

The Radical Future of the Liberal Arts

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Accomplishments are always collective adventures. This prize is therefore for the entire MLA program at Johns Hopkins University. This past year, I was able to provide my best in advising, teaching, and research because I received tremendous support from the Hopkins MLA family: our incredible Program Director, Laura DeSisto; our remarkable group of professors; and our exceptional students. Thank you all.

RADICAL. This word perfectly describes the history and the core identity of the MLA program at Hopkins. This year, we are marking our 60th anniversary. As I researched the program's history, I discovered it had always been at the forefront of the academic discourses in the Liberal Arts. In 1962, it was the nation's first interdisciplinary graduate program, at a time when the term "interdisciplinarity" was viewed with derision by most academics. Throughout the 1970s, the curriculum grew increasingly politicized, with the early introduction of gender and race studies, for instance. In the 1980s, the program resisted the neoliberal wave by providing courses that dismantled this ideology in a timely way. When Cultural Studies became popular in the 1990s, the curriculum started to include the study of pop culture. In 2016, the MLA began offering online courses, at a time when online instruction was not the standard in most graduate programs. During the past few years, Laura DeSisto and I have strived to incorporate a broader spectrum of viewpoints and voices and a commitment to social justice into the curriculum, much necessary in our post-pandemic world.

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The Liberal Arts are radical because their aim is to liberate lives, particularly those of the oppressed. Annie Ernaux earned the Nobel Prize four days ago.¹ It is not an exaggeration to state that she is the reason why I am here today. I recall reading *The Years* in college. For the first time, I felt as if someone was not just writing about my life but also explaining it in ways I could never have imagined. *The Years* was the story of a young girl who grew up in poverty. Her parents were farmers in Normandy; they both had dropped out of school at 14. The young woman soon relocates to the nearest city, enrolls in college, and experiences a strange disconnection with her family and, eventually, within herself. As an 18-year-old who had grown up in Northeastern France, surrounded by poor communities of color and second-generation immigrants (no one had French roots, we were all Italians, Spaniards, Algerians, Tunisians...) and was now attending college in a big city, her narrative struck a chord. My parents had also left school at age 16. Like Annie, no one in my family had attended high school. But Annie was not just telling a story; she was also explaining life with concepts I had never heard of: power, privilege, inequality, capitalism, justice. Everything she felt—everything I had felt too!—was dissected and evaluated in the clearest and most succinct prose. My brain was completely rewired.

My mother's simplest sentences—those I kept hearing during my adolescence—took on an entirely new significance. "I never enjoyed school; it was never my thing," my mother used to say. For Ernaux, these simple sentences were more than just a succession of words. They reflected a whole system of dominance and exclusion. My mother—just like Annie's mother—believed that leaving school at 16 was a choice. She, however, had never noticed that, in her social class, in her village, all the women had led the exact same life (they dropped out of school early, married a local guy who lived down the street, had kids in their early twenties, and usually worked, as my mother did, as cleaning ladies) or that her decision was the result of social inequalities, determinism, and class segregation—the result of a web of injustices. She was unaware that for the most privileged classes, the choice of attending college was equally clear.

At the age of eighteen, Ernaux taught me all about the Liberal Arts, as her works contained references to sociology, philosophy, anthropology, history, literature, and music.

¹ October 2022.

At the age of eighteen, Ernaux taught me the meaning of interdisciplinarity: to better comprehend the complexity of the world, her books were a mixture of fiction and nonfiction, sometimes autobiographical and sometimes not, with pages resembling sociological essays, historical articles, or political pamphlets.

Most importantly, at the age of eighteen, Ernaux showed me that the Liberal Arts were precious and that, like other forms of knowledge and science, they could be misused. Early on, thanks to her, I realized that the Liberal Arts could also be used as a tool of cultural dominance and social control. Thanks to her, I have always viewed pursuing a career in the Liberal Arts as a radical way to deconstruct conventional narratives, not to impose them. The Liberal Arts were/are radically liberating.

In this post-covid culture, understanding the world will require the radicalism, the interdisciplinary nature, and emancipatory purposes of the Liberal Arts. I would like to propose three simple methods for communicating this message to our students and institutions.

First, we must explain the applied value of a Liberal Arts degree. In a more complex world and in a future where we will consume less, work less, spend less, travel less, and eat less, the interdisciplinarity, the ways of knowing, the knowledge, and the critical thinking that we bring to the table are more important than ever. The Covid-19 pandemic was likely a dress rehearsal for a much more devastating future pandemic. It is our students who are best equipped to find concrete solutions to the impending crises, because they are interdisciplinary thinkers, view their work as liberating, and place the human condition at the center of their work. Most companies now employ work-life balance directors, social justice experts, DEI practitioners, chiefs of philosophy, or historians. How do we prepare our students for these positions?

Second, we must talk about the Liberal Arts with the general public, outside of the "Ivory Tower." In a polarized society where it has become increasingly difficult to have uncomfortable conversations, our students are best equipped to explain complex problems to the general public and make connections between all the great concerns of our time: social justice, climate change, and racial inequality, for example. Allow me to share my story with you. In one of my first graduate seminars, "Becoming a Historian," there was a segment titled "How to talk to the media?" The message was straightforward: "Don't waste your time, journalists

only want sound bites, it'll be a disaster." So when, two years ago, I received a call from a French cable network—the equivalent of CNN—inviting me to discuss Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory for one hour on election night, I initially declined, following the guidance I had received during my graduate training. But the journalist tried to persuade me: "It's just like talking to students, except you're speaking to TV viewers." I recalled how I—growing up in a working-class environment where books were not readily available—had been exposed to new concepts, to culture, to politics, to scholars and writers: it was through television. I therefore decided to accept the invitation and went on to discuss Kimberly Crenshaw, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis on prime-time television the night Donald Trump was defeated. That night, a young man of color from Aubervilliers sent me a message on Twitter: "I had never heard anyone talk like that on television before, and I had also never really understood what intersectionality was until now." That was enough to make me continue. I started to appear on television, on the radio, and in the press more frequently, which enabled me to share my expertise with new audiences. Three years ago, I never would have imagined doing this, or posting threads on Twitter, creating Instagram stories about my work, even launching a TikTok platform. But I am finding that our new generation of students are keenly interested in public forums and that we need to assist them.

Finally, we must diversify our programs. Instead of attempting to diversify the curriculum, we must incorporate diverse voices into our programs and departments. Hiring faculty from diverse backgrounds is not enough: we need to retain and promote them, especially those on whom the Liberal Arts had a genuine impact. Nobody is more qualified to discuss transgender studies than a transgender person. Nobody can better explain what it means to be low-income than someone who has experienced it. However, it remains more difficult for an individual from a lower socioeconomic background to access graduate and doctoral studies in the Liberal Arts or to become gainfully employed in a Liberal Arts program and department. This will necessitate some introspection, internally. Our programs and departments may require a dynamic shift. People who have always dominated the narrative may need to take a step back and assist in advancing and amplifying new voices. And if your hiring capacity is limited, it may be time to share more personal and relatable stories with students.

Who taught me about the history and the dynamics of the working class? E.P. Thompson.

Who taught me about how privilege and power work? Pierre Bourdieu.

Who taught me about what it meant to be a gay man? George Chauncey.

To be even more personal:

Who taught me how to deconstruct the confusion I often experience? Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Who taught me how to deal with the anger I often feel? Kimberly Crenshaw.

Who taught me the best lessons about love? bell hooks.

A few semesters ago, I had assigned *All About Love* by bell hooks in my Critical Theory course, and a student emailed me: she wanted to make a Zoom appointment to discuss the book, which had visibly moved her (I am sharing the story with her consent). She disclosed to me that she was going through a divorce and the book helped her to process many feelings. What she didn't know was that I had first read the book when I was also going through a divorce—I shared that with her. What followed was a fascinating two-hour discussion about the public and the private, the politics of love and intersectionality, and how sociology, culture, and history influence the way we love.

She concluded our discussion by stating, “I have purchased so many self-help books, Dr. Cabello, spent so much money on life coaches, and visited so many counselors and therapists; who would have guessed that all I needed was a Critical Theory course to answer my questions?”

And this, my dear colleagues, is, I believe, the best illustration of the Liberal Arts' radical and liberating power.

Confluence