

Transcript of plenary talk at Reward Equator Conference February 20, 2020

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Title: “Why Reform in Academia is Necessary, and Probably Won’t Happen.”

And now, as Monte Python says, it’s time for something *completely* different. Before I get started, I’d like to extend my gratitude to Malcolm Macleod for inviting me to speak today. My name is Allison Harbin, and I’m here to tell you a horror story about research in academia. I earned my doctorate in the History of Art from Rutgers University in 2017, where I focused on the philosophy of ethics in the context of race and gender in contemporary art. But that, alas, is not what this talk is about. I am here to discuss how abuse of power, plagiarism, and the refusal of professors and universities to even *acknowledge* the existence of this, despite the deeply troubling indications this represents to research.

Academia is set up to incentivize the individual and the victory of the most competitive. True collaboration has become counter-productive to the aims of the individual within this system, as is the pursuit of cutting edge research. Researchers within the academe have become ostriches with our heads in the sand while boards of trustees took over the running of the university away from the professors themselves—we academics are only rewarded if we remain blindly micro focused on our own intensely specialized research pursuits that we have forgotten the whole. We have sacrificed the forest to save a single tree. Our tree.

The answer to *why* and *how* this came to be has been become the subject of my research for the past 3 years. In researching for my yet unfinished book *Meritocracies and Other Fables: The Cost of being an Ethical Academic in a Broken System*, I began with the

question of *why* original research is no longer the reality, but rather merely the pipe dream of the university. I realized that to know the answer to that question, I had to follow the money. I examined the very structure of the university system in the United States itself, and just how it has changed to become nearly identical to a corporation in a slow but steady hostile take-over of the university that has been on an accelerated pace since the 1970's coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism and thus the fulfillment of late stage capitalism.

Through the research for the book—especially with the off the record interviews with deans, department heads, and professors, I reached that dangerous point of nihilistic frustration as to *why* and *for whom* this book was even intended. It became hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel because it all seemed to point to *it is already too late*.

Academics in the United States have been warning about the university's steady shift *away* from the pursuit of knowledge, or even education itself, in earnest since the 1950s, but research and pointed critiques of the structural inequality and profit-minded focus of the university have proliferated in staggering numbers since the 1980s. And yet, nothing has changed.

And here is where my own academic horror story comes into focus:

Just 3 months shy of the defense of my dissertation, I discovered that my advisor had published a section of my then un-published dissertation under her name and her name alone. Meaning, I could now be accused of plagiarizing her. And to make matters worse, she had also secured a 100,000 dollar grant, which, by the way, is *quite* a lot in the humanities, and a traveling Museum exhibition all with my research. [*And yes, I have consulted a lawyer and am well within my legal right to say this, as it has all been established as fact in a U.S. court of law.*

Not that that has much meaning given the travesty of the U.S. justice system, these days. But I digress.]

When I discovered this, I was in that fragile state that limns the beginning of the end of one's doctoral research. I was both exhausted and enraged. Almost immediately and with a sickening certainty, I knew what would happen should I report it: it was, after all, a tenured professor's word against my own. Despite the healthy trail of email exchanges and document transfers that would invariably, and at much legal expense in a court of law, prove that I had had written the work first, I knew that didn't matter within the confines of academia at an R1 school.

I knew, that the school would side with the department, who would, despite overwhelming evidence of guilt, side with my advisor. As I came to terms to what had happened, I couldn't help but think of that classic computer game "Oregon Trail" where I imagined the professors and deans of my school jumping into covered wagons and circling them against an outside threat: me, the savage attacker. And that is precisely how I was treated.

But my other mentors, who were professors from other departments, were aghast. They insisted I *had* to report it, because a professor who had done that to one student, they argued, would do it again to another. And indeed, as I began my initial paranoid inquiries with my peers, I discovered that I had not even been the only one plagiarized within the same paper. But, I was the only one in a position to do something about it. The other, then in a tenure track position, depended too heavily on our advisor's support. It's not a critique, it's a fact. This person remains to this day one of my closest friends.

I knew whispering a word, even to my peers, potentially spelled out the automatic destruction of my 7 year goal of becoming a professor. While I was repeatedly told that I was catastrophizing, as it turns out, I was not. Or perhaps I had realized the oncoming catastrophe that this represented to my career: because my work had been good, and because I was but a graduate student ripe for plagiarizing, my career was over.

But, nevertheless, I persisted. Looking back, I think it was my idealistic belief in the aims of academia, the pursuit of knowledge, and my indoctrinated belief that, at all costs, we must protect even the very idea of the university, which is to say, the very idea of research itself. This led me to decide to report it to the university, in advance of my defense. The way in which I was belittled, mocked, and dismissed pales in comparison to the clear violation of my civil rights. But now perhaps with the sham that was our impeachment trial, I should no longer be shocked by this.

Before I began this process, I found a lawyer who specialized in intellectual property and agreed to offer council at a steep discount, out of sheer fascination in the case. As it turned out, there was absolutely no legal precedent for a graduate student or junior professor reporting an incidence of plagiarism by a superior. As I would later find out, this was in no way reflective of the amount this actually happens within the supposed noble confines of the ivory tower.

To make a very long story involving not 1 but 3 different lawyers, and a very tense public defense of my dissertation short, I did, in fact, lose everything. In a dull basement conference room, I sat facing my dissertation committee of 4 professors, and when my advisor would not make eye contact with me, I knew that my “confidential” report to the school had been nothing of the sort. My advisor knew. And was radiating both rage and fear. My advisor then proceeded

to eviscerate the very same chapter from which she had “borrowed,” ultimately declaring that she would not give me my doctorate until *after* I removed the very same section that had been plagiarized. I stumbled out of my defense in a daze, and one of the professors on my committee held me back to mumble something of an apology. For the first time, I looked at her in defiance and said “you and I both know what just happened. I was just denied my PhD because I produced *good work*.” And then, like in the movies, I got to utter the statement, “you’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” and really mean it.

Things escalated very quickly after that. Naturally, I refused to remove the portion of my dissertation that had been plagiarized in order to get my PhD, which is where my lawyer stepped in and spent weeks sending tense letter after tense letter to my university until eventually, my advisor had no choice but to acquiesce to the threat of a very public legal battle and sign off on my Ph.D. with my dissertation in-tact. But that came at a very high cost for me, after this small-scale scandal, I lost *all* of my contacts within academia, even those who had initially urged me to report it.

I had the feeling as if I had just become toxic waste, an unfortunate byproduct of the university system, and not to be associated with. While my peers quietly removed my advisor from their dissertation committees, they publicly and professionally shunned me. And let me make it clear: I do not blame them. Had the situation been reversed, I’m not sure I can say I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing. Simply too much was at stake. One thing that remains the very same across the humanities and the sciences is recommendation letters, word of mouth, and the absolute power a mentor or advisor has over a graduate student’s fledging career.

Why risk your career for the sake of a sense of righteous indignation over someone else's problem? Especially when one has little to no power within the system itself. To quote the contemporary artist Jenny Holzer, "the abuse of power should come as no surprise." And this is precisely why nothing has or will likely change about the structural inequalities of academia; it is a system set up to ensure that once you earn the power within it to change the system, you want to do nothing of the sort. After all, one's own research goals is far more important.

Which is the conclusion that, a year and a half later, my research for my book into this little matter would inevitably bring me back to. The totalizing power of the hierarchy of academia, of research, and of the pursuit of knowledge, is not something to be trifled with. Nor is it, I would argue, something we can truly change within our lifetimes.

I earned my doctorate and the dust settled. I began to grapple with the reality that I no longer had a career, and that I would be starting over. With this, I became angry. In fact, I became indignant. I was *convinced* I was not the only one to whom this had happened. There *had* to be others. In my research down the dark rabbit holes of reddit threads and graduate student forums, I had read only whispers. As I wrote in a blog post, "stories of plagiarism are academia's equivalent of ghost stories told around a camp fire—everyone has one, or at the very least, has heard of one." But no one who had come out and reported it, as I had. No one who had taken a stand. So I, after having already lost everything, decided it was time someone speak out.

I first decided to publish a blog of my ordeal after first consulting a lawyer (I'm no fool) because I felt I had to warn my fellow and future graduate students in my small department—

no one should have to see the end of their academic career for producing *good* research, after all. It is counterintuitive to the very aims of academia and to everything the university purportedly holds dear. Besides, what had all of my intense study of the philosophy of ethics done except to fortify my resolve?

I published the first part of my story, aptly titled, “Why I Left Academia” on my website in August of 2017. I fantasized about having 500 people read my 3 part series. Within a week, I had 30,000 readers. By the time a month had passed, I had over 100,000. I was nerd famous, and in no way equipped to deal with what would come next. With readers came emails, hundreds and hundreds of them flooding my inbox with the equivalent of “me too” stories. Long tenured professors wrote in sharing their experiences, begging that I maintain confidentiality of stories from when they were in graduate school, or early professors, of having work stolen out from underneath them (not to worry, their names die with me). Graduate students in crisis reached out to me, begging me to tell them what to do. The press reached out for comment. I was offered a book deal.

To date, I have received around 500 personal emails. Their stories span across the globe, although I remain limited to those who read and write in the English language. However, the results are nonetheless shockingly impressive. Or perhaps, I should just say shocking. My nerd-fame allowed me to begin collaborating with academics from around the world. My most recent collaboration with a researcher at Queen’s University of Canada, we designed a survey and qualitative interview series to investigate just how many people pursuing Ph.D.s had been victims of intellectual property theft by a superior professor. Using my newfound internet following, to date, we have received over 5,000 respondents whose stories of intellectual theft,

plagiarism, and expulsion from academia so that their mentors, professors, and peers could cover their tracks is appalling.

These stories of abuse of power, forfeit of careers, forfeit of future research span the disciplines. And perhaps the most alarming stories I've encountered is in the field of scientific research.

Returning to the question at hand: how does this impact research? It is a case of the old eating the young, established researchers in positions of near-absolute power cannibalize the research of their subordinates, usually graduate students, post-doctorate fellows, and early professors in order to fulfill the university's publishing quota so that they can continue to climb the academic professional ladder. In order to ensure they are not found out, our study found that nearly every time this happened, the person whose research was pirated is the one expelled from academia, unable to continue the research they began.

At least in the United States, I can confirm with multiple resources and statistics, that from the 1970s onwards, which is approximately the same time we see minority and women enrolling into undergraduate programs in large numbers, the American university system began implementing what we in the US call "adjunct" or temporary professors. As of 2017, 75% of undergraduate courses taught in the U.S. are taught by temporary instructors who are either working towards a Ph.D. or have earned one already. Their average pay is 26,000 a year, without benefits or long term stability. And certainly no time for research, let alone sabbatical or even summers of.

This also comes with no job stability and no time to research. With the amount of tenure track positions dwindling the competition for those and for tenure itself becomes even more cut-throat. Further thwarting the aims of research.

Perhaps in homage to the poet and ex-pat American art collector Gertrude Stein, I have come to think of my generation of academics as the “lost generation.” Competition for jobs has risen at alarming rates since the 1970s, the tenure track pool continues to narrow. When professors retire, their positions are eliminated entirely and their course loads transferred to adjunct instructors.

I cannot tell you the amount of prominent professors with whom I have had amazing and thought-provoking conversations about the state of research who have ultimately shrugged their shoulders going, “but what can I do?”

As a humanist, I have but one answer: you can only impact those in your immediate vicinity. Put aside competition, build up your colleagues, better yet, build up your graduate students. Don’t be intimidated by them, be proud of what they’ve been able to accomplish under your tutelage. Acknowledge that the massive power imbalance in academia is a symptom of a much larger disease, and be the antidote, at least for one researcher. One department. One university.

Take heed from the corruption of the baby boomer generation in the United States, do what we did not do. Protect integrity. Foster curiosity. Cultivate the future of research. Thank you for your time.