The Death of the Graduate Student (and the Birth of the HQP)

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In the middle of a sleek little brochure entitled *Framing Our Direction 2010–12* (2010), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) announced its plans to gather together its graduate student and postdoctoral funding programs under a new umbrella program called "Talent." According to the SSHRC website, the primary context for the establishment of the Talent program is the granting council's efforts at "promot[ing] the acquisition of research skills, and assist[ing] in the training of highly qualified personnel in the social sciences and humanities" ("Talent Program"). The Talent program is not the first time that SSHRC has adopted the term "Highly Qualified Personnel" (HQP) as a euphemism for "graduate students," and SSHRC is far from the only granting council in Canada deploying this rhetoric. But for a recent PhD graduate and current postdoctoral scholar such as myself, SSHRC's decision to link the major granting programs for all graduate students and postdoctoral scholars and collectively frame them as a training program for highly qualified personnel offers an occasion to pause and consider what is beginning to look like the death of the graduate student in Canada's increasingly corporatized postsecondary institutions. The time has come

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for an impassioned defence of graduate education as education, a process that could begin with a pedagogy of critical professionalization.

In *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education* (2011), James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar lament what they call the "drift towards vocationalism" (14) currently underway in Canadian universities. Although Côté and Allahar focus on undergraduate education, the distinction they draw between the *training* that characterizes preparation for postuniversity vocations and the *education* that fosters critical thought is useful for understanding the process underway at the graduate level as well. While "training is more given to specialization and the acquisition of a narrow range of skills and information associated with a discrete or specific task," they suggest, the concept of "education is more general and envisages as an end product a more cultured, open-mined, and civic-minded citizenry" (14). SSHRC's newly minted Talent program is only one example, of course, but its stated aims of "promot[ing] the acquisition of research *skills*, and assist[ing] in the *training* of *highly qualified personnel*" (emphasis added) is indicative of a larger shift in the humanities away from graduate student education and toward graduate student training.[1]

My own introduction to the changing climate of the humanities came as a result of my fortuitous involvement with Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli's "Culture of Research" colloquium, which I attended in the first semester of my PhD in 2006. Let me confess here that I was utterly and unredeemably lost throughout the weekend, although I'm sure this was abundantly clear to all who were around that table. My sense is that the vast majority of those currently entering graduate studies in Canada would be as bewildered as I was at such an event and, as such, are woefully unprepared to respond to the various ways in which their position in the university is shifting. As Jessica Schagerl points out, for students lacking a systematic introduction to the relevant networks of organizations and contexts of humanities scholarship in Canada, any debate surrounding their form or function quickly dissolves into "the equivalent of 'blah blah blah blah, funding, blah blah blah blah, research'" (98). Schagerl turns to a re-investment in mentorship as a means to offer graduate students such

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1 The vast majority of students in the humanities will ultimately work outside the academy, of course, but realigning graduate studies so that their economic value to private industry becomes the primary outcome is fatally misguided. If, as SSHRC argues, the "skills" enabled by the humanities are to include the "intellectual assets of independent thinking [and] creative enquiry" (*Framing* 9), it should be obvious that any attempt to foster the humanities while funneling them into predetermined ends is, nearly by definition, bound to fail.

an introduction, and, as someone who was extremely fortunate to have strong mentors throughout my graduate studies, I can certainly attest to the value—both intellectual and economic—of strong and invested mentorship. As a recent member of the wider graduate student community, however, I can also attest to the vast inconsistencies and inequalities that show mentorship to be a fatally ad hoc pedagogical model. A more systematic introduction to the shifting contexts of the humanities in Canada is necessary not simply for the precious few students who will ultimately join the tenured professoriate, and not because graduate students are simply victims in this emerging paradigm (in fact, PhD students occupy a strangely privileged role in its logic, as both a source of funding for their universities and as the labour pool necessary to enable ever-increasing class sizes). Rather, it is necessary because graduate students deserve to understand the quickly changing values, expectations, and opportunities for their academic work.

What is necessary to more broadly equip graduate students to negotiate the rising of what Coleman and Kamboureli call "research capitalism" (xvi) in Canada is a reinvestment in graduate student professionalization. Professionalization has come to designate the increasing pressure for students to validate (and capitalize on) the learning process through extensive conferencing and publication prior to the completion of their degrees—a shift in the expectations of students that the MLA has identified as "the most significant change in the last thirty years in our field" ("Professionalization"). While we should be wary of the institutional amnesia that would allow us to juxtapose the current moment against an imagined golden age in which graduate students worked free of professional, financial, or institutional pressures, it is clear that the rise of this form of professionalization both reflects and affirms the vocational logic in which students are highly qualified personnel expected to immediately produce in the new knowledge economy. But professionalization need not be the simple instrumentalization of graduate studies. As a form of education, professionalization ought to move beyond the (necessary and valuable) training seminars on writing cover letters or grant applications. It must offer an introduction to the complex and swiftly changing worlds that comprise the contexts within which the profession is being practised, and must include a frank discussion about the larger benefits and challenges of undertaking graduate study in the humanities in the contemporary moment, including the difficult realities of the academic job market. More than this, however, it must enable students to critically assess and forcefully engage with the larger political and institutional forces that give these worlds their shape.

The absence of a systematic introduction to these worlds, particularly at a time of such foundational and rapid institutional change, constitutes a sanctioning of the ignorance necessary to facilitate the ascendency of research capitalism.

There are very real obstacles to implementing a pedagogy of critical professionalism. Time is limited, resources are low, and cynicism is high. The major granting agencies encourage students to route their "talents" through the logic of research capitalism as a requirement of accessing funding for their studies. Add in a larger public discourse of anti-intellectualism that promptly reconfigures any critical engagement with the corporatization of the humanities as further evidence of their illegitimacy,[2] and it is hardly surprising if graduate students are disengaged from the larger discussions regarding the future of postsecondary education at the very moment when their input is most needed. Yet a response to the quiet death of the graduate student and the corresponding birth of the HQP is necessary, and it will have to begin with a widespread commitment to demystifying the determining contexts in which such an exchange is possible. Today, perhaps more than ever, students must move beyond the study of their various disciplines and specialties to engage critically with the larger contexts in which their scholarship occurs. Their very existence as graduate students is at stake.

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2 See, for example, Robert Fulford's scathing review of Kamboureli and Coleman's collection in the *National Post*. Like any work, *Retooling the Humanities* is open to critique, but Fulford's sloppy attempt—which misrepresents the contents of the collection and fails to offer evidence for its generalized critique, appealing instead to anti-intellectual sentiments and resorting to counting the number of words used per sentence by a major scholar whose name he misspells—is, unintentionally but unmistakably, an exemplary argument for the need for humanities education.

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