the changing profession

Profession, Revise Thyself—Again

MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ

I HAVE BECOME FOND OF STARTING SENTENCES WITH *I AM SO OLD THAT . . .* AS IN, I AM SO OLD THAT I REMEMBER WHEN MICHELOB WAS CONsidered a premium beer. And, I am so old that I remember when GLBTQ was just G and L; Q was considered a threat, B apostasy, and T pathological. And, finally, I am so old that it has been more than twenty years since I wrote an MLA paper declaring, "Profession, revise thyself," partly as a response to Stanley Fish's arguments about professional antiprofessionalism in "Profession Despise Thyself." I delivered it at the 1992 MLA convention, in New York, and it eventually became the essay "Bite Size Theory: Popularizing Academic Criticism," published in *Social Text* in 1993 and reprinted in my second book, *Public Access*, in 1994. Long, long ago.

My argument in that essay was (and please forgive me for repeating myself, but I am so old . . .) that "we need to reconceive . . . the professionalization of cultural criticism . . . , so that public work can be recognized as a form of professional work." I acknowledged that this was "[e]asier said than done":

> Ask anyone who's trying to build a career—or get tenure, or get a job—whether they'd rather have their next essay appear in *Details* or in *differences*. For that matter, it's not as if the prestige system of academic publishing will disappear when it comes to the valuation of nonacademic work. We might, that is, be tempted to judge the merit of nonscholarly publication in part on the basis of our ideas about various nonscholarly audiences. (168)

Nevertheless, I insisted that it was possible and necessary for the profession to conduct meaningful evaluations of both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed work:

> [O]ur determinations of faculty merit and promise, especially in departments like English that have always tried to appeal to broader publics, should ideally be based on *both* kinds of publication. Although the system of peer review often insulates professors (especially controversial junior faculty) from Know-Nothing colleagues, thus allowing Profes-

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> sor X's advocates to say, "Well, you may not like feminist theory, but you can't dispute someone who's placed articles in *Signs* and *differences*," it has also, by the same token, *prevented* faculty from reading one another's work. Because acceptance of an article by, say, *Critical Inquiry* is (rightly) deemed to be an index of its scholarly merit, many faculty committees, reviewing the author of said article, often feel that it has already been judged on its merits, and does not need to be read for "substance." Professional peer review, of course, is supposed to provide one's colleagues with just that guarantee of merit-by-acceptance. But when peer review becomes the means by which one's scholarly work is judged by quantity (and place of publication) to the exclusion of considerations of quality, then I think it's time to shake up the system, and ask that everybody read everything. (170)

The passage bears the imprint of the pressures of its time. In the early 1990s, at many institutions (including the University of Illinois, Urbana) you could find senior faculty members who had risen to the rank of full professor on the basis of a handful of articles, having been hired and tenured during the higher education boom of the 1960s. These professors—almost always men—now had the institutional power, though not the intellectual wherewithal, to review junior colleagues who had amassed more impressive records than they and who had done so in the course of a few years. Hence the line about *Signs* and *differences*, vastly different feminist projects though they were at the time; those arguments actually needed to be made in hiring decisions, annual reviews, and tenure and promotion cases.

My line of argument goes all the way back to my dissertation—in other words, to a point in my life when I had published exactly zero anythings in any venue, peer-reviewed or not. I had drawn on Jonathan Culler's use of Christopher Jencks and David Reisman's book *The Academic Revolution*, which argued that the establishment of the system of international peer review had freed faculty members from potentially parochial and capricious reviews of their work by their immediate administrative superiors on campus; for Culler, this development explained the rise of cutting-edge criticism and theory, prompting him to claim, in 1988, that "today the literary avant-garde simply *is* literary theory and criticism" (40). But by the time I fine-tuned that argument for my convention paper and "Bite Size Theory," I had some skin in the game: I was on the tenure track, having submitted a few articles—and my book manuscript—for peer review even as I began publishing in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*. It would not have been ungenerous of any of my colleagues to wonder whether my argument in favor of considering publications outside the system of peer review, in an institutional system of scholarly communication built on the protocols of peer review, might be a tad self-interested.

For what it's worth, I don't believe it was. At the time, I was ambivalent about the institutional status of my essays for the *VLS*. (I did not publish anywhere else until after I was tenured in 1993—not by design, but only because the *VLS* was the only place interested in my work until 1994.) On one hand, I thought my first few essays for the *VLS* were pretty good; though they didn't constitute original scholarship, they were not devoid of intellectual content, and the long cover essays on postmodernism and cultural studies tried to survey enormous fields of work in ten thousand words. I thought well enough of them to include revised versions in *Public Access*. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I wanted my academic colleagues to judge my value as a scholar—as a peer—on the basis of essays that were sometimes breezy and flip, written in a style more suited to the *Village Voice* than to *Critical Inquiry* (a reader for which turned down my one submission to the journal in 1990 with such vehemence that the rejection letter burned my fingers). And I didn't want some administrator dismissing

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me as a dilettante or a polemicist. If I was going to be a dilettante or a polemicist, I thought, I wanted to do so on my own time—not while I was pursuing my professional research, teaching, and service. And yet I didn't worry too much about this question when I came up for tenure. The way I figured it, I had placed a book with Cornell University Press and a couple of essays in peer-reviewed journals, so I had cleared that bar. Anything else, from *VLS* cover essays to letters to the editor, was extra. If my department head and dean wanted to include the extra stuff in my dossier, fine; if not, fine. At the very least, I thought I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Years later, I was serving on a governance committee with a colleague who argued that everything faculty members do—including work in their communities, from literacy programs in local prisons to the organization of protests and demonstrations—should be considered part of their service records. It sounded right and just, in a way, especially since it was proposed in the spirit of promoting the ideal of the scholar-activist, and it seemed to offer a challenge to the us-and-them, ivory tower model that produces so much tension between town and gown. Moreover, it seemed to be a humanities version of what is ordinarily considered, in other disciplines, "outreach" or "engagement." Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life has published a comprehensive report on how to evaluate such activities as part of a tenure or promotion profile: *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University* (Ellison and Eatman). As Imagining America explains about the report:

> IA's Tenure Team Initiative on Public Scholarship (TTI) was inspired by faculty members who want to do public scholarship and live to tell the tale. Publicly engaged academic work is taking hold in American colleges and universities, part of a larger trend toward civic professionalism in many spheres. But tenure and promotion policies lag behind public scholarly and creative work and discourage faculty from doing it. Disturbingly, the authors' interviews revealed a strong sense that pursuing academic public engagement is viewed as an unorthodox and risky early career option for faculty of color.

So there were at least two, and possibly three, unimpeachably enlightened and progressive ideals at stake in this proposal. It would reward scholar-activists, it would build strong university-community relations, and it would especially benefit faculty members of color.

The only problem is that the proposal would also allow university administrators to sit in judgment of everything a faculty member does. There would be no such thing as extramural utterances, no time off the clock. When a faculty member stopped teaching, doing research, or serving on committees, went home, and decided to create a locavore food co-op, or canvass for a candidate for political office, or work the line in a soup kitchen, or organize a high school production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, or train with a rural militia in its mountain fastness for the coming race war (you will gather that one of these things is not like the others), that faculty member would still be working for the university, in a "scholarship of service" or "scholarship of engagement/outreach" capacity, and the department head, dean, provost, and internal or external review committees could decide whether they approved of that work as a matter of professional judgment. There would be no sense in which faculty members could speak or act as private citizens, unaffiliated with their place of employment; everything on the activism side of their scholar-activist profiles would be available for institutional sanction (in both profoundly ambivalent senses of the term).

The third component of *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, by the American Association of University Professors, covers extramural utterances:

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> College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.

There is no fourth component of the AAUP definition of academic freedom, one that would cover university service and committee work; this lacuna was painfully exposed by the 2006 Supreme Court decision in *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, which held that state employees do not have First Amendment protections for utterances they make "pursuant to their official duties." *Garcetti* involved a whistleblowing assistant district attorney, and not a contentious assistant professor, but when Justice David Souter noted, in dissent, that the decision could have chilling implications for academic freedom at public universities, Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the 5-4 majority, replied, "We need not, and for that reason do not, decide whether the analysis we conduct today would apply in the same manner to a case involving speech related to scholarship or teaching" (425). The result is that the *Garcetti* decision has served as precedent for lower courts, one of which held, in *Adams v. Trustees of the University of North Carolina—Wilmington*, that Mike Adams, a professor, was rightly denied promotion on the basis of his writings for the right-wing Web site *Townhall.com*. That decision has since been overturned by the Fourth Circuit Court, and in 2014 Adams won a jury trial; a federal judge has since ordered his university to promote him, retroactive to 2007, and to award him back pay. But in a larger sense the jury is still out when it comes to professional evaluations of professors' extramural work.

Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2014, David Perry, an associate professor of history, made an energetic case for considering all forms of professors' intellectual labor as fair game for evaluation, and he closed with recommendations for faculty members:

- Start by figuring out just what your institution and program does and does not count for tenure and promotion.
- Within our diverse disciplines, begin conversations about protecting and rewarding public engagement. We need to do this as faculty members. In fact, that's what many administrators want. For example, Kriste Lindenmeyer, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences and the graduate school at Rutgers University at Camden, told me that while she can advocate for public engagement, it is in fact faculty groups that set tenure-and-promotion standards at her campus. Faculty have to take the lead.
- Go to your national professional organizations and ask them to continue or start discussions about how "sustained public engagement" might be defined, assessed, and valorized within your discipline and type of institution.
- Finally, if the circumstances of your life and job permit it, think about the ways in which your expertise might serve and be served by engagement with the public.

> The myth of the ivory tower dismisses the public academic as an aberration and the specialized scholar as detached. Neither is true. But we do have a problem with how we define, count, and value many types of public engagement. If we can improve this and tear down the mythic tower, we can make sure that all of our varied but important types of work get the credit they deserve.

Perry, who writes often (and compellingly) on public matters ranging from police harassment to disability studies, notes that "the advent of web journalism and social media

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has created countless modes for academics to reach a broader audience," and he sees in this program for "public engagement" a powerful way for professors to serve the public good while challenging the "snobbery in academe" that leads one (unnamed) administrator to "compare public writing to playing video games." In other words, Perry makes a social-media-era version of the argument I made twenty years ago: *everything can count, and maybe everything should*.

There is no question that the boundaries of acceptable professional discourse have widened in the past twenty years. From below, Web journalism, blogs, and social media have made it possible for professors to reach, or create, vastly more outlets than the previous generation of academics could have imagined; from above, the *Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion* has urged that "the profession as a whole should develop a more capacious conception of scholarship by rethinking the dominance of the monograph, promoting the scholarly essay, establishing multiple pathways to tenure, and using scholarly portfolios" and that "departments and institutions should recognize the legitimacy of scholarship produced in new media, whether by individuals or in collaboration, and create procedures for evaluating these forms of scholarship" (11). And yet, despite the fact that I served on that task force (and argued for a more capacious conception of scholarship), I have never asked my department or college to consider my personal blog, which I maintained during 2004–07 and 2008–10, as part of my output as a scholar. That is not because I thought the blog was devoid of intellectual content. Some of it was merely personal and "hobby" stuff, like commentary on hockey and other sports, but some of it consisted of informal, chatty versions of arguments I would go on to make in tighter form in other genres, as when I adapted a blog post on Terri Schiavo and advance directives for publication in the *Boston Globe*, or collected a series of posts on literary theory or on my life with my son Jamie for inclusion in print books. So, as Perry suggests, the blog was countable in principle (or at least some of it was), and when it peaked at eight thousand daily readers, it was the vehicle through which my work was best known. Other bloggers, whose work was consistently thoughtful and polished, chose to have their blogosphere commentary on postcolonial criticism, queer theory, feminism, or disability studies included in their scholarly portfolios. Those decisions seemed (and still seem) legitimate to me, insofar as one is asking for one's work to be evaluated on its intellectual merits regardless of its venue. For me, though, there remains a bright (though fading) line between material that has undergone some form of editorial vetting, whether by peers or by newspaper, magazine, or Web journal editors, and material that has not. That is why my occasional online essay for *Raw Story* or *Slate* or *CNN* or *Aljazeera America* appears on my CV, whereas my blogging career (at my own site and at the widely read group academic blog *Crooked Timber*) does not.

I want to close with a cautionary tale. Not long after Perry's column appeared, the biggest story in academe became that of Steven Salaita's *Twitter* feed—and the question of whether it did or did not cause Phyllis Wise, chancellor of the University of Illinois, Urbana, to decide not to forward his appointment to the university's Board of Trustees, effectively dehiring him from a position he thought he had accepted months earlier. It is still too soon to tell what effect the Salaita case will have on American higher education, but the early returns are not good. Regardless of what one thinks of Salaita's tweets, some of which were strident denunciations of Israel and impassioned outbursts about Israel's 2014 assault on Gaza, it is remarkable that a senior faculty appointment, approved by faculty, department, and dean, can be derailed at the usually pro forma moment of approval by chancellor and trustees.

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It is likely that the Salaita dehiring will set a precedent for administrative review of senior appointments that will, at minimum, delay every appointment by a year, since Salaita was informed of the decision just scant weeks before the fall semester, well after he and his family had relocated from Virginia to Illinois. But what is even more alarming is the possibility that from now on everything a faculty member says or does in social media—from the thoughtful, polished four-thousand-word Web essay or blog post to the most casual tweet or comment—is fair game for administrative review.

Indeed, in defense of her controversial decision Chancellor Wise issued an open letter suggesting that the grounds for the decision were at once strikingly flimsy and astonishingly broad:

> What we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them. We have a particular duty to our students to ensure that they live in a community of scholarship that challenges their assumptions about the world but that also respects their rights as individuals.

Understandably, much of the response to this jaw-dropping passage has focused on the heretofore unimaginable premise that a university cannot tolerate the demeaning of viewpoints (Leiter). But it is arguably just as bad, for academic freedom and for American higher education, that anyone would draw conclusions about a professor's classroom demeanor from his or her *Twitter* account. Notably, there is no evidence that Salaita has ever been disrespectful of his students and much evidence that he has been a successful teacher.

It is by now obligatory to note that some of Salaita's tweets were variously juvenile, overheated, offensive, or vile (I believe they were, even if I am obliged to note it). There is also debate about whether one or more were anti-Semitic or an incitement to violence. About the tweet "Zionists: transforming 'antisemitism' from something horrible into something honorable since 1948," it has been argued that this ostensible endorsement of anti-Semitism needs to be understood in the context of Salaita's denunciations of anti-Semitism and his conviction that pro-Israel Zionists have illegitimately conflated all criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. That seems possible to me, though I am not sure it is a good idea to make one's Twitterees do so much interpretive work to exonerate one from the implications of a literal reading of a 140-character statement. But the point remains that *we are debating the meaning of a professor's* Twitter *feed as a basis for a hiring decision*. Steven Salaita was dehired from the University of Illinois precisely because of his activities as a public intellectual engaging people in social media. I still believe in the ideal of the public intellectual engaging people in various media, in multiple registers. But I have come to think that it makes sense for public intellectuals—and their extramural utterances—to be accorded some measure of autonomy from administrative review. Even a public intellectual occasionally needs a little privacy.

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