A Superhero's Perspective on the MLA Convention

By THOMAS H. BENTON

Personal experiences on the job market

Once again the annual Modern Language Association Convention hovers over Gotham. I am not a job candidate this year. In fact, I'm on a hiring committee. This makes me feel more powerful than usual -- but not in the way I expected. I stroll the hotel lobby. I look into people's eyes while they look at my nametag.

As an untenured professor at a small college in the Midwest, I am nearly invisible. No one sees me when I enter a room or when I walk past them in a hallway. Freed from self-consciousness and anxiety about finding a job, I now possess emotional X-ray vision. I can look into the unacknowledged hearts of these academics. I can perceive their hidden pain and see their secret motives. I am an academic superhero. Instead of a cape, I wear a brown cotton sweater from Land's End.

I am "Conference Man."

I sit down in the hotel restaurant. I see a young woman dining alone. She doesn't have enough friends in the profession to do otherwise. Normally, she eats in her hotel room -- usually packaged snacks from convenience stores (the cheapest food one can get in the core of a big city). She's early for her only interview, and she can justify the expense of one good breakfast. It cost her a month's salary as an adjunct to be here. Her hands tremble as she sips her coffee. She fears spilling it on her clean, white blouse.

Suddenly, there are squawks of greeting. The job seeker looks across the room. A middle-aged, bottle-blond white woman draped in an expensive paisley scarf embraces a middle-aged, gray-haired African-American woman draped in an expensive kente cloth scarf. Both smile broadly and talk rapidly to each other in stage voices. Everyone in the lobby sees them and pretends not to. They were tenure-track, Ivy-League activists back in the 70s, fighting for the representation of women and minorities in the curriculum. Now they are among the biggest names in the profession with salaries to match.

The young job-seeker feels absolutely no connection to them. She knows they wouldn't talk to her. She will not get the job. She will never enter this profession. After 12 years of college and graduate school she will become a secretary like her mother who never went to college.

I go to the book fair. I walk unseen among the booths, leafing through odd volumes while listening to the people around me. A young assistant professor asks the editor of a mid-range university press if he has looked at the manuscript he sent almost a year ago. (He hears the tenure clock ticking; his family is depending on this book.) Before the editor can answer, a middle-aged don in a tailored suit strides up (he glows like a televangelist); he shakes hands with the editor, who praises the don's new book for three minutes without a break. The young professor is shut out by their body language; he slinks away.
unacknowledged by anyone but me. He can see me, for he too is invisible. I shrug my shoulders in recognition.

I go to the big room where "cattle call" interviews are being held. The nervous, defeated-looking candidates plod on, reciting their speeches. Some of them glance up and see me. I stop to look at one candidate who seems particularly charismatic and professional. How can she be so confident? Her relentless smile is menacing and aggressive. It has no relation to the context. Looking at her teeth, the interviewer envisions all the candidates who beat him out for jobs. He thinks of the grad students who encircle the biggest celebrity at every reception.

It's late, and Conference Man looks for an open bar. (Even the invisible need to self-medicate.) Despite the just-above-average white wine, I see little spontaneous enjoyment. Too many people gauge those around them before revealing an emotion. Their facial expressions seem to lag a few beats behind their words. When they laugh, it seems forced. Instead of conversing, some declaim, issuing speeches prepared long in advance or used successfully on other occasions. Some speak too loudly or too softly. Some never make eye contact -- or they sustain it until one feels violated by their gaze.

Despite appearances, most of these people are not self-satisfied elites. They are prisoners of past experiences. They wander about like 10,000 Jacob Marleys, dragging chains of emotional trauma. On the city streets I can pick them out: dressed in black, "theory glasses" low on their noses, still wearing their MLA nametags like plastic pocket protectors.

They envision themselves in heroic poses, fighting selflessly for the rights of other people (their lost selves?). But most are so self-absorbed that they hurt other people's feelings without even knowing it. (Ask the servers in the hotel restaurants.) Most are so fearful of attack that they lead with their defenses. Sometimes it seems that those who have risen in the profession are the most indifferent to others -- even as their public hearts bleed for those with whom they have no contact. Such indignation only elevates the status of the indignant.

In hundreds of nearly empty rooms, the walking wounded speak about the dynamics of oppression and resistance, suffering and recovery, to others who are, more often than not, wrapped in their own thoughts, devising questions that will call attention to their own wounds. The speakers crave the academic healing ritual of bobbing heads and affirmative hums; it is the equivalent of saying, "We understand and we accept you." Most receive barely any validation at all. Instead, they listen to pleas of other wounded people and mistake them for unprovoked attacks.

So many academics lie awake at night replaying the verbal exchanges of the day, magnifying nervous conversations and accidental slights into grand insults. They construct personal narratives of rejection and humiliation, and from this they draw their creative energy. How many academic books are rejoinders to perceived insults, many of which were never intended? Years and years away from loved ones, locked in libraries, spilling bitterness into a laptop computer. All those propped up volumes look like so many tombstones in the graveyard of the academic book fair. Who will care in 100 years? Who cares now?

Of course, this is a conditioned response from people who reacted to schoolyard taunts by winning the praise of teachers. But, as one advances and ages in the profession, there are fewer and fewer teachers to please. For some, academic celebrities, interviewers, and
editors become surrogates. Most academics cannot relate to each other as equals; most of their peer experiences are too painful. They can only function in hierarchical relationships, and that means every encounter between potential equals becomes a struggle for position:

"Still at Tundra College?" "How's your book coming?" "Have you read my article?" "I don't subscribe." "I suppose not." "Gotta run ... Hello!"

Such insights are easy for "Conference Man." What happens when one must become visible and attempt direct communication with these people? When the history I have just described is one's own secret story? How can academic people relate to each other without fear when every encounter has the probability of misunderstanding and hurt feelings?

But Conference Man has limitations. He loses his power when he must talk to people. He is invisible because he wishes to be. And because other people can see right through him.

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