

lacunae (figurative or literal) never intended to be filled or explained. To treat silence as silence is ridiculously hard, because it would entail understanding how meaning is made (and unmade) in a space of absolute indeterminacy, where the only appropriate response is restraint: not to say or to say only provisionally. Carson's book of Sappho translations (*If Not, Winter*) is a decent but flawed example of how to go about doing this.

If what I have said here should strike you, O Benevolent Reader of our fair *PMLA*, as absurd, unfair, or irresponsible, remember that I am a nobody, no longer possessed of real academic privileges, unemployed, no one significant in any academic field or critical discourse, whose future career is up in the air. You may well never hear from me again.

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Writing for Lay Readers

TO THE EDITOR:

I had just received an e-mail from my former graduate school adviser asking if a young graduate student of his who had moved to my city could contact me for advice. Always happy to meet new people, I said yes. I soon received a pleasant e-mail from the student, who told me about her research interests, but as she began describing her project I could feel my eyes glaze over. Though she was discussing a research field that interests me, I was wearied by her diction: "heteronormative discourse," "problematizes," a rampant use of gratuitous quotation marks. Her writing was in danger of becoming a parody of itself. Why was she using this language to talk to me? It was so formal and tedious. And why my disappointment? Because this dry, almost calcified academic language does a disservice to our work as academics in the humanities. The typical academic will have little trouble decoding catchwords like "hegemonic" and "epistemological," but what about lay readers? That a young graduate student was using this language left me concerned. All fields have their jargon, but if

graduate students are being trained merely to assemble prefabricated phrases lest they not be able to compete with the field's old guard, are clarity and accessibility being foreclosed from day one?

I have the great fortune of being a nontenured scholar. A strange assertion, perhaps, since securing a tenure-track position is often seen as the be-all and end-all of academic success. Though I have kept one foot in the academic world through adjunct teaching, presenting papers at conferences, publishing, and other academic tasks, I have made a satisfying career working in arts and cultural production outside academia. I have had the privilege of sharing my work with nonspecialized audiences and have tried to join a dying breed: the public intellectual. Whether offering lectures through the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, an organization that brings humanities experts to lay communities; running book groups at local libraries; or providing engaging programming through my job as director of arts and cultural programming at a Jewish community center, I have worked to foster learning, inquiry, and intellectual stimulation in ways that are hardly dumbed down or reductive.

But what of my colleagues in the ivory tower? I don't want to stereotype, since some academics are producing engaging, accessible scholarship. Happily, the age of high theory seems to have died, and much scholarly work nowadays is insightful and readable. Yet a tendency to write for a specialized audience persists, to our profession's detriment, perpetuating jargon-filled modes of communication that hamper the dissemination of important new ideas.

Ask academics in the humanities why they pursued their career, and, in addition to expressing a love of research or teaching, many will express a worthy desire to combat racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequality, or another of the injustices plaguing society. Many of us want our work to be culturally relevant, yet we often feel forced to perform in obtuse or inflated language that our profession seems to demand if we want to be taken seriously by our peers.

I recently faced this challenge myself, when I decided to teach a unit on gender and sexuality in my class on performance studies. In the weeks leading up to the course, I considered various texts, old and new, for inclusion in the syllabus. Kate Bornstein's *My Gender Workbook* made the cut, a smart, conversational work on the construction and performance of gender by one of the few transgender activists who regularly speak to lay audiences. A colleague mentioned José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, which, according to the publisher's blurb, argues that "the here and now are not enough and issues an urgent call for the revivification of the queer political imagination." A worthy claim indeed. But as I read Muñoz's book, I knew I couldn't teach it to undergraduates. Despite Muñoz's use of personal experience and pop cultural texts, his many invocations of theorists, particularly Ernst Bloch, require specialized knowledge. In addition, the text contains multiple dense constructions such as "My argument is therefore interested in critiquing the ontological certitude that I understand to be partnered with the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary

gay identity. This mode of ontological certitude is often represented through a narration of disappearance and negativity that boils down to another game of fort-da" (11). Who is the intended reader of this text? The book should be an ideal text for the queer community, but I don't know of many lay readers, queer or otherwise, who could easily parse Muñoz's statements. And even if they could, the style doesn't make for a compelling read. We risk alienating the audiences that most need to receive messages like Muñoz's by making academic discourse inconsumable by a nonspecialized audience.

I continue to write and research because I believe that my work might change the thinking of some people. But I want those people not just to be other academics who can talk the talk. Lay communities are bright and eager to learn, but they need to be presented with accessible information. We can't expect our work to explain itself to all audiences; it's our responsibility to make sure we remain relevant, for only then will academia be able to influence society meaningfully.

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