïve graduate students. After reading a thesis hatement, the decision to continue pursuing a Ph.D. is not less irrational, but it is done after learning all the rational reasons against graduate school, it is a decision whose irrational nature has been accepted after rational deliberation.

Moreover, these texts that explain why something is being done against all good reason speak strongly of intrinsic motivation precisely in rejecting it. Indeed, the unpopularity of the decision, by common standards, might thus be what makes it particularly attractive. In reception and in production, thesis hatements are stories of people doing the Ph.D. despite its presumed drawbacks in life quality. These texts thus open up and invite into a subject position marked by disdain for worldly and extrinsic motivation, by practicality and by economic reasons. Again, Schuman’s text is telling in this regard in that it juxtaposes economic and intrinsic motivation:

Don’t misunderstand me. There is unquantifiable intellectual reward from the exploration of scholarly problems [...] even if that means doing bat-shit analysis like using the rule of ‘false elimination’ to determine that Josef K. is simultaneously guilty and not guilty in *The Trial*. But there is one sort of reward you will never get: monetary compensation from a stable, non-penurious position at a decent university.

In juxtaposing the ‘unquantifiable intellectual reward’ with ‘monetary compensation’, Schuman’s text makes clear what is at stake: quantifiable monetary compensation or unquantifiable intellectual reward, and no matter how much the text argues for the former, it still opens up and casts as an alternative the latter. Even if ‘unquantifiable’ here does not mean ‘big’ but only ‘impossible to measure’, this operation creates and maintains a binary rather than questioning whether this binary makes sense in the first place.

Ultimately, then, one central aspect of the textual work of thesis hatements is how they cast the decision for academia as a decision that is untenable by common, popular standards while they, simultaneously, open up a ‘heroic’ subject position from which to make this unpopular decision.
for an unpopular profession by upholding the notion of the unquantifiable reward of intrinsic motivation. Indeed, while their politics may work to delegitimize the decision for a Ph.D. degree in the humanities, they simultaneously provide the psychological mechanisms required to make exactly this decision: to Other graduate students as naïve, to perform a ‘token payment’ acknowledging the irrationality of the decision, and to hope for unquantifiable reward in exchange for it. In other words, whenever they fail to convince, they simultaneously open up a position from which to take pride in an unreasonable decision for an unpopular profession.

Conclusion

Thesis hatements are a troubled genre: they offer contradictory advice, and their pragmatics are at odds with what they claim to say. Asking their readers to do one thing while in fact encouraging them to do another, they constitute contradictory acts of communication at best, and insincere ones at worst. At the same time, however, thesis hatements often are honest attempts to come to terms with a highly contradictory subject position: that of a graduate student, and both this textual work and the contradictory quality of this subject position become particularly visible in the metaphors thesis hatements employ. Looking at their inner contradictions, then, is telling: It underscores that this genre does not simply offer advice to graduate students. Instead, it wrestles with important social questions, among them questions of class and of intellectual labor, and it works through the complex affective dynamics and the conflicting values that determine both an individual student’s decision to pursue a humanities Ph.D. and the perception of the humanities in contemporary U.S. society.

Notes

1. In fact, gender also is an important dynamic in these texts, and while I do not have time to develop a more detailed argument about the relationship between (occupational) gender (cf. Hoberek 374), academia, and class here, I will, throughout this paper, point out moments in which this subtext becomes particularly poignant.
2. The first of the two titles is used in the <title> tag of the web page, thus showing in the browser window only, the second, consisting of title and subtitle, is visible as a headline on the page itself. Using two different titles is a common SEO strategy employed by slate.com
3. This derailed metaphor indeed is telling in that it speaks of Schuman's difficulties of coherently conceptualizing the experience of graduate school. Assuming that, as a Kafka scholar, she does not want to use the fable simply as a flowery version of saying 'bad situation', mapping the metaphor onto graduate school is difficult: is the mouse the grad student? Is the trap the unsuccessful quest for tenure? Does the cat correspond to private sector employment? Ultimately, these questions seem to speak strongly about the ambivalent desires and fears negotiated in her piece.

4. Cf. Nicholas Barber, who also refers to thesis hatements as a 'rapidly expanding sub-genre' of essay writing.

5. The question of how to slice genre affiliations here is not easily answered. One way to look at thesis hatements is as a 'relatively packed genre of recent works on the decision to go to grad school or not (which is probably just a subgenre of bearish pieces on academia)' (Cleveland). The larger segment of ironically (self-)deprecating portrayals of graduate education have a much longer tradition. Speaking even more broadly, the argument over whether studying the humanities is a good decision might be as old as the humanities themselves. As Anthony T. Grafton remarks: 'To become a trained humanist [...] is to join a tradition, which has usually been embattled, while parents scream 'No, for God's sake go to law school!' (That is what Petrarch's father said to him, thereby inaugurating a great tradition.)'


7. Benton is the pseudonym of William Pannapacker; the piece was also mentioned in the Schuman quote at the beginning of this paper. Another typical representative is Larry Cebula’s 'Open Letter to My Students: No, You Cannot be a Professor.'

8. With tenure remaining an attractive perspective even for those academics who announce having given up, thesis hatements by non-tenured authors always smack of an attempt to scare off job market competitors. I am grateful to Sascha Pöhlmann for pointing out this particular dynamic.

9. As one anecdotal case of such transnational reception: I came across Schuman's piece like most of its audience must have, via Facebook. A friend of mine, a German scholar living in California at the time, had shared it on her Facebook wall. Reading it about six month away from finishing my own dissertation, I immediately identified with its ethos (or: pathos) of suffering, an ethos that I was very much acquainted with and that I had learned to embrace as well. The text also echoed my impressions at the German Association for American Studies' Postgraduate Forum at Leipzig where a group discussion about German academia and one's place in it had quickly morphed into something akin to a meeting of Academics Anonymous, or so it had seemed: how else does one make sense of a room full of people speaking of the plight of the dissertation and of the lack of a perspective for the time after—none of them having to do it, and none of them seriously considering to quit? For a brief mention of the 'prekäre[n] wirtschaftlichen Situation, in
der sich der Großteil der Promovierenden befindet' cf. the conference report ('Tagungsbericht'). Cf. also Bordel and Ritter, as well as the debate on the ‘akademisches Prekariat’ that briefly flared in German public discourse in 2011/12.

10. This section profited greatly from discussions at the Unpopular Culture conference. I am particularly grateful for the remarks by Barry Shank, J. Jesse Ramirez, and Martin Lüthe.

11. Cf. Grafton for a particularly bitter phrasing of the use of graduate students as a way to provide cheap teaching: ‘Administrators, meanwhile, began to treat systematic underemployment as a feature, not a bug, and made of it a management tool. They realized that they could finance elementary teaching by taking in large numbers of graduate students, keeping them at work for eight or nine years on low pay, running sections and occasional courses, and then spewing them forth unemployed or re-employing them as adjuncts.’ Cf. also the attention the case of Mary Margaret received, an adjunct at Duquesne ‘who died sick, alone and penniless’ after not being able to build up retirement money from her meager payment (Flaherty; cf. also ‘Reality Check’).

12. Note in this context the debate about the study of class in academia that, Keith Gandal argues, has been hampered by the lack of poor professors. In the complex class identities at stake, it remains unclear whether ‘facing or anticipating economic difficulties’ constitutes enough of a ‘poor identity’ to energize ‘literary-critical poverty studies.’ The debate has recently been energized not just by the last economic crisis but also by Walter Benn Michaels’s 2006 The Trouble with Diversity, which opens with a discussion of whether the difference between rich and poor people is simply a matter of having or not having money (cf. 1–3).

13. This view, of course, plays into a concern haunting the humanities at least since the revisionary interventions of the 1970s, the democratization of the university, and the broadening of university access: the concern that the humanities might be a class sanctuary, that their presumably universal quality might hide mechanisms of exclusion.

14. Note, of course, the conspicuous gendering that aligns the economically responsible decision to earn money with the (presumably) male job of the Hooters managers and that associates the humanities with femininity, as well as the unspoken allegation that graduate students fail to grow up; in these arguments, graduate school often features as a failure to grow up into an male adult breadwinner role, pointing at the nexus of gender, age, and economy.

15. Cf. also Tressie McMillan Cottom, who points out that the ‘blanket advice' of thesis hataments comes from a privileged white position, and that minority students may require the credentials of a Ph.D. (even for non-academic jobs) to offset the negative hiring effect of their minority status. ‘Plainly put, black folks need credentials because without them our ‘ghetto’ names get our résumés trashed, our clean criminal records lose out to whites with felony convictions, and discretion works against our type of social capital (and weak ties and closure of information) to amount to a social
reality that looks and feels a lot like statistical discrimination.’ As Kalaidjian summarizes her point: the advice to opt out of academia ‘ignores questions of race, gender, and class, indeed, the very social bedrock upon which the humanities staked many of its claims in the 1960s.’

16. Cf. also Michael Bérubé’s observation that ‘the contemporary university is so amorphous that it can be described as the research wing of the corporate economy, the final resting place of the New Left, the last best hope for critical thinking, the engine room of global technological advance, the agent of secularization and the advance of reason, the training ground for the labor force, the conservatives’ strongest bastion of antifeminist education, the progressives’ only bulwark against the New Right, the natural home of intellectual isolates, the natural home of goose-stepping groupthinkers, and the locus of postmodern skepticism and fragmentation’ (147).

17. This text, too, bears two titles. One, marked down in the html title tags, is given above. The main title on the page reads ‘You Aren’t the Exception.’

18. Cf. also Newhouse’s ‘Deprogramming form the Academic Cult.’

19. On the sub-genre of survival guides in academic advice literature, cf. Cook. For an example of ‘survivor guilt’, cf. Thomas H. Benton’s self-indictment that ‘nothing but luck distinguishes me from thousands of other highly-qualified Ph.D.’s in the humanities who will never have full-time academic jobs’ (‘Is Graduate’), a quote I will come back to below.

20. Outside of academia, nursing comes to mind as one such sector. Note that Pannapacker also sees this dynamic inside the academy with the humanities on the one side and the ‘male-dominated ‘hard’ fields, such as physics or engineering’ on the other. On the particular class dimension of the metaphor, cf. also Jacqui Shine’s article on ‘Love and Other Secondhand Emotions’. Shine argues that people from lower class backgrounds have a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to ‘love’ one’s work. She thus asks ‘whether our reliance on using love as a way to measure one’s suitability for their work has the effect of excluding low-income and working-class people from the academic professions. If the love question is, in fact, a kind of gatekeeping thing—and I think it is—then we run the risk of stacking the deck with people from middle- and upper-income backgrounds, folks who can understand and answer the question affirmatively and who have the luxury of ignoring the hard economic realities of the academic job market.’

Works Cited


*Simpsons Funny Scene Grad Students*. 2013. Web. 7 Apr. 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsDOvBTt8Sg

*So You Want to Get a PhD in the Humanities*. 2010. Web. 7 Apr. 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=obTNwPjyO18