

Who's Doing the Work, and Whose Work are We Doing?

Heather Murray
University of Toronto

THE SIGN-OF-THE-TIMES WORD IN THE TITLE of this readers' forum is "negotiating." In the 1980s, 1990s, and even earlier in the millennium, I suspect we'd have used the term "resisting," and I am reluctant to jettison it, especially when—writing in late November 2011—we are witnessing a reinvigorated protest movement occupying key symbolic spaces and the interstices of virtual culture. "Occupying" carries the time-honoured connotation of "working from within," and I hope that "negotiating" retains that meaning too.

The term "negotiating" also may reflect a recognition that the changing conditions of the academic workplace are impossible to "resist" in the sense of turning them back altogether. What once appeared a specific, albeit long-running, "crisis" in the academic job market, we now know, was only a seismic shimmer signaling the earthquake to come, triggered by the shifting tectonic plates of global capital. We stand on an altered terrain of short-cycle economic climbs and crashes, dislocated and migrant labour pools, and mass unemployment that is structural rather than periodic. Work—academic work is no exception—is increasingly downsized, outsourced, un-unionized, de-professionalized, proletarianized, and largely "part-time" in status and pay if not in hours. In the last few years, I have

HEATHER MURRAY
teaches in the
Department of English
at the University of
Toronto and is its
current Director of
Graduate Studies. She
is the author of *Working
in English: History,
Institution, Resources*
(1996) and *Come Bright
Improvement! The
Literary Societies of
Nineteenth-Century
Ontario* (2002) as well
as a number of articles
on the history of
English studies, reading
and readership, and
nineteenth-century
Canadian cultural
history.

been trying, if only in a limited way, to understand the impact of this new situation on stipendiary/sessional employment, a topic to which I'll return, somewhat parabolically, in a moment.

And here is a parable, in keeping with the pre-holiday season in which I write. Our department has a lounge for staff and faculty, with a fair traffic in graduate students although they have their own lively space as well. People sometimes leave treats near the coffee machine, and this week someone contributed a tray of oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies, topped with one large festive cookie with red frosting and coloured sprinkles. During the course of the week, I observed this tray with increasing fascination. No one would take the frosted cookie—indeed, people had to shift it to get to the plainer biscuits beneath—and when we locked up for the weekend, there it remained in its sprinkly splendour. That no one ate it—surely someone *wanted* to?—seems oddly symbolic of the values of the community we call “English”: responsibility and community-mindedness, with a dash of self-abnegation. In the seasonal tally of the naughties and the nices, people in English departments must get very few lumps of coal.

As a fairly new administrator, I've been pleasantly surprised how easily people agree to requests (although a “yes” from a colleague who is operating on automatic pilot, eyes glazed from end-of-term marking, may not count as informed consent). But I also am aware that the “ethos of yes” that characterizes our discipline—the meeting and mentoring, reviewing and networking—is increasingly difficult to maintain. We spend our days in a workplace with frozen resources and chopped services, new mandates for “accountability” and “measurability,” pressure to inaugurate and expand graduate programs, and the inflated demands of short-stay administrators (“mission creep”? Surely it should be “mission sprint.”) We all know the toll this takes, in the forms of chronic fatigue syndrome and repetitive strain injuries, missed writing deadlines, free-floating guilt, and a flattened or foreshortened intellectual life. I wonder if we all imagine ourselves, in our secret heart of hearts, as an academic Aeneas, battling improbable odds. The Angel in the House might be more like it. “When there were cookies, she took the plain one: when there was a committee, she sat on it.”

The late November context that forms these reflections finds new PhDs competing for twenty-three tenure-track positions available in Canada. While more may be added, the fact that there are fewer postings now than at the low-point in 2009–10 following the economic downturn (and endowment death spirals) is a quick indicator that underhiring to the tenure track is becoming normalized. The same is true of stipendiary/sessional positions, although this fact may seem counterintuitive. Surely

if tenure-track positions decline (and/or if senior faculty retire, and/or if undergraduate enrolments grow) an increase in stipendiary/sessional positions will result? The reverse is true, at least for English, as evidenced by the two surveys I have undertaken (currently available on the ACCUTE website). What used to be known as CLA or CLTA positions (salaried positions of limited length) are a rarity. With the exception of institutions undergoing significant growth or restructuring, sessional/stipendiary positions continue to decline, substantially in the “comprehensive” and “primarily undergraduate” institutions and dramatically in the “medical-doctoral” universities.

Woody Allen recycled an old vaudeville joke: “Two elderly women are at a Catskills resort and one of ‘em says ‘Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.’ The other one says, ‘Yeah, I know, and such small portions.’” *Annie Hall’s* metaphor for life serves equally well as an analogy for stipendiary work: it’s hard, and underpaid, and there’s not enough to go around.

So, who is doing the work? What appear to be structural rather than temporary cuts to tenure-track hiring and to faculty numbers overall appear to have been followed by structural rather than temporary cuts to stipendiary/sessional positions in most sectors, with a strong cumulative decrease (the permanent cuts to secretarial and administrative staff occurred even prior to these). However, in my initial survey, only one departmental chair cited declining enrolments as a cause for decreased sessional/stipendiary hiring. The institutional expectation is that tenure-track and tenured faculty members will do the work of laid-off or “out-placed” or never-hired others and (at least in part) will cover other functions (including secretarial and administrative) when those jobs disappear. In other words, the role and position of university faculty have been rendered indistinct through processes of institutional erosion and have bled into other employment categories.

Is there anything that faculty members can do to restructure our work and to create new spaces for employment? Five methods come to mind. The first is to unionize: only unionization can provide workload protection with teeth. Second, in the context of negotiations, workload considerations should move front and centre (not only course assignments and classroom caps, but compensation for administrative positions, supervisions, service, and a multitude of forms of “invisible” work). Third, chairs should continue to argue for the necessity of full faculty complements, curriculum coverage, and stable leave replacements, however fruitless these arguments may seem. Senior faculty nearing retirement should strategize to postpone their retirement until the “line” has been secured and use their clout to let deans

Virginia Woolf
slew her Angel
with a well-
aimed inkwell,
and we might
do the same.

know that they are not, however flattering it may seem, “irreplaceable.” It’s important to explain the optics of the second and fourth strategies, since reduced teaching for faculty and the retention of a position past retirement could appear simply as further exercises of faculty privilege.

The fifth suggestion, for consciousness raising, may seem an odd recommendation at first. But more professional and disciplinary reflection may be called for, if we are to understand how our admirable culture of service—to students, to scholarship, to our colleagues, and to our communities—has rolled too readily into a culture of overwork. I would like to see the beginning of collective conversations about what is central to our mission and what is peripheral, what is worth doing well and what is worth not doing at all, and about the importance of the humanities—*to us*. Because if we don’t define our work as scholars and teachers of English, that mission surely will be defined for us. It is time to stop “managing” in the new “managerial” university. Virginia Woolf slew her Angel with a well-aimed inkwell, and we might do the same with whatever comes to hand: a heavy volume of decanal procedures, or even a cookie jar.