

Introduction: Cynicism and/as Academic Citizenship

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IN FOLLOWING THE DISCUSSIONS that have been swirling around the mounting challenges facing the humanities in Canada, I have been struck by a rising tone of frustration and fatigue, as if negotiating the changing model of the university is fast becoming as depressing as it is necessary.¹ In proposing a Committee for Professional Concerns panel on “Cynicism in the Academy” for the 2012 Congress, I hoped to foster a discussion about the affective and personal costs of navigating the academy in a period when the humanities are widely perceived as being under threat. “Academic Citizenship,” a second panel organized by Clint Burnham, emerged from a different path but addressed similar concerns, exploring how literary scholars in Canada currently understand their relationship to the profession and to the public at large.

At a time when governmental and institutional leaders unapologetically evaluate postsecondary education through neo-liberal rhetoric of efficiency and economic accountability, a certain amount of cynicism in

¹ Here I am signaling my indebtedness to the 2011 *ESC* Readers’ Forum edited by Neta Gordon, “‘Where are we now?’ Negotiating a Changing Model of the University.” The 2011 forum, in which I participated, addressed and reflected many of the concerns of this forum.

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the academy may be understandable. It may also prove critically useful, for active cynicism has the potential to interrogate, or at least destabilize, the shifting power dynamics that are quickly becoming normalized. In their contributions to this forum, for example, Mark McCutcheon draws on Slavoj Žižek to underline cynicism's value as a "carnavalesque mode of [...] ridicule," while Erin Wunker draws on its classical tradition to suggest a form of cynicism that "barks" in the face of power. And yet, as both McCutcheon and Wunker go on to remind us, cynicism also exerts a tremendous affective and political cost and risks facilitating the conditions responsible for its rise.

If the notion of citizenship has become an increasingly important term in Canadian literary studies over the past decade, it must be at least partly in response to the threat of institutional disengagement that comes with a rise in academic cynicism.² In this context, citizenship has come to signify less as a reified marker of inclusion in the nation-state than as a rhetorical construct designating a critically engaged participation in the structural and institutional politics of the profession. In his "Defense of Publicity" in this forum, however, Frank Davey reanimates academic citizenship's implicit connection to the nation. Untangling academic citizenship from activism—insisting the two may be related but ought not to be mistaken as synonymous—Davey suggests that as citizens with very particular skill sets, academics have an obligation to engage the larger national community by offering our expertise outside of the academic context. If we understand academic citizenship through faculty expertise, however, how are we to position graduate students? As Brad Congdon points out in his contribution, graduate student labour has become central to the function of contemporary universities, and yet their position within academic notions of citizenship is far from clear. Congdon notes that for graduate students looking toward a career in their field of study, "the many concerns of citizenship are effectively reduced to one: *how* to get in." Lily Cho further questions the efficacy of citizenship as a model for academic engagement, arguing that the implicit equation between the academy and the nation-state obscures much more than it reveals—including the ways in which we are complicit within the structures of power against which we

² See, for example, Donna Palmateer Pennee's influential essay "Literary Citizenship: Culture (Un)Bounded, Culture (Re)Distributed," in *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004. 75–85). See also Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki's co-edited collection, *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007).

rail. Instead, Cho advocates for a radical “honesty about the incomplete process of becoming that marks academic life,” with the hope that we might find ways to “exploit the submission to power.”

The title I have given this Readers’ Forum is “Cynicism and/as Academic Citizenship.” This is meant, in part, to reflect the deep frustration and encroaching resignation many of us feel as we navigate academia in particularly challenging times. It is also meant, however, to reflect my cautious optimism that, as a collection, the essays here gesture toward an academic practice that is strategically proactive in its engagement with the affective and the institutional contexts of our discipline.