

# Gaskell, Ghosts, and the Common Good

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**I**N 2017, a group of faculty members—the late Aaron Barlow, Carolyn Betensky, Rachel Sagner Buurma, Seth Kahn, and Talia Schaffer—came together to develop a campaign to convince *U.S. News and World Report* to factor the exploitation of adjunct faculty into their rankings of U.S. academic institutions.<sup>1</sup> Our campaign went viral. Long before law schools began reconsidering their cooperation with *U.S. News*, we drew public attention to the fundamental inequities their rankings perpetuated. Although we could not convince *U.S. News* to reflect the real learning and labor conditions on the campuses they purported to analyze, we worked together so well that we decided to organize into an official group.

The premise of Tenure for the Common Good is in the name: we are tenured faculty who seek to make use of our secure positions to benefit the larger academic community. We want to encourage tenured allies of contingent faculty to help secure just working conditions and remuneration for their non-tenure-track colleagues. We want to push back on the normalization of “adjunctification” (ugly word, still uglier concept) itself: we hope that by taking public stands in print and in person, we can make it impossible to ignore the fact that highly qualified and devoted faculty are being denied benefits and a living wage. Some of us worked those jobs before landing tenure-track lines, and we know that only good fortune differentiates us from our colleagues.

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*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 569–576.

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doi:10.1017/S1060150323000608

That three of the five of us—Talia, Rachel, and Carolyn—were Victorian studies scholars was, we assumed, a coincidence, and definitely secondary to our identity as tenured faculty. Victorian studies had not seemed relevant to our work as activists in the first years of *Tenure for the Common Good*, but as we reflect on the work of tenured allies now, we have come to understand that the Victorian tradition we research and teach does offer important lessons for our moment, if not a way out of our impasse.

For *Tenure for the Common Good* is facing new conditions now. The Covid pandemic changed our plans. Not only was it much harder to organize, but the very stability of the privileged position we were urging our fellow tenured allies to work from had come to seem far less secure; we all knew tenured colleagues who had been laid off during the pandemic. In addition to threats to tenure coming from financial austerity regimes were the threats to academic freedom and diversity in higher education coming from autocratic, racist, transphobic governors and legislatures in states such as Florida, Texas, Georgia, Virginia, and Iowa (among others). Tenure was no longer necessarily a privileged position we could leverage now that tenure itself was looking increasingly precarious.

Yet at the same time as tenure, programs, and institutions were becoming more vulnerable, another very welcome development was taking shape. Across the country, contingent faculty, along with graduate students, were forming new unions and demanding equitable labor conditions at an unprecedented pace and scale. A new organization, Higher Education Labor United, brought academic workers from across higher education—staff and student workers; adjunct, contingent, and tenured faculty; postdocs, university health system workers, and others—together to strategize on a national level for fair pay, better working conditions, and to imagine a new collective vision for higher education.<sup>2</sup> Academic laborers—and, very prominently, contingent faculty—have been striking on some of the largest campuses in the country and have achieved considerable gains.

In this context of tenure-insecurity, on one hand, and revitalized labor activism on the other, we wonder how to position our organization for the future. We worry that we might seem embarrassingly like the worst kind of middle-class Victorian reformists. We would be the last to deny that middle-class Victorian reformists achieved important victories in Parliament and across a broad swath of institutional, social, and cultural settings. Nevertheless, if we do not want to play white saviors or ladies bountiful—and we most definitely do not—what are we to do?

Somewhat to our own surprise, we ended up thinking through this impasse by returning to Elizabeth Gaskell. In the process, we realized that our formation as scholars of Victorian literature and culture had more relevance for us than we had acknowledged. By chronicling exploitation and also exploring models for its resolution, Gaskell's novels name an endemic problem and attempt to work through it. In their very different (and, to some degree, contradictory) ways, *North and South* (1855) and *Cranford* (1853) consider political and economic scenarios that offer instructive analogies for the current predicament faced by Tenure for the Common Good.

It is crucial to acknowledge that in using Gaskell this way, we hope to draw a comparison rather than make an identification; of course, Victorian economic structures differ importantly from our own, and the people Gaskell describes are certainly not our academic populations. Yet while contingent faculty obviously do not face the same kinds of oppression as nineteenth-century factory workers or servants, they, too, are dehumanized and exploited in the name of efficiency and large-scale (knowledge) production. We draw these parallels to show that Gaskell can help us notice how economic disempowerment works. Specifically, Gaskell's novels show that a rapacious system extends far beyond its immediate victims. In *North and South*, the industrial economy taints everyone and everything. In *Cranford*, global colonial trade provides all the products the Amazons use, from tea to shawls.

We, too, feel the way economic exploitation embroils us all. Adjunctification filters into every aspect of our professional lives. Like industrialism and colonialism, casualized academic labor damages everyone, including people who are not themselves adjuncts. It is perpetuated by the corporate university and its enablers who are willing to violate basic ethical principles out of greed, fear, or obliviousness. And there is no escape: contingent and noncontingent faculty alike may well feel trapped in the exploitative systems in which our institutions are invested and that hurt us profoundly. The ivory tower, perhaps as insular as Matty's dining room or the Thornton parlor, likewise rests on horrors.

The best description of this feeling we've seen comes from Erin Bartram, writing in *Contingent Magazine*, who says that scholars feel "phantom pain where their colleagues should be."<sup>3</sup> Like phantom pain, it has many triggers, because our missing colleagues affect all the limbs of academia.

Phantom pain affects us all. It starts with the undergraduates, who lose relationships with faculty when their professors are temporary part-

time hires without access to time or space to mentor them. The halls of the English department are empty or populated by a few aged tenure-track folk among the exhausted, overworked part-timers. Undergraduates who apply to graduate programs increasingly show evidence of having been taught outmoded practices in departments that have not been able to hire for years. The English department feels like a ghost town.

Living in a ghost town hurts. Graduate students are tortured by that phantom pain, experiencing unbearable anxiety and corrosive rage about their foreclosed futures. Those who manage to enter the profession as junior faculty have intense survivor's guilt, are scarred by years of adjuncting, and certainly can't exercise any agency in where they teach.

Meanwhile, more senior faculty are exhausted, forced to take all the service work that was formerly spread across a larger department. A single professor is now doing the work that used to be done by four or five people. And they, too, are demoralized if not heartbroken, watching their beloved mentees broken by this system, seeing brilliant colleagues exploited, feeling the dwindling away of the profession to which they have given their lives.

From the student in first-year writing classes to the senior professor, everyone feels the phantom pain of the tenure-track faculty who are missing. Our extractive economy pulls exhausting and unbearable work out of certain people in order to keep a larger institutional economy churning. But that financial practice piles up money to pay administrators or add to an endowment; it doesn't recirculate back in, it doesn't enable us to repopulate our ghost town. We subsist, meantime, on scraps, our departments forced to rely on what the narrator of *Cranford* calls fragments and small opportunities.

It is easy for the last tenure-track faculty (like us!) to feel like the characters of *Cranford*, the residual aging residents in a dwindling town. The Cranfordians are haunted by those missing inhabitants: their fathers, husbands, neighbors, brothers, suitors, patrons. Like us, the Cranfordians feel phantom pain where their fellow residents should be, even if they insist they can handle everything.

Matty's brother, Peter, is one of the most painfully lost of these vanished men, and he really is like a ghost: neither dead nor alive, whereabouts unknown, correspondence blocked or circulating in vain. When Peter returns, it is a festival of restoration: comfits rain down upon children, pearl necklaces get distributed, homes are renovated, social rifts get mended.

For us, this might speak of a fantasy of academic restoration: someday we will get the lines, plenitude will be restored, the community will be renewed. Simultaneously a sympathetic insider and a refreshing outsider, a born Cranfordian and a global traveler, assigned male but identifying female, Peter is a hire who can extend a department's capacities while respecting its character.

Yet the Peter story is a fantasy of miraculous largesse, not a structural solution. And of course Peter's wealth comes from the exploitative colonial economy, a fact that the novel requires us to ignore in order to enjoy his return (how *did* he make his money on that indigo plantation?).

Moreover, if the Cranfordian restoration rests on a dubious fortune, it also relies on widespread, unacknowledged, mystified labor. For the lower classes are full of vigorous youths who deliver the butcher's orders, court the maidservants, and repair the railroad. The town of Cranford is filled with stronger, younger workers—the ranks of the adjuncts, as it were.

We are supposed to accept the fantasy that members of this underclass love their servitude and voluntarily choose to remain subordinate and unseen. Martha begs to continue serving Matty as a personal favor. Meanwhile her husband, Jem, hides so effectively in his own home that Matty is able to remark complacently that she never sees him at all.

If *Cranford* is readable as a parable of academia, then, it might feature the worst sides of academia: its elitism, easy acceptance of unbearable economic inequalities, willingness to delude itself with fantasies about our own virtues and daydream about magical solutions.

However, *Cranford* holds out the possibility of a reading against the grain—a reading that actually echoes some of the work of *North and South*. Reading these novels together gives us a new sense of the kind of role we might play.

*North and South* reframes the reformist hero. Margaret Hale awakens to the stark differences between her own life of privilege and the experiences of the working-class families whose labor creates their employer's wealth. Meeting, observing, and listening to Bessie and Nicholas Higgins and other factory workers and their family members, Margaret learns about the human consequences of untrammelled capitalism and thoughtless "progress," so that her on-site education in Milton-North enables her to convey to her father and to the factory owner, Mr. Thornton, a deeper understanding of what the industrialists' profits cost the people who work for him.

Does this intermediary role work? Well, despite Margaret's best efforts at reforming Milton-North, she does not succeed at improving

the workers' lot, for they do it on their own. She does not even succeed at reforming Mr. Thornton, although he does fall in love with her and allows her to rescue his enterprise by applying the funds she has inherited from her godfather to his coffers. Any reflected magnanimity on Mr. Thornton's part originating in Margaret's influence is eclipsed by Nicholas Higgins's generosity toward the man who had abused him. In fact, Margaret Hale is at her most effective when she acts almost as a narrator: when she listens to the workers and lets them do the talking directly to the reader.

Although she is indisputably the *novel's* heroine, the labor conflict at the novel's core is not Margaret Hale's story, and she is not its heroine. We at Tenure for the Common Good identify with Margaret in this respect. As relatively privileged academics who are deeply committed to combatting the systemic exploitation of our contingent colleagues, we recognize that no matter how earnestly we wish to change conditions on the ground, we are not ourselves the story here. It is up to us to listen to our contingent colleagues, amplify their voices, and use our positions to bring their stories to the attention of university administrations and media outlets.

Interestingly, *Cranford* also suggests such an intermediary, amplificatory role, although its narrator's job is somewhat more active. Mary Smith is able to write to Peter when everyone else's letters fail, and she brings in new advisers and ideas to help when Matty loses her fortune. Structurally, Mary has a role that tenured faculty can fill: the person who writes, the person who figures out how to keep the money flowing.

But what do these texts say about their laboring populations? Whereas *North and South* highlights its workers, *Cranford* shows them hiding. Jem invisibilizes. Fanny conceals her lover in the shadows. Occasionally, however, they can act. Mrs. Fitz-Adam's servant, Rosy, strikes for better wages after working seven and a half years. The fact that Rosy's strike roughly matches the tenure clock is a particularly happy coincidence. We hope that Rosy had friends who struck with her, and we hope that they got their living wage.

Where *North and South* depicts an already divided world of workers and owners, *Cranford* shows the two classes living together, although the employers sometimes conceal their cross-class friendships. Servants and mistresses collude, mutually engage in the domestic work of admitting visitors, discussing inhabitants, making refreshments, and repairing clothing. Indeed, in some cases, the ex-servants become wealthier than their erstwhile employers, and patronize them in turn.

Thus if *Cranford* depicts a society divided by class, it also lets us imagine a society of mutual aid. We would like to see—we would like to *live*—a version of *Cranford* in which Martha, Betty, and Rosy work with Matty, Miss Pole, and Mrs. Fitz-Adams, everyone realizing that it is not a ghost town, because the missing colleagues are *already here*. They are inside the house. If tenure-track colleagues do not see them, that is because they deliberately aren't looking. If we refuse to be a ghost town of shabby gentility (excuse me, elegant economy) and exhausted laboring, we stand up and say no to the discourses that keep us down, whether austerity or maternalism.

*North and South* is more explicit in its plea for cross-class unity, if less hopeful about its possibility. It doesn't have a fairy-tale wish-fulfillment fantasy resolution. By the end of the novel, the laborers have at least established a foothold in Thornton's consciousness, and Thornton himself has been humbled by a downturn in his business. Margaret does get her opportunity to play a Lady Bountiful, but it is Thornton, not the workers, who are her beneficiaries.

Margaret Hale and Mary Smith attest to the fact that speaking a truth on behalf of or alongside others can create real changes. We hope, through *Tenure for the Common Good*, to channel Mary Smith and Margaret Hale: narrators who see everyone in the house and who use our voices to help others be heard. Like Mary and Margaret, we step forward and say: we want an end to underpaid, invisibilized laborers who have to spend their own money for resources, whose space in this house is denied them while they nonetheless do the real work. We insist on Jem being visible in his own home. We use our privilege to amplify (not to replace) the words of Rosy, to help everyone hear Nicholas Higgins. We admire the competence, intelligence, expertise, and strength of our colleagues victimized by this economic system. Like their nineteenth-century counterparts, they deserve much, much better. A department is not a ghost town—it is a town full of living people who have been ghosted, people who are being starved of the resources they merit and the remuneration they deserve. We are here to say so.

## NOTES

1. Carolyn Betensky, Seth Kahn, Maria Maisto, and Talia Schaffer, "Common Good, Not Common Despair," *Profession*, Fall 2018, <https://profession.mla.org/common-good-not-common-despair>.

2. “Higher Ed Labor United,” accessed May 4, 2023, <https://higherlaborunited.org>.
3. Erin Bartram, “A Profession, If You Can Keep It,” *Contingent Magazine*, January 7, 2023, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://contingentmagazine.org/2023/01/07/a-profession-if-you-can-keep-it>.