

LEAVING THE GROVE
A Quit Lit Reader

Edited by
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Foreword:
The Art of the Academic Heart Perforation

Rebecca Schuman

BEFORE THE ADVENT of those bleep-bloop machines you always see on hospital TV shows (and, I suppose, in real hospitals), the medical act of adjudicating relative levels of human demise necessitated a measure of human creativity. I think, for example, of the bell-equipped “safety coffins” that allowed the unexpectedly awakened to ring for a last-minute exhumation. Yes, while death itself was as much a certainty in, say, the nineteenth century as it is now, certainty of death was another thing entirely.

Enter, then, the heart perforation, a procedure with whose erstwhile utilization I have been preoccupied for a number of years both because I am morbid and because I happen to enjoy the literary stylings of Rainer Maria Rilke, who detailed it in his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, when the titular character recounts the *Herzstich* of his own father:

Who, for example, could have imagined the resistance. No sooner had the wide, high breast been laid bare before the hurried little man located the spot in question. But the quickly applied instrument did not penetrate. I had the feeling that all time had suddenly left the room. As if we were all in a picture. But then time crashed back down in, with a small sliding noise, and there was more of it than was used up. Suddenly there was a knock somewhere. I'd never heard a knock

like that: a warm, reserved double tap. My hearing transmitted it and at the same time I saw that the doctor had reached the bottom. But it took a while before both impressions came together in me. So, so, I thought, now it's through. As far as the tempo was concerned, the knocking was almost gloating. (my translation)

Malte's father might not have been *actually dead* — I mean, he probably was, but it was not outside the realm of possibility that he could have been technically alive and comatose, a heartbeat so faint nobody could detect it. But from all conceivable angles, death was imminent, and to be honest any more dilly-dallying about it wasn't going to do anyone any good.

And so, the doctor at hand did the only reasonable thing: He made sure Malte's father was dead by killing him just in case he wasn't.

In the Spring of 2013, I had been unable to detect the heartbeat of my academic career for many months. I was haggard and ashamed, incandescent with a rage I was only allowed to express in private to a select few others (lest my angst somehow reach the ears of someone who might be on a search committee someday), all of whom now wished to tap needles through their own hearts so as not to have to listen to my disconsolate jawing for another solitary minute.

It was my fourth year on the job market, in search of a tenure-track or similarly stable teaching position in the discipline of German studies. To be fair, each successive annual attempt had brought me a paradoxical Zeno's skosh closer to that goal. My first year, I'd netted zero interviews of any sort but managed to eke my way into a manageable adjuncting gig. My second, I'd made the shortlist for a renewable three-year position and been awarded a two-year postdoctoral fellowship that placed me at Ohio State. My third, I'd interviewed for one tenure-track job ... and biffed it spectacularly; my fourth, I'd received *two* tenure-track interviews and only biffed *one* spectacularly, thus resulting in a single campus invitation.

However, while I'd managed not to eat shit during my initial meet with this well-regarded public institution, I was ill-suited to the pressure of that single campus visit — *one chance* to “make it” in the field: that is, onto the tenure track at a nationally ranked university, the only acceptable outcome of doctoral study in my discipline. And so, yet again, failure impaled me like so many icicles on a single-digit day, which it indeed was as I tottered across that aggressively manicured campus, shivering in my ill-fitting Banana Republic interview suit.

To be fair, my one chance was no chance. My teaching demo was an ambush, a 9 AM class on Friday full of hungover dudebros who not only hadn't been apprised of my impending substitution, but who also had an

essay due and had not even begun to *think* about the homework assigned on the clearly abandoned syllabus from which I had so diligently planned. A few hours later, I gave a flaccid job talk whose only worthwhile outcome was when the woman knitting in the front row completed about two good inches of a scarf. The university hired their inside candidate.

I'd promised my partner at the time that this was it. *Four years, I'd negotiated, I'll go on the market for four years and then cut bait.* That was as long as we could handle the uncertainty, and the waiting, and the hundreds of hours of emotional labor that always, somehow, ended in rejection anyway and threw an inky pall over the relationship and the household and my soul. So it was over. I was going to do the thing that when people did it, their names ricocheted through the hallowed halls in shame-whispers: *Oh, she Left the Field.* Left. The. Field. The emotional cadence of those ludicrous words was about two degrees more intense than death. Because even when you're dead, theoretically someone can still cite your books.

Yep, I was Audi 5000 — and I *still* couldn't tell anyone. Or rather, I was *very much* not supposed to (imaginary search committees everywhere), but this was 2013 so people Facebooked, and so sometime around March, I, too, Facebooked: *I regret getting a PhD with every possible part of me. It has broken me beyond measure and given me nothing.* Actually I'm not sure what I wrote, because I deleted it, after I was pummeled with comments about how it couldn't have been all bad because I *got to spend all that time doing what I loved, didn't I?*

Anyone who thinks someone is still “in love” with their research after four unsuccessful years of trying to impress search committees with it is incorrect.

If you're reading this volume, then you don't need *me* to tell you why it was so wrenching to Leave The Field: that's literally the point! Read on! Other people have done this work, much better than I! You might also not need me to tell you why, when an editor from *Slate* magazine on my Friends list (who'd glimpsed that deleted status) thought my brand of bile was the perfect #SlatePitch, my colleagues in The Field were horrified. I spent an entire night emailing with one who, in his defense, had spent the last two years attempting to mentor me and likely viewed my cratering as a personal failure:

You can't publish this, Rebecca, a search committee might see it!

That's just it. I don't have to give a solitary flying fuck what a search committee thinks of me, ever again.

Oh god, Rebecca, what if a search committee heard you say that?

My colleague, bless his Teutonic soul, refused to believe what was dead was dead. *Nobody* believed me, in fact. Not my dissertation committee, not my colleagues, not what few friends I had left after spending the past decade transforming into a monstrous mirth-sucking vampire, and definitely not my parents. It hurts to write “parents” now, by the way, because in the intervening years I’ve lost one of them, and it reminds me that when I was blessed with an inerrantly kind and supportive father, I wasted my time, and his, bitching about *academe*.

At any rate, speaking of dead fathers and, thus, Rilke: I knew what I had to do. Part of the reason that nobody believed me was that I was, indeed, still beholden to the academic code of secrecy about how dehumanizing the job-search process is. And so it was time to *make* them believe me. I told Dan, my *Slate* editor friend, that I’d do it. (And then, consummate academic I still was, I worried over those 1,250 words for an entire month.)

And so I didn’t just quit. I quit as publicly as I was humanly able. And that, friends, brings me to the genre I joined by doing that — now known, for better or worse, as Quit Lit. As you’re about to see, every public confessional quitter quits differently, for a host of different reasons. But the quitters here basically boil down to four categories.

You’ve got your Private Sector Quitters, such as Matt Welsh and Terran Lane, who bemoan academia’s slow turnaround for peer-reviewed work and even slower pace for real-world adoption of their discoveries. (And, let’s be honest, the money. Call me gauche, but I’m guessing even Harvard doesn’t pay Google money.) Then you’ve got your Fed-Up Tenureds, such as Karen Kelsky and Lexi Lord, who succeeded on the ultra-competitive tenure track but still left because they found the life of a scholar in a strange town to be alienating and, in the end, untenable. Then there are the Never Starters, such as Jessica Collier, who sometimes leave their programs and sometimes finish them, but *always* decide to opt out of the job market pretty much entirely, and thus never give it a chance to turn them into detritus.

And then, finally, there’s the detritus. The Shut-Outers. The job-market casualties who, after four, or eight, or ten, or even fifteen years of temporary positions and interviews and waiting and rejection (so, so, so much rejection), finally just can’t take it anymore. Kelly Baker. Joe Fruscione. Erin Bartram. And, yes, me.

It is possible that I’m biased in the way only neurotic people can be, but I maintain that of the Shut-Outers, my work was (and remains) the most ... let’s just say *untethered*. I don’t have the word-limit necessary to enumerate the, well, *outré* aspects of my own expletive-laced contribution to the genre, my needle-pierce, the reason your intrepid editors asked me to write this foreword in the first place: “Thesis Hatement,” which was first published in

Slate on May 5, 2013, definitely a date I always wanted to remember for the staggering amount of emails from strangers I received, and not because it was, indeed, the day of my sister-in-law's wedding, in which I was a bridesmaid.

"Thesis Hatement" was my truth at the time. It was. Every bile-filled word. And I don't want to negate that or try to self-excoriate it away. But I did want to take a small amount of the space I'm afforded in reflection to say that I deeply regret using in it (more than once!) the intellectually lazy and ableist term "stupid," which 2021-me would never think of doing. I would also like to acknowledge the level of privilege and entitlement that I, as a white woman with no financial insecurity growing up, had not examined in any meaningful way when I wrote it, so engulfed was I in the shame of failure and insecurity about my future. And I also now feel some legitimate regret for trivializing the worth of my own academic research, which, like most academic research, was perfectly good. In demeaning my work — I used the term "bat-shit" at a time *Slate* still forbade curse words except under truly special circumstances; *you're welcome* — I hurt the feelings of not only anyone *else* who's ever done academic research, but of my PhD advisor, whom I loved and still love like a young curmudgeonly uncle, and the other patient and unfailingly supportive mentors who helped shepherd my dissertation through.

Now that I'm older (so much older), and have, to be blunt, lived through something resembling hardship — a miscarriage; the breakup of my marriage followed almost immediately by the sudden death of my father in a horrific accident; the coronavirus pandemic and the near-constant pall of the Trump presidency — I recognize that by lashing out at the "bat-shit" nature of academic research, I was simply writing out my worst possible fear at the time, which was that other people would think my work was a joke. "Thesis Hatement" is also hard for me to read now because it hurts to relive that kind of raw anguish, anguish at such a total rejection of the life and identity to which I'd dedicated my whole self, to remember how gutted I was that academia didn't want me. Truly, I began to forget that feeling almost immediately after "Thesis Hatement" posted, and now it really is gone.

But here's part I don't regret. In embarrassing myself so thoroughly, I also made myself immune to further embarrassment. In perforating my own heart with such efficiency, I accidentally made myself immortal. Well, sort of. As I suspect also happened with more than one of my cohort here, owning my exit, and centering it in a discourse of academia's systemic issues, brought control to my destiny (or felt like it did), and recentered The Field as just another job, rather than an all-inclusive identity. Finding my voice through my failure helped, in a way, to diminish that failure — to help me realize I was

never a failure in the first place. And though I don't pretend to know the hearts of everyone in this volume, I can confidently say that *nobody* here is a failure by any measure, both because most have excelled in their new careers, but also because simply by writing whatever their own equivalent of a heart perforation is, they've succeeded in owning *their* exits and recentering *their* identities.

As clearly self-absorbed as my own contributions to quit lit are, I am fully aware that this book is not about me, but I'd be denying you the whole story if I didn't Where-Are-They-Now myself for just a second. I'm not dead. And neither, I guess, is my academic career? I actually ended up going back on the job market in 2018 — with “Thesis Hatment” on my CV. And I got a tenure-track interview, conducted over video conference, as is now the norm thanks in no small part to the fearless nature of quit lit to call academia out on the unnecessary bullshit of, among other indignities, the conference interview. (The university hired their inside candidate.) In 2019, I did it again — and though I kept forgetting about my applications entirely, I was reminded when I got not only an interview (Zoom, again) but a campus visit, which was once again terrifying, but primarily because it was the first night I had ever spent away from my little daughter. On *this* visit, I had fun. The campus was stunning, the conversations were lively — and, despite not having set foot in a German classroom for six years, I absolutely murdered my teaching demonstration beyond any possible hope of coffin-bell reincarnation, because it was a classroom full of volunteers who were eager to meet me and earn some extra credit. (The university hired their inside candidate — and I thought: *Mazel tov for him!*)

That was the end of that little experiment — but even as I write this, I'm balancing part-time gigs (adjuncting *actually adjunct* to other employ!) at the University of Oregon, the Stanford Continuing Studies creative writing program, and even my alma mater, Vassar. (Remote teaching does have this one advantage, but I still never want to do it again.)

It is now beyond my ability to comprehend that self-evident truths such as *conference interviews are unnecessary*, or *academia is not a meritocracy*, or *structurally, the university is still set up like a 1950s suburb where every professor was a white dude with a stay-at-home wife*, were once verboten in mixed imaginary-search-committee company. If you finished (or didn't finish!) your own doctorate after around 2014, you may take for granted that you can say things like that in public now — but I assure you, you can, and that's due, in part, to the bravery of the people who wrote the essays here.

The book you're about to read is a series of heart perforations, people from all rungs on and off the tenure ladder, murdering their own academic careers to keep themselves alive. The reasons they offer for leaving are as

unique as they are, and yet every one of those reasons should ring true to someone who's thinking of quitting or has already done so. I hope that you're inspired by the honesty here, and the intimacy of bringing an audience along as each author jumped out of the ivory tower and hoped they'd land softly. It is my sincere hope that their wise words — and possibly even my embarrassing ones — might help keep you alive, too.

Introduction

Christopher Flanagan

LEAVING THE GROVE

In this volume, we have brought together a variety of voices of individuals who chose to leave academia. By academia, we specifically mean the traditional path of scholarly advancement from graduate student through to tenured professor. There are of course many other aspects to academic institutions, from the undergraduates and terminal Master's students who make up the majority of most campuses' populations, to the administrative, fundraising and student support staff who fill the university's offices and keep campuses running on a daily basis. Yet the tenured professor remains in many ways the archetypal image when we think of academia: indeed, that is part of the problem this book hopes to address. It is to become a professor that so many scholars sign up for multi-year graduate programs, learning the tools of the trade in the hope of one day achieving the distinguished position themselves.

Yet the lived reality of this branch of academia has long been out of sync with the popular imagination. The vast majority of graduate students who receive a PhD do not go on to be tenured professors. Many struggle with exactly what career direction they will pursue, upon discovering the unhappy reality that a long-desired tenure-track job may be forever out of reach. And for those who make it to the promised land of a tenure-track

position — or of tenure itself, as with some of our authors — they can find that the job is far from the career they imagined. Different enough, disappointing or alienating enough, that they decided to leave the “dream job” and take their career in a different direction.

This brings us to Quit Lit.

Coined as a term by Rebecca Schuman in 2013 (as “I Quit Lit”), the genre encompasses a wide variety of authors, ranging from graduate students through to tenured professors, bidding farewell to their vocation, as they resign their academic posts, or choose to stop looking for one. So varied are the writers’ circumstances, their attitudes, and their future careers after academia, that little may seem to unite them. But at the heart of all the pieces of this genre is a single thought:

“This isn’t what I signed up for.”

All the essays contained here, and many more that we didn’t have space to include, echo that unavoidable dissonance. A dissonance that perhaps explains why so many academics choose to write about their reasons for leaving, at the moment of departure. And why this phenomenon, “quit lit,” is uniquely centered upon academia and academics. It speaks to the power of that archetypal image of the professor, of the myths that our society still clings to about the nature of academia and of academic careers. Your average professor, so this vision of academia goes, lives a cushy professional life, far removed from the nine-to-five rat race of their nonacademic peers. Sitting in their book-lined office or study, they work at their own pace, with the academic freedom to read, research, and philosophize on whichever big issues in their discipline have taken their intellectual fancy. At intervals, they leave this private space to share their current research, lecturing to a classroom of eager students. And while they may not receive the highest salary for all of this, they have the recompense of unrivaled job security, through their tenured position. Even if not sporting the tweed, elbow patches, and bow tie of popular caricature, the archetypal professor is still a middle-aged white male, an identity adding several extra layers of privilege to their already desirable situation.

Missing from this image is the intensity of teaching work at all but the most elite institutions; the many demands of departmental, institutional, and disciplinary service; undergraduate advisement; and the demands to chase external research funding or to develop prestigious collaborations. And while the job security and academic freedom of tenure exist for a shrinking number of the most fortunate and most visible scholars, for the vast and mostly unseen majority, the reality is one of short-term employment contracts, often on a per-course basis and lacking even basic benefits such as subsidized health insurance.

Still, the durable myth of the professorial lifeway both motivates and haunts junior members of the academy, graduate students and newly minted assistant professors striving to make their way to the top of the profession. Coming face-to-face with evidence that challenges such deeply held assumptions is a jolting experience. For many writers, the “quit-lit moment” has been one of disillusionment, sadness, or anger — a chance to vent at an unfair or ineffective system. For others, it has been a call to educate their peers, to warn them away from those same misconceptions, from making major personal and career choices based on woefully incomplete information, or from the exceptionalist mode of thinking that insists, despite all evidence, that “*I’ll* be one of the select few who make it....”

Quit lit didn’t appear from whole cloth in the years immediately preceding Schuman’s 2013 article. In fact, as our contributor Grant Shreve records, there was an earlier batch of “proto-quit lit” in the 1970s, when tough economic times brought an earlier generation to the realization that not every PhD candidate would become a professor. Yet the years after 2008 and the Great Recession brought a particular set of circumstances that makes the current crop of quit lit so affecting, and so wide-ranging in its critique of academia. As several of our authors detail, the institution of the university is under pressure on several fronts. Cultural and political shifts in how the American (and to a lesser extent, the British and Canadian) public sees the university have undermined its formerly privileged place in society. At the same time, university governors across the US, UK, and Canada, with their eyes on the budgetary bottom line, have come to favor a consumer model for how the institution will operate, focusing their resources on the “student experience” (undergraduate accommodations, sports and recreation facilities, luxurious study-abroad options, and the like) over their research and teaching staff. In the face of this, the academic job market — the annual gateway for hopeful scholars to gain tenure-track employment — has contracted, and for decades the number of academic job seekers has significantly outpaced the number of academic jobs available. After the briefest moment of optimism in the late 2000s came the sharp, short-term system shock that was the collapse of the world financial markets in 2008, and the deep recession that followed. The academic job market, already in a multi-generational funk, collapsed even further and has never recovered. At this point we can assert that the tenured professorial role has been effectively supplanted by contingent academic labor — “visiting” professorships, “teaching postdocs,” and, of course, adjunct appointments: short-term, low-paid teaching positions, usually without benefits and with minimal chance of advancement within the profession.

This toxic blend — of fewer jobs, less meaningful and less valued jobs, and pay lower than even the most reasonable job entrant might expect —

explains the scale of the exodus from academia at this moment in history, and the powerful need to write about that exit that drove the authors included here to take up the pen.

A Quit Lit Reader

What then, you might ask, is the value of compiling a selection of these “I Quit” testimonials in one place — beyond sheer aggregation, or contributor Sarah Kendzior’s wry suggestion that there ought to be “a Norton Anthology of Academics Declaring They Quit”?¹

This volume will, we hope, be of value to its readers on a number of fronts.

First, the volume aims to serve as a wake-up call to the many scholars applying for, or working their way through graduate education, believing that a professorial career beckons at the end of their labors. As so many of our contributors lay out, the unvarnished truth is that this career is becoming almost impossible to achieve for the vast majority of scholars-in-training. Graduate education, and the university itself, usually does a poor job of explaining this until it is far too late. Despite recent leaps forward on many campuses, where various forms of professional development and career diversity are being built into curricula, academia still strives to replicate academia, professors training younger versions of themselves to one day (... eventually ...) replace them, and little more.

Second, the volume aims to speak to all those scholars who are already in the midst of, or who’ve already gone through this process: of frustrated job searches, low-paying adjunct work, or desperate exploration of other career paths — those whom Rebecca Schuman refers to, quite appropriately, as “the Shut-Outers.” For this group the label “quit lit” is least appropriate, it being more accurate to say that the academy quit on them. As the essays that follow reveal, discovering that the career path you have invested so much time, energy, and self-identity into has resulted in *nothing* can, unsurprisingly, lead to emotional, financial, and professional turmoil. Too many talented, hard-working scholars are left feeling lost, isolated, and let down — angry at themselves, angry at the system that let them get to this place, and unsure in what direction they can go next. This volume, and the personal testimonials herein, tell those people that they’re not alone. But more than that, we hope their stories can give the reader hope. The authors in this volume have gone on to do awe-inspiring things after leaving academia, personally and profession-

1. Sarah Kendzior (@sarahkendzior), “There needs to be a Norton Anthology of Academics Announcing They Quit,” Twitter, October 20, 2013, <https://twitter.com/sarahkendzior/status/392095346907557888>

ally. Their stories of career transitions and new paths in life, while not all plain sailing, remind readers that they are talented, capable people too, and give them hope that there are many different places and careers where they can utilize their skills, experiences, and interests.

Third, the volume aims to speak to those still committed to pursuing the elusive tenure-track career. Many of them, like many of the contributors here, may have very little idea what tenured academic scholarship is really like as a “day job.” And once again, the old myths of the well-heeled professor give little guidance for what to expect. More troublingly, *neither does graduate school*, which all too often fails to prepare trainee scholars for the teaching loads, the departmental service, the demands of tenure review, the departmental politics, and the day-to-day lifestyle and work-life balance issues faced by a tenure-track or tenured professor. By sharing the authors’ experiences at various stages of this process, we hope to shine a light on the lived experience of academics in the modern university, so that aspiring professors can glimpse what the career really entails.

Fourth, we hope that through the writings of the quitting authors, and through the series of broader reflections and analyses of quit lit as a genre, this volume can cast a critical eye on the institutions of the academy itself. These reflections use quit lit as a lens through which to examine the academic labor system, precarity, graduate education, and the future of the professoriate. In the humanities and social sciences — and increasingly in STEM fields — PhDs granted far outstrip jobs advertised year on year. In all subjects, an ever-increasing proportion of academic jobs are contingent. And many of our authors repeat the same lament, that again and again in recent years, universities have chosen to invest their resources on administrative staff and student amenities, leaving the scholars supposedly at the heart of the academic venture a mere appendix to the modern university. These are all daunting challenges, but the writers in this volume can at least begin to suggest an agenda for confronting them.

Finally, although this volume was conceived in the final days of 2019, before any of us knew what the years 2020 and 2021 would mean for the world, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted and worsened some of the deep structural challenges facing academia. Job adverts have dried up, even some contingent jobs have ceased to exist, and some institutions totter on the brink of financial collapse due to the mass withdrawal of students from their campuses. The voices gathered here remind us of the longer-term origins of some of these issues, and of the human toll already taken on the people who chose to pursue a career in this profession. If there is any hope of building a better academia in the wake of recent events, these voices need to be heard.

Part One of the book presents an anthology of original quit-lit pieces.

The essays appeared in a range of locations, from the pages of *The Guardian* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, to a great many that were simply published on the author's personal blog or website. Many are what could be called classics in the field — such as Rebecca Schuman's infamous "Thesis Hatment," published in *Slate* in 2013, or Erin Bartram's poignant blog post, "The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind," which went viral in 2018 — and two are published for the first time in this volume. Yet they all bring powerful, personal stories of the challenges and tribulations within academia that drove the authors to leave it behind.

Since quit lit is a highly self-referential genre in which predecessors are routinely invoked, we have ordered the selections chronologically, by date of initial publication. Nonetheless, readers will quickly observe that the essays fall into three broad categories, connected to the academic career stage at which the quitter quit. First are the scholars who realized in graduate school that academia was a poor fit for them. As Joseph Conley points out in "Just Another Piece of Quit Lit," graduate training is something high achievers can drift into after succeeding as undergraduates, seeing further study and research as an escape from the "real world" of nine-to-five jobs. Absent better systems at the undergraduate level of conveying what graduate school, and an academic career, actually entails, budding scholars can soon discover that their skills and interests diverge from the expectations of the profession. Susan Ferber reveals how she found the individualistic culture of academia off-putting, and the focus on a scholar's own research and on showing off intellectual prowess in seminars inconducive to humility or intellectual collaboration. Similarly, Jessica Collier and Josh Marshall both found that academia would not reward their flair for concise, communicable writing. The constant demands of heavy teaching loads and academic service threatened to take Collier away from the writing that she loved most about her work; Marshall bridled at the hyper-specialized content and intended audience of academic writing, founding the current affairs blog Talking Points Memo to bring his expertise to a wider audience.

Second are the individuals who completed their degree, entered the academic job market, and experienced the frustrations, injustices, and disappointments of the annual lottery by which tenure-track positions are awarded. Some, like Melissa Dalglish, walked away from this broken system within a single hiring cycle, whereas others held on in hope of better days to come, like Joe Fruscione, who taught as an adjunct for eight years before throwing in the towel. All the authors in this category share the same criticisms: there are painfully few jobs in any and every field; scholars have no control over the physical location in which their lives unfold; and, above all, adjunct lecturers are overworked, underpaid, and undervalued through-

out academia. As mentioned previously, these are the authors for whom the term “quit” is least accurate — they worked hard to remain in a system that ultimately had no place for them. Yet some of the most memorable pieces of quit lit are found in this category. Notably, both Schuman’s and Bartram’s viral pieces are in this camp: something about the rawness of the deal handed to these individuals, and the big issues that they pass such incisive indictments of, have obviously struck a nerve in wider academia. And experiencing such frustrations themselves, many of these authors now work to help the next generation of junior academics. Rebecca Schuman writes essays of advice and criticism on the state of academia for *Slate* and *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*; Joe Fruscione and Erin Bartram are editors of the book series *Rethinking Careers, Rethinking Academia* with the University Press of Kansas, publishers of Fruscione and Kelly Baker’s coedited book, *Succeeding Outside the Academy*;² Maren Wood runs *Beyond the Professoriate*, an organization helping graduate students find careers that match their skills; and Melissa Dalglish is the president of Canada’s Graduate and Professional Development Network, an association for professionals who advise and support graduates in their career choices.

Finally, are the lucky few who made it to the summit of the academic career: the tenure-track or tenured professorship. Yet as the essays here indicate, even those who “won” the career lottery often found the academic career unfulfilling, stifling, or even alienating. Some found the job impossible to sustain on a personal level. Alexandra Lord protests the demand that scholars permanently leave behind the people and places they know and love for whichever city, state, or region the unicorn “perfect job” appears in; and Karen Kelsky criticizes the cold, isolating, career-above-everything environment fostered at the United States’ leading research institutions. Others came to feel that their professional aspirations could not be met within the confines of the academy. Matt Welsh and Terran Lane, both STEM scholars, left academia for Google, lamenting the difficulty of doing big projects and making a major impact within academia, while spending all of their time chasing grants; Constantina Katsari quit her lectureship in history to go full time as an entrepreneur, citing a growingly inflexible academic environment that stifles innovation.

Notably, the majority of the UK writers featured in this volume, including Katsari, appear in this section, and speak of an academia that has become overly bureaucratic, forcing scholars to jump through endless hoops of service and administrative oversight. Liz Morrish and Malcolm Gaskill both

2. Joseph Fruscione and Kelly J. Baker, eds., *Succeeding Outside the Academy: Career Paths beyond the Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2018).

suggest that systems of accountability have made it almost impossible for them to deliver high-quality teaching or research. Yet this UK trend connects to a larger critique seen in US academia, too. As both Gaskill and US author Oliver Lee Bateman argue, universities have taken on consumer-centric business models, putting the student at the (supposed) center of the university experience at the expense of the scholars and teachers who provide the actual education. Bateman suggests that in the US, the bloat of university administration has become its own end, existing to make money off of student enrollments — exploiting underpaid employees while charging students tens of thousands of dollars a year and giving only a mediocre education in return.

Several of the authors of the original quit-lit pieces have also offered short postscripts for their essays in this volume. Along with Rebecca Schuman's wry and percipient thoughts in the volume's foreword, Matt Welsh, Alexandra Lord, and Liz Morrish all reflect on the response to and afterlife of their essays, and share a bit of their subsequent careers in light of their now-immortalized decisions to part ways with tenure-track academia.

Part Two comprises a series of essays that step back and explore quit lit as a genre, from a variety of critical and historical perspectives. The authors in this section investigate where quit lit came from and what quit-lit authors are trying to do, and wrestle with what the genre says about the current state of academia. Three broad trends emerge from these pieces.

First are the foundational pieces that drew attention to the exodus from academia, that labeled quit lit as a particularly academic phenomenon, and that showed how the current situation was long in the making. Sarah Kendzior, writing before there even was a genre called quit lit, argued that the mix of low pay and high costs to entering the profession would price a generation of scholars out of the academy. Then came Rebecca Schuman (with her second entry in this volume) giving the genre its name, and bringing attention to how quit lit encompassed more than frustrated, shut-out job-seekers. Even tenured professors were quitting, and using the opportunity to criticize the broken system. As the genre became better known, Sydni Dunn proposed an early taxonomy of quit lit, exploring three broad types of quitters — the explainers, the statement makers, and the destigmatizers — and their motivations for writing. And taking a historical perspective, Grant Shreve and Jennifer Vannette explore how the structural problems of academic employment were decades in the making, coalescing out a succession of adverse economic and political developments.

A second, unavoidable trend within discussions of quit lit is engagement with Erin Bartram and "The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind." Arguably the most famous entry in the quit-lit canon, Bartram's piece has been decon-

structured to show tensions both within the concept of quit lit, and in the pervasive myths surrounding academia that fuel the genre. Ian Saxine challenges the very terminology of quit lit, insofar as scholars like Bartram aren't "quitting" but being forced out of the profession they've been trained in by a broken system that can't provide stable employment. Katie Rose Guest Pryal and Grant Shreve both discuss how the emotional farewell to an academic good life, encapsulated in Bartram's piece, fails to critique this unjust, central element of the predicament. They suggest that, rather than calling out the broken system, Bartram unintentionally reinforces the myths surrounding academia that lead so many would-be scholars to pursue a mirage of a career. In a trenchant essay that situates quit lit within the "politics of withdrawal," Pepita Hesselberth ties the particularly emotive qualities of the genre to the fact that for many authors, including Bartram, leaving academia represents a *second* moment of withdrawal. Having already withdrawn to the false, idealized image of the ivory tower university as a place where they can challenge and critique the problems of capitalism and power in the modern world, the writers find themselves caught up in those same systems *within* academia, and are forced to retreat yet again.

A final common characteristic of these essays is the analysis of how quit lit approaches the question of next steps — of "where do we go from here?" — and its continued ability to affect conversations about reform within academia. Leonard Cassuto and Howard Gardner both assert that the profusion of quit lit demands fundamental reform in graduate education, but the authors approach the problem from different directions. Gardner suggests a major reduction in the number of doctoral candidates being trained, in return for a guarantee that those who gain a PhD will receive an academic job. In contrast, Cassuto argues that graduate training needs to prepare students for a more diverse range of careers, so that professorial positions become just one of a number of career paths a PhD-holder can choose to pursue. Christine Kelly praises the work that quit lit has done to raise awareness of previously hidden challenges in academic careers and of possibilities beyond academe. In this way quit lit wards against the damage to emotional and mental welfare a frustrated academic career can bring. Kristen Galvin also highlights the important role quit lit has played in promoting career diversity and helping scholars and public intellectuals mobilize for change. Suggesting that the aggregation of each individual writer's criticism forms a sort of online megaphone, Galvin portrays quit lit as a vehicle for holding academia accountable for its most exploitative practices.

Within the bounds of this single volume, there are inevitable absences and silences. Running beside and informing the genre of quit lit is what can be called "Just Don't Go Lit." Emblematic is William Pannacker's *Chronicle*

column from 2009 (under the pseudonym Thomas H. Benton), “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go,” referenced numerous times by subsequent quit-lit authors.³ Schuman’s famous “Thesis Hatment” piece blends the “just don’t go” genre with quit lit, as she reflects on why she quit while advising her readers to learn from her experience and avoid graduate school entirely. These and other jeremiads against the academy drew responses. Katie Roiphe defended the value of graduate education for its own sake, and Tressie McMillan Cottom introduced the vital qualifier that blanket “just don’t go” advice ignores and threatens to entrench existing racial disparities within graduate education and the professoriate.⁴ While this strain of writing certainly informs the quit-lit genre and wider discussions surrounding the state of academia, to include such pieces here would have fundamentally reoriented the collection in a way that obscures the specific features and contributions of quit lit per se.

However, the debates within the “just don’t go” genre, foregrounded most notably in McMillan Cottom’s piece, shed some light on another inescapable feature of the present volume: its whiteness. Academia remains a disproportionately white space, and academic environments have historically been, and too often remain, hostile to non-white students and scholars. Thus, the makeup of this volume’s authors may in part simply reflect this historical bias. There may also be a degree of entitlement at work. White scholars, particularly those from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds, are much less likely to have experienced such a structurally unfair system, and so more likely to raise their voices in response to this particular one. However, McMillan Cottom’s piece hints at more complex tensions that may explain why the genre is so dominated by white voices. Her argument is underpinned by the idea that academia needs more students and professors from diverse backgrounds, to bring more voices to the table of academic teaching, research, and governance. Yet McMillan Cottom recognizes that such a commitment will entail extra burdens for non-white scholars in comparison with their white counterparts, in the form of enhanced mentorship for underrepresented students, service on numerous committees and other

3. Thomas H. Benton [William Pannacker], “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 30, 2009, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/graduate-school-in-the-humanities-just-dont-go/>; and “Just Don’t Go, Part 2,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 13, 2009, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/just-dont-go-part-2/>.

4. Katie Roiphe, “Thesis Defense,” *Slate*, April 8, 2013, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/04/a-literature-ph-d-is-not-a-waste-of-time.html>; Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Blanket ‘Don’t Go to Graduate School!’ Advice Ignores Race and Reality?” *Tressie McMillan Cottom* (personal blog), April 6, 2013, <https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/blanket-dont-go-to-graduate-school-advice-ignores-race-and-reality/>

institutional functions requiring minority representation, and the multitude of microaggressions that can occur in any predominantly white space. These observations suggest an alternate view of academia less saddled with idealizing myths, either about the university as a “safe” countercultural refuge or as a practically desirable site of day-to-day employment. If a big part of quit lit involves puncturing the myths of academia, then for non-white scholars there may simply be fewer myths to be punctured.

The editors of this volume were surprised to find that the response to an international call for quit-lit pieces arose overwhelmingly from the United States. The exception to this, as noted already, is the series of essays that portray the United Kingdom as ground zero for a very specific model of bureaucratic hyper-management, in which it is predominantly experienced academics who are driven from the profession by a system undermining their creativity. Beyond that, the pieces in this volume focus overwhelmingly on the ever-more-visible structural flaws of the corporatized American university. Is quit lit, then, primarily a response to disillusionment with long-standing myths about academia, as the academy is seen specifically in Anglo-American culture? Consider Germany, where graduate training has adapted to better reflect the needs of the academic job market, and holding a PhD retains significant social prestige, particularly in the realm of politics. Or countries such as India, Pakistan, or China, where academic expansion has been driven by regimes with particular ideological or utilitarian demands, minimizing the scope for academic freedom and leaving much less to be disillusioned about from the start. Alternatively, is quit lit better seen as an economically focused response to ever-declining labor conditions, and a growing call to confront an exploitative institution? Many regions lack the extensive and well-endowed higher education system in place in the US, with its consequent lure towards maximizing profit. So, if the vagaries of late capitalism have a central role in the genre, we may still see quit lit replicated internationally in the future, if and when the corporatized American model of the university is exported to the rest of the world.

Looking to the Future

The question then remains, where do we go from here?

As several authors of the previously unpublished pieces reflect on, this volume was put together in the midst of the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic. The virus’s effects on the way academia operates, as with so much else, has been significant. Yet, while initial fears that it would lead to the wholesale collapse of traditional academia now seem unwarranted, we still don’t know what, if any, large structural changes might emerge from this disruptive period. One tempting assumption is that, having discovered cheaper ways to

deliver instruction to their students through mass videoconferencing, institutions will find more ways to squeeze spending on their teaching staff. But given the parlous pre-pandemic circumstances for adjunct instructors documented within these pages, it might be worth asking if future changes can make things much worse than they already were. Searching for silver linings, perhaps the transition toward more remote instruction may provide some relief for those scholars forced to work and teach between multiple locations to piece together a living wage.

Looking further down the road, what does quit lit suggest about the state of academia, and its future? As Kristen Galvin points out in her essay, major changes have already begun in recent years. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Historical Association, and the Modern Language Association have all undertaken high-profile initiatives to address the chronic problem of careers in academia for students in the humanities. And in the current landscape of PhDs looking for diverse careers, some of the key authors and commentators of the quit-lit genre are now helming projects of their own to help scholars better understand and navigate the worlds of academic and non-academic jobs. In addition to the work of Wood, Baker, Dagleish, Fruscione, and Bartram noted above, Karen Kelsky gives her readers the unvarnished truths about the workings of academia in her long-time blog and consultancy *The Professor Is In*. And as Christine Kelly explores, the movement of quit lit from the blog to the vlog has allowed for a new wealth of accessible solidarity and support for scholars facing their own decisions over whether and when to quit the profession.

However, for all the hopeful change, there remains important continuity. Both Galvin and Pepita Hesselberth refer to theorist Lauren Berlant and her concept of “cruel optimism,” which “names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” maintained “because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.”⁵ The concept speaks well to one unchanging element behind quit lit: the exceptionalist thinking of academics who convince themselves that the fraught economic circumstances of academia do not have to apply to them. Whether this involves seeing academia as a career of a very different sort, immune to the pressures of capitalism and competition; the conviction that making enough sacrifices — in work hours, low pay, geographic movement, or sacrificed relationships — *will* land the dream academic job; or the hope that with tenure and academic seniority, the tensions and compromises will resolve themselves, leading to an academic

5. Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *Differences* 17.3 (2006), 21.

“good life,” too many scholars damage their well-being and their career prospects by leading themselves down a professional blind alley. Knowledge about the state of academia, and support for those who wish to transition their careers away from it, exist, but it is for academics themselves to learn about and take these opportunities, and consider as fully as possible what life and career choices will be best for them.

In the end, only a minority of scholars will ever write quit lit. Despite the challenges and frustrations described in this volume, many persevere through the various stages of the academic career: to completion of their degree, and through numerous years of the hiring cycle, potentially including one or more short-term, underpaid, or geographically undesirable positions. Some scholars do get on the tenure track, get tenure, and go on to have long academic careers. Academia can undoubtedly bring many joys in teaching, research, and intellectual exchange, and for some people sticking out this long and winding path may be the right and rewarding choice. But committing to academia in its current form should be a considered, rational decision made on the basis of evidence and a clear view of probabilities. Scholars can no longer afford to surrender to cruel optimism. Remaining in academia should mean wanting the sort of job that actually exists there. It should involve careful, ongoing contingency planning — or rather, preparation to give oneself the best chance of landing the most rewarding and self-affirming job that beckons, whether that is a faculty position or a role in a different job sector entirely.

This is where quit lit can help, tearing away the rose-tinted spectacles that remain firmly before many of our eyes when viewing academia, and providing models for how other people in similar situations grappled with the realities of, and their investment in, the academic system. Although quit lit cannot lay out any one definitive path forward, we hope this volume helps some of its readers take the first steps to think critically, plan proactively, and consider new possibilities.

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Ian Saxine teaches Early American History at Bridgewater State University, runs the Historian's Forum at the Maine Historical Society, and hosts the podcast *Mainely History*. His first book, *Properties of Empire: Indians, Colonists, and Land Speculators in New England* (NYU Press, 2019), examines the dynamic relationship between indigenous and English systems of property in early America. The concept and genre of "quit lit" became ubiquitous during his succession of one-year VAP postings, prompting his frustrated outburst in the winter of 2018 and the piece included in this volume.

Rebecca Schuman is a translator, copywriter, consultant, speaker and adjunct professor of literature, German, and creative writing. She is the

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Matt Welsh is the vice president of engineering at OctoML, a Seattle-based startup developing technology to optimize machine learning models. He left Harvard after getting tenure to join Google, where he became an engineering director on the Chrome team, eventually growing a team of more than 40 engineers to build out Chrome features for emerging markets. After more than eight years at Google, he jumped ship to join the startup world, where he enjoys hacking code again and learning to survive without free food.

L. Maren Wood is the founder and CEO of Beyond the Professoriate, a mission-driven organization dedicated to helping graduate students and PhDs thrive in today's fast-changing economy. She received a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2011, then founded and acted as lead researcher for Lilli Research Group. In 2017 she founded Beyond the

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Glenn Wright is director of graduate school programs at Syracuse University. He has a BA in English from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and an MA and PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has worked in academic assessment, publishing, and higher-ed administration, and has taught English at the University of Michigan and the University at Albany, SUNY. He is the editor of *The Mentoring Continuum: From Graduate School through Tenure* (2015).