The Dialectics of Tenure: An Interview with Dr. Ben Etherington

In April 2013, Robert Wood and Ashleigh Prosser interviewed Dr. Ben Etherington, a Research Lecturer in English, Text and Writing at the University of Western Sydney. Dr Etherington’s work focuses on decolonization and the emergence of literary materials and communities before, during and after that process. With these interests his work intersects with Literary Theory, Intellectual History, and World Philosophy. In this interview, Dr Etherington discusses a range of subjects. Among other topics he shares with us his current understanding and future expectations for higher education in Australia and the UK, where he undertook his doctoral studies; the tension between publishing and teaching; and the relationship of the university to other forms of communication and education. Undoubtedly, this interview will be of interest to postgraduates seeking a career in the academy and those interested in the politics of the tertiary sector.

You are currently employed in a much-coveted tenure-track position as Research Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney, could you please elaborate on what this position entails, and on the defining moments of your career that you feel have guided you down this career path?

As an undergraduate, I was very focused on gaining a scholarship to study overseas. During my masters I was very focused on getting into a good doctorate programme. To an extent, I devised projects which would get me to the next thing. Whilst writing my doctorate I realised that I’d not thought through the full implications of what an academic career entails in our time, and that I had not in any realistic way assessed the difficulties for thinking posed by the saturated marketplace of academic labour. I realised that doing what one needs to do to get past the next obstacle was the wrong way of going about entering into the vocation of scholarship, because it would never end. I stopped thinking of academia as a structure in which to succeed, and started focusing on the intellectual projects that I felt to be meaningful. I wouldn't say that this necessarily ‘paid off’, but it certainly helped me cope with the pressures of the profession.

How has your career path lead you to where you are today?

I followed a traditional path for Australian academics: win prizes as an undergraduate towards gaining a scholarship to Cambridge; gain recognition there (in my case, a postdoctoral fellowship in the English faculty) and then compete for a permanent post in an Australian university. Fortunately, this career path is not as dominant as it was previously. With that said, going to Oxbridge has a historical precedence that gives it a certain stability; and stability is not to be underestimated when writing a doctorate. From the start of my master’s degree, I was always developing competence in every aspect of the profession: publications, running events, teaching, building and maintaining a profile. To break it down like this, though, implies a calculation in each case. I think I was genuinely excited by the prospects of each, and threw myself into it.
Could you please elaborate on your postdoctoral research and what role it has played both intellectually and professionally in your career?

After that turning point mentioned earlier, I approached my doctoral and post-doctoral work as periods of exploring ideas, rather than producing academic capital. I was not so concerned to produce one career-making piece of research that would quickly grow up into a monograph via discrete journal articles, as to work out what things are worth devoting effort to. I did very little to further my doctoral project (on literary primitivism) during my time as a post-doctoral fellow. I dedicated myself to thinking in a parallel area in intellectual history (on decolonization as an idea) and an inordinate amount of time protesting higher education cuts and restructuring in the United Kingdom. I didn’t consider such activities to be distractions: again it helped to clarify what it is that I hoped to be doing, and the institutional conditions in which such work might be possible.

In light of the previous question, what are you currently researching, and what kind of projects do you have in the pipeline or planned for the near future?

I have begun a project on the history of the poetics of verse in creole in the West Indies. Persuaded, as I am, that we cannot know how artists think if we don’t have a sense of why they make the compositional decisions that they do, the aim is to illuminate the process by which creole became a viable material for poetic thinking in that region. This also involves the articulation of the field of publishing and reputation making in which such material first gained a foothold and then flourished. This, it is hoped, will be something of a case study in a larger study of the transformation of literary materials during decolonization.

The title of Limina Volume 19 is "Exclusivity: Boundaries of Difference" and in our Call for Papers we asked for submissions that explored questions of 'exclusivity'. How does the concept of 'exclusivity' function in your work, both from an intellectual perspective and from your perspective from within the academy?

I recently heard a friend use the term exclusivity to refer to a phase of intensifying commitment in liaisons which begin as open and casual. It is also a term that resonates with the journalist’s ‘exclusive’ story. I notice that the former is a noun form of the latter. When we talk about things in terms of exclusivity, it would seem that we will be abstracting from the act of describing an object as exclusive (which, of course, has become a noun in its own right). The scoop which, whether by cunning or payment, belongs to one media organisation is an ‘exclusive’ and thus bears the general trait of exclusivity. Thinking, then, across to the intellectual perspective from within the academy: it makes me think that such qualities of individual ownership and the activities of securing exclusive items and groups sectioned off with velvet ropes is the kind of thing that we ought to be avoiding. In the area of research, for example, it would be to shield our ideas like pharmaceutical companies do patents.

How do you think postgraduate and early career researchers can engage with such questions of exclusivity in a meaningful way with regard to their own intellectual and professional pursuits in the academy?

As above.
Could you please elaborate on your work's engagement with non-academic audiences, and the ways in which such an engagement functions with regard to the perceived 'exclusivity' of such research associated with the academy?

I do not think of specialised scholarly research as having any necessary connection to concepts of exclusivity. This is more a function of class and the distribution of resources in our society. Rigorous scholarship must follow its own path and has no responsibility to massage perceptions of its character as being of the ‘ivory tower’ and so forth. My experience is that when intellectuals aim for a broader civic engagement as the immediate purpose of their scholarship (rather than, say, civic engagement from the position of a bona fide thinker) they risk becoming charlatans.

As someone whose work has been thoroughly engaged with contemporary media and the new avenues for publication it has opened up in recent years, as can clearly be seen in your work for the Sydney Review of Books, in your opinion, how has the emergence of the digital humanities challenged the traditional academy?

Speaking in my field: concerted literary activity has existed in one manner or other in such a great range of societies, so I can't see why we should expect that digital technology will fundamentally alter the desire for such experience. It takes a long time to read literature well, or to hear it well; the adjustments with digital platforms and distribution will change things, but I don’t think their essence, pace McLuhan. As I see it, the Sydney Review of Books is largely an exercise in transferral not transformation. The situation with ‘moocs’ and possible shifting revenue models for universities is, in my view, the more uncertain aspect of the transition currently taking place. We could well face a situation such as that which exists in high fashion, where a small number of select brands (Versace/Stanford, Vuitton/Oxford) make a loss in high fashion/education in order to create a distinct brand for mass-produced commodities. Literary friends tell me, for example, that they have gone through the ‘Yale lectures on modern poetry’ online as though this is best way of learning ‘modern poetry’. So rather than persisting with universities like the one that I work at, which are located in and serve the local community, we would have disenfranchised students buying bling degrees, which are mass produced versions of the real thing consumed by the global cosmopolitan elite. Local literary cultures would then probably start to mirror this: ‘I’ve written a Yale modern poem; you can find it on my twitter stream’.

In your opinion, do you think the old adage "publish or perish" is still the case in the contemporary academia, and what do you feel this implies about the role of teaching?

Publish or perish is not a good slogan for mental health. The attitude which it seeks comically to distil is psychologically harming the profession, and degrading its work. I’m not unusual in believing that thinking, reading, teaching, and writing are an organic whole, and we need to resist any attempt to break this down into work functions; now as ever.

Finally, your career path has allowed for you to experience both the Australian and the United Kingdom's academic systems, could you please comparatively discuss your experiences within them and of the transition and exchange you encountered between them as both a student and an academic?

Both are under ceaseless attack by expropriating capital and state-led quantification. I think the struggles and challenges presented by this situation are common to both. My first response, upon returning, is that Australian academia has gone further along the path of alienation and we are quickly forgetting what academic freedom
and open inquiry really feel like. We should all be very wary of the ways in which the seemingly objective criteria that secure us positions and promotions permeate the way we form scholarly aspirations and, thereby, come to mediate our modes of reflection.

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