

# Come Back to the Ranks Ag'in, Huck Honey!

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**I**N THE LAST HANDFUL OF YEARS, the *ESC* roundtable has become an important ongoing feature of our association's annual meeting and conference, a place to think out loud about the conditions of our work, and I was delighted to be asked to participate in this year's event. Michael O'Driscoll's original email inviting the five of us to participate in the roundtable described its topic as "academic rites of passage," rites, in Mike's words, that "serve not only to establish certain hierarchies and power structures but also to secure important relations and forge the bonds of community."

"To establish ... hierarchies and power structures" *and* "to forge the bonds of community": it is this paradox, maybe even outright contradiction, at the heart of our academic rites of passage that I want to explore. To do that, I want to talk about something that is both *no longer* and *not yet* a rite of passage, but I think it should be—or it should be *again*. I am calling this little paper "Come Back to the Ranks Ag'in, Huck Honey!"

"Come Back to the Ranks Ag'in, Huck Honey!" is, of course, a play on Leslie Fiedler's well-known—and, at the time, hugely controversial—article, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" Originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1948, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!"

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argues that, at the heart of nineteenth-century American literature, and reaching forward into the early twentieth century, was an *as-yet* unrecognized—and *yet* disavowed—archetype<sup>1</sup>: the archetype of the “mutual [homoerotic] love of a white man and a colored” (146): Ishmael and Queequeg, Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Huck and Jim: “lying side by side on a raft born by the endless river toward an impossible escape” (145). At the heart of the disavowal, says Fiedler, is a regressive, “implacable nostalgia for the infantile” (144), the (white) American dream of boyhood, of “good clean fun” and “self-congratulatory buddy-buddiness” (144). This is the “child’s dream of love” (147), a dream that

Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in ... when we have been cut off, or have cut ourselves off, from all others, without rancor or the insult of forgiveness. He will fold us in his arms saying, “Honey” ... he will comfort us, as if our offence against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real*. (151)

The white American, says Fiedler, “dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended” (151).<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if it is by now clear that *I* am reading *Fiedler’s* reading of Huck and Jim together on the raft as a wishful allegory of university administration? Senior administration. Deans and up. Except it is we who are the dreamers, the Jims, who call out ... I won’t say to “our oppressors” ... to come back to the raft again, come back to the breast, to the dream of emancipation that is at the heart of real education.

A couple of articles have been circulating widely, on Facebook and other social media sites. The first is W. D. Smith’s *Maclean’s* article of January 2010, “Where All that Money is Going: Tuition Rises, Class Size Grows, and the Bureaucracy Gets Big.” The second is Barry Cooper’s article from May 2012—published in various newspapers—titled “Universities Have Been Taken Over by Administrators.” Both make the same argu-

1 “By ‘archetype’ I mean a coherent pattern of beliefs and feelings so widely shared at a level beneath consciousness that there exists no abstract vocabulary for representing it, and so ‘sacred’ that unexamined, irrational restraints inhibit any explicit analysis. Such a complex finds a formula or pattern story, which serves both to embody it, and, at first, to conceal its full implications” (Fiedler 146).

2 While Fiedler’s article, his first academic publication, was in many ways groundbreaking, it is very much of its time. Conceding that there are “genuinely useful” elements in the essay, critics like Christopher Looby nonetheless point out that it “does its thinking from within a deeply homophobic ... structure of assumption” (536).

ment: that central administrative costs have skyrocketed; that is, that “a disproportionate share of new income has been used ... to expand the central bureaucracy” (Smith).

Smith’s 2010 figures, from data compiled by StatsCanada, are shocking. In 1988, 12 cents of operating funds were “spent on central administration for every dollar spent on instruction and non-sponsored research.” By 2008, that 12 percent had risen to 20 percent. At an average Canadian university, that means \$18 million dollars annually going to central administration that would previously have gone into the classroom and unsponsored research. At a G13<sup>3</sup> university, says Smith, that figure rises to \$20 million annually; and at a G5<sup>4</sup> university, like my own, the figure is closer to \$39 million. \$39 million would buy a lot of tenure-track professors. It would buy a lot of sections of first year English. It would even buy telephones and letterhead, which my department, the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, had to eliminate last year as a way of meeting that *one year’s* cut—one of many—to our operating budget.

I do realize that our central administrations are being required to meet new, and externally imposed, demands for accountability and strategic planning and to commit themselves more forcefully to fund raising from private sources. And I do know that these activities cost money. But \$39 million, annually? At each of the G5 universities?

My own university has six vice-presidents: Academic (and Provost), University Relations, Facilities and Operations, Finance and Administration, Research, and Advancement. Of these six, only two have ever held academic—that is to say, professorial, teaching and research—positions. And neither of them has ever taught a course at our university. They don’t know our classrooms or our students from the perspective of a teacher.

In his article, Barry Cooper says that “When professors were on temporary administrative assignment, they never forgot [that] the purpose of the university was teaching and research. Now, full-time professional managers see administration as an end in itself.” I don’t know that I would go that far, and I do know that the work of senior and central administration is difficult and demanding. Nonetheless, I think we lost something crucial when we stopped expecting that our senior administrators would—

3 A strategy and policy formation group, G13 is the group of thirteen leading research universities in Canada. In 2010 these were Dalhousie, Laval, McGill, McMaster, Queen’s, Alberta, UBC, Calgary, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Waterloo, Western. Now, with the 2011 addition of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, this group is known as the U15.

4 Montreal, McGill, Toronto, Alberta, UBC.

*could*—one day return to the classroom. I think we lost something crucial when executive search and recruitment firms—headhunters—took over the business of placing our senior administrators, thereby creating a peripatetic senior managerial class. It is a class of academics that will never have to live and work with the policies and procedures it develops or the initiatives it prioritizes over the less glamorous work of undergraduate teaching that most of us do and that most of us continue to value.

And so I am proposing a new rite of passage: a contractual requirement that every senior administrator, from the Dean up, must spend the middle six months of every five-year term in the classroom, in her disciplinary department, working with the current generation of undergraduate students, setting exams and marking papers, using the features of our “smart” classrooms without the benefit of tech support, entering grades into our new computerized systems, looking for chalk or a whiteboard marker, begging for a couple of sheets of letterhead on which to write letters of reference, explaining to SSHRC or NSERC that she can’t participate in a conference call because she doesn’t have a telephone, and filling out her own expense claim forms.

I propose that for six months out of every five-year term they come back to the ranks. That they join us on the raft that is the dream of higher education, “born by the endless river toward an impossible escape” (Fiedler 145).

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