

Academic Citizen Subjects

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IN ANNABEL LYON'S *The Sweet Girl*, Pythias, the daughter of Aristotle, cannot gain entry into her father's Lyceum. Even though she is brighter than her brother, she is barred from this place of higher learning because of her gender. Indeed, for Pythias, the Lyceum is a place of potential oppression. Upon Aristotle's death, she rejects the idea of seeking shelter at the school. Imagining being there under the care of the new head, Theophrastos, she thinks to herself, "And weave in my room for the rest of my life, obeying Theophrastos?" (116). Instead, Pythias navigates all the dangers of being a young woman alone with little power and even less money. For Pythias, crippling debt, the loss of house and home, and sexual threat are preferable to the care of the Lyceum.

What might Pythias's cynicism toward the Lyceum reveal about academic citizenship? Although Lyon's story unfolds in ancient Greece, Pythias's situation tells us that places of higher learning may offer a refuge from worldly cares, but they can also be places that are antithetical to freedom for those who do not have full access to the rights and privileges of that social world; that is, for those who are not citizens. Even though the Lyceum appears in this novel as a site of exclusion and potential oppression, I want to suggest that the novel offers a view into the risks of citizenship

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rather than those of the Lyceum. Although the school is where Pythias might lose her freedom, it is her place in Athens that is the condition of that potential loss. Let us turn our cynicism away from the academy and toward citizenship.

Citizenship depends upon exclusion. As Engin Isin argues, “citizenship and its alterity always emerged simultaneously in a dialogical manner and constituted each other. Women were not simply excluded from ancient Greek citizenship, but were constituted by it. Similarly, slaves were not simply excluded from citizenship, but made citizenship possible by their very formation” (4). Like citizenship in ancient Greece, contemporary citizenship also depends upon exclusions. One need only to consider the moves by the current Canadian Immigration Minister to strip thousands of people of Canadian citizenship (as of September 2012, the ministry has indicated its intention to investigate the revocation of citizenship for eleven thousand people)¹ to realize that citizenship continues to rely upon acts of exclusion in order for its consolidation.

Beyond its exclusions, and its constitution upon exclusion, contemporary citizenship is also a problem in terms of the contradictions of its constitution. In “Citizen Subject,” Etienne Balibar points out that the contemporary use of the word “subject” holds within it both the idea of *subjectum* and that of *subjectus*. The former is substantive and the latter adjectival. It is the difference between being a representation of the people and being subjected. Balibar demonstrates that recovering this difference enables an understanding of the antinomies of freedom and equality in contemporary citizenship: “The idea of the rights of the citizen, at the very moment of his emergence, thus institutes an historical figure that is no longer the *subjectus*, and not yet the *subjectum*. But from the beginning, in the way it is formulated and put into practice, this figure exceeds its own institution” (46).

Prior to the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, citizens were subjects of the king. They were *subjectus*. With the rise of the republic, the “*citizen is the subject*, the citizen is always a *supposed subject*” (Balibar 45). Balibar calls this transition the “citizen’s becoming-a-subject (*devenir-sujet*)” (45). The citizen is not yet *subjectum*. This process of becoming clarifies the contradictions of citizenship (man versus citizen, subject of legislative power versus legislative subject, and so on), as well as those

1 CBC News, “3,100 citizenships ordered revoked for immigration fraud: 19 individuals stripped so far as Jason Kenney’s department investigates some 11,000 cases.” www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/09/10/pol-conservatives-revoking-thousands-citizenship.html. 28 October 2012.

of academic citizenship (promise of equality through collegiality versus intrinsic hierarchy of the institution, the academy as a sovereign intellectual space versus its reliance upon governmental support, and so on).

Indeed, I suggest that academic citizenship does not exist not only because the academy is not a nation (and, despite Saskia Sassen's suggestion that citizenship may be unbound as well as the cosmopolitics of Kwame Anthony Appiah, I still think that citizenship must still be understood within the context of the nation) but also because we are not yet done with the academic subject.

Balibar's "*devenir-sujet*" reveals the issue of equality as a central and unresolved problem for citizenship both within the academy (if such a thing exists) and without. Moving through an examination of the contradictions of the 1789 *Declaration*, Balibar highlights the tensions between formal or symbolic equality where man "is *reputed* to be equivalent to every individual in his capacity as citizen" and "real" equality where "citizenship will not exist unless the *conditions* of all individuals are equal, or at least equivalent" (46). Any casual glance at the situation of postsecondary institutions in Canada will reveal the ways in which the "real" equality that Balibar outlines is absent.

Citizenship demands equality. And yet the academy functions on inequality not just in terms of its dependence on precarious labour but also in terms of the hierarchies intrinsic to its institutional premise: teachers over students; deans over faculty; the board of governors over the university. Academics attempt to address inequality through a mixture of hopeful measures (we might someday hire more tenure-track professors); rationalization (the university cannot operate without governance); more rationalization (some people are more meritorious than others); hand-wringing (if only we could get more funding); more hand-wringing (if only society were not so anti-intellectual); and guilty unease. Few moments capture the guilt of inequality so sharply as the moment when one, or one's colleague, admits that they would never have gotten a job in the current climate of inflated expectations and fierce competition. But this guilt, hand-wringing, and rationalization is not necessarily a reason for cynicism so much as it is a reason to dwell in *subjectus*.

Dwelling in *subjectus* means being attuned to process of the submission to power. Balibar clarifies that the subject is a *subditus*: "this means that he enters into a relationship of obedience. Obedience is not compulsion; it is something more" (41). It is a relationship that must be established. "Obedience institutes the command of higher over lower, but it fundamentally comes from below: as *subditi*, the subjects *will* their own

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obedience” (Balibar 41). In the academy, there are the obvious hierarchies of the government over the university, the university governance bodies over faculty and students, and so on. Rather than railing against power—a move that so often leads to cynicism for the institution of the academy—academics might productively examine our situation as *subditi*. In so doing, we might find ways to exploit the submission to power.

The Sweet Girl closes with a scene of intimacy between Pythias and Tycho, her former slave: “I put my head on his shoulder, and after a while, he puts his arm around me” (236). This moment unfolds after Tycho has been given his freedom. Through Pythias’s marriage to Nicanor, by the terms of Aristotle’s will, Tycho is freed from slavery and given employment by her household. This relation between two non-citizens offers a clue to dwelling in *subjectus*. Lyon’s novel ends with ambiguity. The reader does not know whether Pythias and Tycho become friends, or lovers, or anything more than two people bound by a relationship of employment. But, in this moment where Pythias and Tycho “sit for a long time, quietly, as morning turns hot noon,” with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her, Lyon offers a glimpse of intimacy and subjection (236). Pythias does not find her freedom in breaking down walls and entering the Lyceum. She chooses to submit to the husband that her father had chosen for her, and, in so doing, she is able to insist upon liberation for Tycho. Her subjection makes his freedom possible.

Like Pythias, perhaps the academy might dwell in its subjection in order to examine the ways in which this willed obedience might allow for other forms of liberation. Clearly, there are compromises and losses. Dwelling in subjection is not pretty. But some honesty about the incomplete process of becoming that marks academic life might allow for less hand-wringing, less guilt, and more real equality. There are no academic citizens—the academy is not a state unto itself—but there might yet be academic subjects.

Works Cited

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