"Sustaining the Humanities"

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I work at a university that strives to be the greenest on the planet in the self-proclaimed greenest city. The rhetoric around sustainability at UBC was on my mind in the spring of 2013 as I prepared for a think tank called "Sustainability, Mentorship, and Intellectual Production: The Present and Future of Emerging Scholars in Canadian Literary Studies." Participants were asked to brainstorm on practical ways to address problems in the humanities caused by funding cuts, a scarcity of jobs, and the low morale among graduate students, former students, post-docs, the under-employed, and faculty. Although we all study Canadian writing, the problems laid out extended well beyond the field. Struck by the word sustainability in the think tank title, I decided to press this metaphor and draw on the language of environmentalism to reconsider the state of post-secondary education and the post-post-secondary job market. In doing so, I asked a number of questions. What if, instead of thinking of the humanities as in a state of crisis as we so often do, we think of the humanities as an ecosystem that is failing to thrive? How do we sustain the humanities as part of a system of diverse communities both within universities and in the public arena? In the face of resource undernourishment, how can we prosper? How do we promote biodiversity (or a rich variety of communal life, research, and teaching in all its forms and combinations)? How do we protect educational habitats that are endangered by the damaging effects of human populations (be they administrators or voters)? Finally, how can we productively change the climate of graduate training in humanities faculties to create an environment more conducive to intellectual growth, healthy life, and the maintenance of productive ground for future generations? How green and

forward thinking could UBC actually be if the institution, alongside others in Canada, opted to work more equitably?

Adapting my framing categories from Washington State's Department of Ecology "Supporting Sustainable Communities and Natural Resources" webpage, I propose seven ways to improve educational resources in the metaphorical ecosystem of the humanities: 1) recycle, 2) waste reduction, 3) create green jobs, 4) green development, 5) retrofit industry, 6) reduce toxicity, 7) prevent pollution. My conclusion is that to thrive, we need to protect the local environment and acknowledge that we are part of much larger diverse ecosystems.

1) Recycle

Worry about the humanities is certainly not new. As Marjorie Perloff wrote well over a decade ago, "[o]ne of our most common genres today is the epitaph for the humanities." Perhaps the best way to recycle is to historicize. This needs to be done at the level of individual departments and programs, at the level of institutional cultures, at the level of provincial departments of education, and at the metalevel of the disciplines.

To highlight the ongoing contributions of the humanities in culture and society, it is useful to turn to books as diverse as *From Humanism to Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Europe* by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine; Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*; "Out of the Ruins, the University to Come" special issue of *TOPIA,* guest edited by Bob Hanke and Alison Hearn; *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the Administrative University and Why It Matters* by Benjamin Ginsberg; Stefan Collini's *What Are Universities For?*; Louis Menand's *The Marketplace of Ideas*; and *Retooling the Humanities* edited by Smaro Kamboureli and Daniel Coleman. The point of such a reading list is to remind us of centuries old conversations about the humanities and to consider the challenges of continuing changes. In the field of Canadian literature, we often study the role of culture in the development of ideas about community, public spaces, the environment, systems of power, citizenship, and social justice. We do so most profitably when we remember that we are not the first generation to address such issues, even if differently stated.

By placing debates in historical and social context, we can rethink, repurpose, and reimagine the contributions of humanities scholars to conversations about the public good. Recycling here is closer to W. B. Yeats' notion of the spiral staircase than Wilson Harris' notion of infinite rehearsal.

2) Waste Reduction

In his 1999 article proposing solutions for the crisis in the humanities, Robert Weisbuch wrote: "[a]s doctoral programs in the humanities proliferate irresponsibly, turning out more and more graduates who cannot find jobs, the waste of human talent becomes enormous, intolerable" (qtd in Perloff). His proposal to eliminate such waste was to impose a kind of "birth control" on doctoral programs whereby fewer PhDs would be conceived and delivered. Fifteen years later, it is quite clear that his proposal for population control was not taken up with vigour.

I am not surprised. A few years ago at a faculty retreat, in response to a discussion about placement numbers coming out of our graduate program, I rather rashly proposed a five-year moratorium on admitting PhD students. The proposal was not met favourably. I was reminded that not all fields are equally well-covered in terms of graduate training and it is difficult to predict what areas will be in demand and when. It is also difficult to know at an early stage (after a BA or MA) who might become an original researcher, a strong teacher, and a good departmental citizen. It would further place an unfair burden on those in graduate programs to have to continue, even if they decided on another career path. Perhaps most significantly, such a moratorium could lead to an unproductive generation gap in knowledge and perhaps stall the development of ideas across generations. Finally, with funding tied to student numbers, it would be potentially dangerous for a departmental ecosystem to decrease programs based on attention to an international ecosystem problem. And yet, even acknowledging the drawbacks, I think that grad programs in the country should consider either downsizing (instead of growing as many administrations would prefer) or redesigning their programs for a wider range of outcome options.

I think we could also reduce the perception of waste if we were to rethink the importance and applicability of humanities degrees. The value of the bank of skills developed over the course of a graduate career should not be underestimated. Humanities graduates have skills in critical, creative, imaginative, and analytical thinking, in big picture analysis and close reading, in oral and written communication, in problem solving, in reasoned argumentation, in lateral application of expertise, and in working to deadlines and constraints on space and time. Humanities graduates also have immense amounts of knowledge useful for historicizing and nuancing the complexities of everyday life around the world.

The UBC English Graduate Chair, Patsy Badir, proposes the following: "I would like to see SSHRC-funded research at the highest level; I would like to see surveys of government, of communications networks and services, of business, of the entertainment industry etc. that look at the qualifications of employees; I would like to see census data that collates employment, salary and graduate degrees." If we had better metrics on placement of students with humanities graduate degrees outside academia, I suspect we would find that there is less "waste" of human talent than is rumoured. Better numbers might help us acknowledge the value of the contributions graduate training has made to culture, government, NGOs, publishing, research, communication, the arts, and so on. Such comparative statistics might support the humanities (as anecdotes about baristas are currently used against it) to funding bodies and might help bolster arguments about public accountability concerning the value of university degrees. Or, they might prove that there is a problem and that too many people are finishing graduate degrees and working in positions for which they are not reasonably compensated or are overqualified.[1] By shrinking programs across the board and by emphasizing the alternatives to academia, we might reduce the creation of a next generation of exploitable labour and avoid waste in that regard as well.

3) Create Green Jobs

As former UBC Faculty Association president and my colleague in English, Elizabeth Hodgson, argues, "on the employment side, what we as TTF, department heads, and national lobbying organizations must do is understand once and for all that we can ONLY protect tenure and academic freedom by insisting that part-time, sessional, adjunct faculty are properly paid. As long as adjuncts are a two-for-one or three-for-one deal (especially on the teaching side), universities will continue to choose these positions." So, unless the exploitation of graduate, part-time, and sessional labour is addressed adequately and all colleagues are valued and paid in reflection of their training and experience, the system will remain untenable for all but a few emerging scholars.[2]

I wonder if we might think of the corporatization of the humanities as akin to the introduction of an invasive species with the imposition of standards from outside the humanities on the research and work we do. The biological diversity of our research has been threatened as funding decisions for post-secondary institutions have relied more heavily on endowments and corporate sponsorship than in the past, as cuts to university budgets have

disproportionately hit arts faculty budgets, as classroom sizes have grown and shiny new MOOCs have been introduced, and as the culture of overwork becomes the norm.

This is where the ecosystem analogy is most relevant. For a healthy ecosystem, we need radical change to the university system of employment, class size, and course offering. We currently have a hierarchical system of stars (CRCs and endowed chairs), faculty, instructors, sessionals, adjunct instructors, and graduate students. Administrators rely on the hierarchical meritocracy to perpetuate the inequities. I understand that CRCs and SSHRCs are a way for the federal government to fund education beyond provincial mandates and they certainly support excellence and originality but they also reinforce the hierarchy and raise expectations. They destabilize the ecosystem.

4) Green Development

Being a university professor is a job and not a vocation and we must think of green development accordingly. As the graduate placement officer in my department from 2011-13, my basic guiding question was this: How do we train students for the realities of today's job market? How can we be transparent about our students' need to engage in their own risk assessment upon entering a degree and how do we build risk management into our programs? We know that the chance of securing a job in the academy remains slim even when a student checks all the right boxes and performs the now-standard extra work (beyond requirements for the degree)— attending conferences, publishing reviews and articles, teaching classes, and serving on departmental committees. How do we retain support and optimism for the students we have in the face of such a precarious future? What are the ethics of training here? One of my doctoral students recently told me that he would prefer not to be reminded of the dismal prospects for the future at every turn (after having been clearly told once) as it is difficult to proceed through the program with intellectual excitement (and arduous hoop jumping) under the shadow of an always dark cloud. I take his point. I think we are obligated to spell out the thin possibility for academic employment after graduation to grad students as they enter the program and to facilitate forms of education for other meaningful and productive careers to come out of graduate education. If students continue, knowing the risks, then it is their choice.

So how might we broaden the chance for meaningful employment? One way is to facilitate graduate training in settings beyond academia. My department

is in the pilot year of a Co-op PhD program (we already have an undergraduate Co-op program). In it, in addition to our current training in English Language and Literatures, we offer placements within a variety of professional work settings for three stints of four months over the course of the degree. Students gain professional experience attractive to future employers (both academic and non). While co-op programs are conventional in disciplines like Engineering, they are still unconventional in a field like English. So far the experiment has been going very well with employers as eager to place students as grad students are to get wider experience.

While some might argue that such a program could dilute the degree, sacrifice intellectual rigour, or mean that we have succumbed to the corporatization of the university, I believe that it will realistically develop options for students who have invested one to two years for an MA and five to seven years for a PhD. It will not make us a service department for a professional degree. Elizabeth Hodgson, one of the program founders, notes that "If we facilitate our grad students' move from the academic ghetto to a larger neighbourhood of research, communications, and expert-administration positions in non-academic or academic-admin, we will likewise both attract students and limit the supply of cheap labour for our institutions."

For the past three years I have been part of a team at *Canadian Literature,* led by Margery Fee, developing the *CanLit Guides* project (see canlitguides.ca). This is a good example of the kind of placement that would be useful for an English Co-op student. We have worked with five graduate students writing, producing, designing, building, and coding the guides. Along the way, we have shown the graduate students how a journal operates, how to edit, how to navigate the mechanics of a journal, and how we approach Canadian literary history. Reciprocally, and sustainably, we have relied on their expertise and training (their knowledge of digital humanities and visual poetics certainly outweighs mine). Working together is a form of green development.

We are not alone in thinking that we are obliged to open the scope of graduate education. In 2011, historians Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman attacked the notion that non-academic employment for history PhDs be considered a Plan B and advocated a change in language to reflect a necessary change in attitude. They write, "we tell students that there are 'alternatives' to academic careers. We warn them to develop a 'Plan B' in case they do not find a teaching post. And the very words in which we couch this useful advice make clear how much we hope they will not have to follow it—and suggest, to many of them, that if they do

have to settle for employment outside of academe, they should crawl off home and gnaw their arms off." Grafton and Grossman convincingly argue that students entering graduate programs need to see that they are being offered an education that faculty "believe in, not just as reproductions of ourselves, but also as contributors to public culture and even the private sector." For these former executive members of the American Historical Association, "alternative" careers (or "alt-ac") "should have as much legitimacy as the traditional PhD-to-tenure-track trajectory." I support such an attitude shift in how we *think* and *speak* about graduate training. We need to integrate training for non-professorial jobs and meaningful careers outside academia—not as second choices, plan Bs, or fall back jobs, but rather as opportunities that parallel teaching and academic research.

5) Retrofit Industry

This is not my area of expertise but it seems to me that the Canadian system of provincial funding of education is flawed. It seems incredibly inefficient. Surely we are due for an overhaul of the system of educational jurisdiction. I suspect we could eliminate waste, reuse ideas across provincial borders, conserve the energy used to replicate programs in each province, share funding, share resources, and create a greener educational program if more national coordination was in place.

We also need to think of ways to make institutions and governments remember that they are accountable to us. My colleague Dina Al-Kassim suggests that students need to take this on themselves. As she says, "ethical and political scrutiny of university administrations by grads and alums . . . politicizes their connection to the institution and has the effect of reminding all that these institutions are to serve the public good; this represents a return to values before the neoliberal takeover or drift to the right and to corporate values." Those in power need to realize that their growth and success depends on a successful ecosystem that begins at the level of the student and that they must retain public accountability.

6) Reduce Toxicity

We need to recognize the stress on those already employed in academic ecosystems (increased class size, many supervisions, large amounts of service, few research dollars and minutes) alongside those who want into the system (too few positions, uncertain futures). In short, we need to reduce the toxicity that comes from the culture of overwork to create a more healthy

workplace environment for both faculty and students. I imagine it would lead to better scholarship as well.

It is time to guide public perception on the value of the work we do as we reduce toxicity in public rhetoric about the waste of a humanities degree. As Michael Bérubé memorably states, "I do want to say one thing about the fields of expertise we have created and validated in the humanities over the past 30 or 40 years. They have been, on the whole, pretty awesome." He argues the absolute relevance of postcolonial, feminist, deconstructive, queer, and ecocritical theories in the study of culture. Questioning everything and maintaining incredulity to master-narratives of all kinds allows us to recognize the need for a more equitable and sustainable society.

7) Prevent Pollution

We can prevent air pollution by acknowledging the problems but also focusing on the good news. As Patsy Badir argues, "Graduate degrees in the humanities are as ubiquitous as air, yes, but also as essential and potentially powerful." Graduates of humanities programs populate government, the entertainment industry, communications, information technology, business, and the not-for-profit sector as well as education. We *have* public impact.

To thrive, we need to protect the local environment and acknowledge that we are part of much larger diverse ecosystems, as we clean up the rubbish of some public rhetoric, conserve energy, reduce waste, improve air quality, reduce toxic exposure, and hopefully increase sustainability. In 1969, Ben Metcalfe, the journalist / environmental activist / and early member of Greenpeace, paid for twelve billboards in Vancouver that declared "ECOLOGY? LOOK IT UP! YOU'RE INVOLVED!"[3] Let's extend Metcalfe's imperative and consider how we—here and now—are all involved in ecology.

One way to do so is to read articles like the ones in this issue. The authors consider works of art that complicate conventional understandings of refugee lives, spousal sponsorship, labour unrest, multiculturalism, nationalism, tourism, war, memoir, and ghosts. They are as "relevant" to reading the world around us as they are to the artistic production of ideas.

Institute at the University of Guelph, April 2013. I am indebted to Erin Hurley for suggesting, in conversation, that I look at the crisis in the humanities through the lens of ecology and ask what humanities would need to thrive. I also want to acknowledge and thank my colleagues at UBC for generously engaging in an online conversation about the questions asked for this think tank in preparation for this paper. I have quoted several of them but the comments of all have informed my points here. Thank you to Larissa Lai, Mary Chapman, Patsy Badir, Sian Echard, Elizabeth Hodgson, Dina Al-Kassim, Jeff Severs, Vin Nardizzi, Sandy Tomcs, Sneja Gunew, Deanna Kreissel, Robert Rouse, Margery Fee, Alan Jacobs, and Mark Vessey as well as my students Brendan McCormack and Christina Turner for their feedback. Thanks especially to Larissa Lai for joining me at a departmental research colloquium to present our work-in-progress on March 8, 2013: "The Crisis in the Humanities: Two Practical Responses." Finally, thanks to Tiffany Johnstone for timely editorial input.

NOTES

1 Consider the findings of the StatsCan report "Overqualification among recent university graduates in Canada" by Sharanjit Uppal and Sébastien LaRochelle-Côté issued in April 2014 that concludes that a large number of graduates of humanities undergraduate programs are overqualified for the jobs they are employed in, ages 25-34. They note that the number has not changed considerably between 1991 and 2011.
2 Concern about the changing job market is not limited to academia. Indeed, academia mirrors what I understand has become standard at tech companies, banks, and other high level businesses. As William Poundstone notes in *Are You Smart Enough to Work at Google*? "hiring at today's selective companies is predicated on the disappointment of many" (19). There is no question that the hiring climate at universities is predicated on a similar degree of disappointment.
3 Thanks to Graeme Wynn for this wonderful reference in "Navigating a 'Wasting World': Perspectives on Environmentalism and Sustainability in Canada." UBC McLean lectures. 7 Mar. 2013.

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Erratum

In issue 218 of *Canadian Literature,* a book review by David Leahy of Deborah Kirshner's novella, *Mahler's Lament,* stated that in the book the character of Gustav Mahler raped his sister Justine. This does not happen in the narrative. *Canadian Literature* and David Leahy apologize for this error and misrepresentation.