

# Roundtable

## The “Second Project”

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The following roundtable was commissioned as a set of brief oral presentations delivered at the joint annual conferences of the British and Irish Associations for American Studies (affectionately referred to here as “IBAAS”), hosted by Queen’s University Belfast, on 9 April 2016. We, the associate editors of the *Journal of American Studies*, envisaged the roundtable as an opportunity for early-career scholars to get together and discuss the importance of the “second project.” In such a competitive job market, simply seeing your PhD through to publication is often not enough to land that elusive academic position; having a clearly articulated “second project” is important for securing a postdoctoral fellowship and/or full-time, permanent lecturing appointment. With this mind, we invited five early-career scholars (four of whom are represented here) to reflect on both the intellectual and the logistical challenges of conceptualizing a second project, especially given the precarious circumstances in which many early-career scholars teach and research once the PhD is complete and/or funding has run out. The event elicited much discussion by audience members and, in this print version of the roundtable, we include three responses by established scholars who attended the session and whom we invited to comment on the roundtable. We are deeply grateful to our ECR participants and respondents for reflecting so passionately and eloquently on changing iterations of the second project, its challenges and rewards, and on the responsibilities of established academics vis-à-vis those who have recently entered the profession.

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## MOVING BEYOND THE SINGLE-AUTHOR THESIS: TIME PRESSURES AND CENTRIPETAL EFFECTS

When I participated in the “Second Project” roundtable at the IBAAS conference 2016, what surprised me most was the presence in the audience of people at all stages of their academic careers. My comments were then, and are in what follows, primarily aimed at PhD students, postdocs and ECRs: people either struggling to keep their head above water in that tricky period between finishing the PhD and obtaining a permanent position, or anxiously awaiting their viva examinations and curious about what lies ahead. Currently in the former group, I have had success in publishing my doctoral research, a version of which appeared as *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (2014). In my contribution to this roundtable, I focus primarily on the practical challenges I have faced in effectively formulating and starting work on a large-scale second project, including those which can result from a successful critical intervention in the first project relating to an author, like Thomas Pynchon, whose work has a substantial and growing critical industry surrounding it. While I hope this will be of use to people in the earlier stages of their academic careers, I also hope that, as part of this roundtable, it will provide an insight that might help more senior scholars conceive of ways to ease the transition into academia for their juniors.

Having completed my thesis in May 2012, and passed my viva in September of the same year, the process of seeing this first project into publication was relatively smooth. The proposal I developed was accepted by Cambridge University Press, and the final manuscript was submitted in autumn 2013. Following this it took around a year for the book to come to print, during which copy-editing, finding a cover image and preparing the index placed fairly considerable burdens on my time. The publication of this book at the beginning of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF) cycle was ideal in allowing me time within the cycle to publish some shorter pieces from my developing second project, thus enabling me to potentially make a full REF submission this time and, hopefully, publish my second project at the beginning of the new cycle (so avoiding “overlap”). The second project I am speaking of has been conceptualized; *Anarchist Fiction: Radical Form in American Literature of the 1960s and 70s* will examine the dynamic interplay between social anarchist visions of a society organized on the principles of local, temporary and spontaneous collaboration as propounded by elements within the 1960s counterculture, and the radically experimental narrative forms of writers like Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme and Ishmael Reed. Work towards an article on Kathy Acker that feeds into this project is well under way, but for the benefit of others it is worth pointing out some of the myriad factors that have prevented me from making more

progress. Apart from the fact that I have a passionate interest in the subject matter of this project, optimal progress is necessary because, in my experience, interview panels for permanent jobs increasingly expect to see well-developed second projects.

In his introduction to the special issue of *American Literary History* which inspired the organizers of the IBAAS roundtable, Gordon Hutner states that “second books, ideally, are the chances to show the intellectual communities in which we participate what scholars can do with time and maturity, when they don’t have to make as many utilitarian decisions as a first book so often necessitates.”<sup>1</sup> For myself, as indeed for Hutner, “ideally” is very much the operative word in this statement. I don’t know about maturity, but time has certainly not been something I feel I’ve had in greater abundance with my second project. Very much the opposite, actually, despite the fact that I was working significant part-time hours in TEFL while writing my thesis on a full-time basis. Apart from the aforementioned work on preparing my first book for publication, my time since the submission of my PhD has largely been taken up by academic teaching work, non-academic paid work, organizing a conference, preparing for and speaking at conferences, coediting a journal, reviewing articles and books, and applying and interviewing for academic jobs. The only sustained period of time I have had in which I have been able to dedicate myself full-time to research is the last few months, my fixed-term position at the University of Exeter mercifully extending over the summer so that I can work on research projects without having to worry about income.

Yet sometimes it is hard, even for myself, to appreciate how the kinds of work mentioned end up taking up so much time. Of course, excessive perfectionism can be an issue, and one’s efficiency only increases, but I feel this lack of time is a very common experience for postdoctoral scholars. Academic teaching at this career stage often requires preparing seminars on multiple modules that the individual has not taught previously. There can be a lot of emphasis on first-year modules (some of the most challenging to teach!) with heavy marking loads for which the casually employed tutor is paid as part of their not particularly high hourly rate. Casual and fixed-term contracts often mean that tutors do not get a salary over the summer. All of this, combined with a post-PhD desire not to still be living “like a student” in one’s late twenties, early thirties or later, makes paid non-academic work either necessary or highly attractive financially. Personally, I worked between six and twenty-one hours a week teaching TEFL right through my PhD and up until my

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Hutner, “Editor’s Introduction,” *American Literary History*, 25, 1 (Spring 2013), 1–5, 5.

appointment to a salaried position in the 2015–16 academic year. Having acquired a qualification in English-language teaching prior to starting my MA put me in a position to earn a reasonable wage and support myself in this fashion; for those without a particular skill or qualification, self-funding can present greater difficulties. Jobs in TEFL in the UK require only the completion of a month-long training course, as well as a degree in any subject, and fit well around academic work as schools (generally located in seaside and historic cities) are busier over the summer months. The work itself also helps in developing core teaching skills that I suspect will only become more useful once the TEF is introduced. Finally, although we might expect to spend considerable time on conference planning, reviewing and other tasks that are par for the course in academia, if, like me, you do not obtain a permanent position quickly, applying and interviewing for jobs can take up a very considerable amount of time and should be factored into timescales when planning a second project.

Such time pressures are, to some extent, a feature of academia that scholars need to get used to, all part of the challenging nature of the job that attracts many of us to it. On a more serious note, however, I would argue that the current combination of pressures on time *and* money, the radical instability resulting from the lack of job security (which can place significant stress on relationships), and the apparent absence of comparable career alternatives to academia for humanities scholars, creates an untenable situation. Moreover, there are discriminatory implications to this, as such pressures will tend to impact most heavily on those suffering from issues with mental or physical health, those with family or other caring responsibilities, and those without independent means of financial support. Since low income in the UK disproportionately affects single parents, ethnic minorities and women, this latter factor becomes even more significant.<sup>2</sup> While aspiring academics can try to make careful choices about the work they take on in order to get ahead, this approach will not solve the overall problem; ultimately, I feel, universities must take responsibility for the PhD students they train and provide more long-term entry-level opportunities. Needless to say, this would also be to the benefit of those undergraduates currently taught by struggling postdocs whose student experience we are increasingly concerned with improving.

In the final section of this essay, I would also like to point to some of the ways in which a successful first project on a single author can, in fact, present a problem when it comes to moving on to a distinct second project. Thomas Pynchon is an author with a particularly vast critical industry

<sup>2</sup> For statistics supporting this see *The Poverty Site*, at [www.poverty.org.uk/summary/income.htm](http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/income.htm), accessed 28 July 2016.

surrounding him (wittily dubbed the “Pyndustry”) and since the publication of *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* I have become involved in several further projects based around his fascinating novels. These include a journal special issue, an edited collection and a coedited collection (the latter two subject to approval of proposals under consideration). Also, unsure of where to take my research in the initial months following my viva, I pursued an interest from my teaching and wrote a draft article on Native American contexts to Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* that the above-mentioned time pressures have prevented me from seeing into publication. Given that potential employers seem to be most interested in the publication of adequate research to make up a full, high-quality REF submission, as well as in evidence of well-developed current research projects, it may have been shrewder of me to have plunged straight into my second project (to which the Pynchon and Native Americans article is unrelated) and given it my full focus rather than taking on either this or extensive editorial duties. Then again, such ruthlessness would have meant turning down projects that inspire me (and also have value in job applications).

To conclude, the current state of the academic job market, along with the centripetal effect that a successful first project can have in keeping one’s research focus within a certain field, does not make pursuing a second project an easy prospect for those who have recently finished their PhD. While to some extent scholars can make choices about what to prioritize that favour their ultimate employability and hence their chance to produce third, fourth and fifth projects, those higher up the food chain will, I hope, do what they can to foster conditions in which more can realize this ambition.

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JOANNA FREER

## TELL US ABOUT YOUR NEXT PROJECT, AND HOW IT FITS INTO OUR REF IMPACT STRATEGY

I first came up with an idea of what I wanted to research as a second book project when I was writing up my PhD dissertation. I was reading over Era Bell Thompson’s *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, an account of the African American editor of *Ebony* magazine’s travels throughout Africa, as she attempts to trace her “roots” and find out more about a continent on the move towards decolonization.<sup>1</sup> While reading of her adventures, I was stuck

<sup>1</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, 1st edn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954).

by the amount of time and space Thompson dedicated to describing her experiences of being flown by black pilots on African-owned airlines. I'd read about pioneering aviators such as the "the Brown Condor," John Robinson, and the heroic work of the Tuskegee airmen, but it occurred to me that there might be a longer history to be written about the relationship between African Americans and aviation.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, as a twentieth-century historian, I wondered how African Americans responded to the emergence of the jet age, as well as how technologies of travel shaped the way in which their freedom dreams were articulated. Indeed, to what extent did the battle to access relatively new forms of commercialized air travel shape debates over segregation? Since then, as I completed my postgraduate studies, took up my first academic post and revised my dissertation into a book manuscript, I've tried to collect as much information as possible relating to "African Americans in the Jet Age," with the idea that this might be the project that would – one day – result in my next academic monograph. For me at least, the idea of a second project had always meant a second book project.

However, what I first believed would be a relatively straightforward progression from first to second monograph has, in reality, been a little more complicated. Just to be clear, this is not an extended moan based on my limited experience in higher education. I realize that I've been incredibly lucky since starting my first permanent academic job in 2013 – I've been exposed to different ideas and afforded opportunities that have taken my work in new and (hopefully) interesting directions. However, I would like to take a moment just to reflect on how I've been challenged to rethink my own research during this time. And, specifically, to think through how the drive to deliver "impact" for the Research Excellence Framework might raise questions about how we define a second academic project.

So what is "impact," and how is it defined in the United Kingdom? The REF sees impact as: "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."<sup>3</sup> Generating impact is therefore about reaching broader audiences, and with the publication of the Stern report, the definition of what this might include could be even more expansive by the time of REF

<sup>2</sup> Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, Inc., 2012); Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> "REF Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions" (July 2011), at [www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf](http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf), 26.

2021.<sup>4</sup> Impact case studies submitted by researchers are judged on their “reach and significance” and are ranked out of four stars. Impact therefore has to be provable and measurable. Also, crucially, it needs to be underpinned by high-quality academic research that often takes the form of more traditional research outputs such as peer-reviewed journal articles or academic monographs. Plenty of thought-provoking pieces have been written about the push for impact, including concerns that it is pushing academia towards an unhealthy focus on measurability and statistics.<sup>5</sup> However, despite its bureaucratic pitfalls, the impact agenda has undoubtedly placed a renewed emphasis on scholars to try and reach different audiences, and has sparked exciting two-way conversations beyond the narrow confines of the university campus.

In essence, much of this is to be welcomed. Indeed, the emphasis placed on impact has made it possible to develop existing collaborations that came out of my PhD research that examined African American responses to the rise of apartheid in South Africa. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the movement’s global dimensions, this work brought me into contact with former activists involved in anti-apartheid organizing in Britain. Through these connections I was able to organize public talks, and develop two small exhibitions that ran during Black History Month in 2013 and 2014, that explored British involvement in the campaign to boycott South African goods. Initially conceived as public engagement activities, the impact agenda has since provided a framework through which to work with former activists, academics and archivists interested in thinking about the legacy of anti-apartheid in a more sustained manner. Working with the British Anti-apartheid Movement (AAM) Archives Committee, I’ve since been able to secure extra time and access to internal funding to work with the organization and to use their collections to develop educational resources through the group’s Forward to Freedom website. In addition to this, along with representatives from an NGO called Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), I’ve started to explore how the history of the global anti-apartheid movement might be able to influence contemporary political discussions relating to human rights and race discrimination, as well as the development of boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns. Whether this will generate the desired impact demanded

<sup>4</sup> “Stern Review: Submit All Researchers to Next REF,” *Times Higher Education*, 28 July 2016, available at [www.timeshighereducation.com/news/stern-review-submit-all-researchers-next-ref](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/stern-review-submit-all-researchers-next-ref).

<sup>5</sup> The following recent pieces are particularly insightful: Andrew McRae, “How’s My Impact?,” *A Head of Department’s Blog*, 24 Oct. 2014, <https://headofdepartmentblog.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/how-my-impact/>; Sioned Pearce, “Making Your Marx in Research: Reflections on Impact and the Efficacy of Case Studies Using the Work of Karl Marx,” *Impact of Social Sciences*, 1 June 2016, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/06/01/making-your-marx-in-research>.

by the REF and research directors alike is still unclear at this stage. However, the opportunity to work with and learn from fascinating people involved in the history of the British anti-apartheid movement has been both rewarding and intellectually challenging.

Significantly, these experiences have also reshaped how I think about both my scholarly development and my role as an academic. Ultimately, this work has led me to think about research in much broader terms. Indeed, when thinking about the themes of this roundtable, I'd like to make the case that it might be useful to define impact as a "project" in and of itself, even though it is tied to more traditional forms of academic research. There are two main reasons for this.

First, impact work takes time as you liaise with your collaborators, research joint initiatives, plan events, and come up with methods to measure what positive influence (if any) these activities have had. Thinking about impact as a self-defined project more accurately reflects what this work actually entails. It might also encourage universities to properly recognize the amount of effort and care that often goes into forging links that exist beyond the university. I mention this as institutions should be careful to provide adequate mentorship to early-career researchers so that they are still able to pursue alternative research activities and aren't pigeonholed as the person who does impact within a specific department. If we're not careful, the push towards generating impact could potentially place obstacles in the way of early-career researchers as they try to venture into new research areas and work on new publications. In my case, my work with the AAM Archives Committee and ACTSA is rooted in what was essentially my doctoral research and to develop this properly will inevitably delay me from moving on to a new topic. This doesn't have to be an issue, but could soon seem restrictive if the production of impact isn't given the appropriate level of institutional support.

Second, and perhaps most significantly, it's vital that we avoid seeing impact as a government-mandated add-on to scholarly research. Whatever you think of the politics behind the impact agenda and the neoliberal reforms currently reshaping the British university system, impact shouldn't simply be seen as bureaucratic tick-box exercise needed to boast REF scores.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, academics in the humanities are being asked to manage real relationships and are often dealing with people who have dedicated their lives to a particular cause or passion. If scholars see impact as something that has a life of its own – a distinctive project that often needs as much attention as writing articles and

<sup>6</sup> Mark Reed, "The Impact Agenda Is Starting to Fail Those It Was Meant to Benefit," *Times Higher Education*, 5 May 2016, available at [www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/the-impact-agenda-is-starting-to-fail-those-it-was-meant-to-benefit](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/the-impact-agenda-is-starting-to-fail-those-it-was-meant-to-benefit).

books – there might be a better chance to build more meaningful and lasting relationships with people outside higher education. The last thing that we should want as scholars is for impact to be an afterthought as people panic to meet REF guidelines and for academics and universities to let down the people that we are working with. If we give impact work the time and effort it deserves, if we afford it enough attention and resources, then there might be more of a chance to build organic two-way relationships that are of benefit to all involved.

I still plan to write a second monograph that explores the relationship between African Americans and the emergence of the jet age, but I don't necessarily see this as my "second" project. Perhaps, given the changes in higher education over the last few years, it makes sense to avoid thinking about research in strictly linear terms. Today early-career researchers are often required to juggle a number of projects simultaneously. It is important that impact is given enough attention and support within this configuration, not least because this work often involves the management of personal relationships and organizational ties, based around mutual trust, that require a sustained level of commitment. Seeing impact as being of equivalent status to writing articles and monographs will hopefully lead to lasting and genuinely two-way relationships and exchanges that transcend specific REF cycles. Ultimately, this comes down to the time and support that universities are willing to give academics to forge external collaborations and whether they see impact work as something more than a REF requirement. If we are going to commit to impact, we should be willing to do so for the long haul.

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NICHOLAS GRANT

### TITLE TBC

First, a word on my title. When I received an invitation to take part in this roundtable about the second book project, I wasn't asked for a title. The first I heard of titles was when the draft programme for IBAAS was circulated and everyone else had these great titles – "The Two-Project Problem," "You Want Me to Write *Another* Book?" – whereas "Title TBC" was listed beside my name. I frantically started to generate catchy but deliberately vague titles – "The Second Cut Is the Deepest" was the best I'd come up with – when it hit me that "Title TBC" is actually rather an apt title for a talk about a second book project. This is, after all, a project that for many of us remains something of a notional abstraction for much of the time

we're thinking about it, while all the time we are telling our potential (and current) employers that it's very much on the way.

So, my title is still to be confirmed, but the direction of my remarks is more certain. As a way into discussing the second book project, I want to focus on the differences I perceive between what the first book project means in three different countries and three different university systems: in Ireland, the UK, and the US. I've had the good fortune to live and work in all of these countries and systems: I did my PhD work at University College Dublin in Ireland, then had two years as an Irish Research Council-sponsored postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University in the US, followed by my current job at the University of York in the UK. Along the way, I published my first book, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism*, which came out in same year as I started my job, 2013. That was the year it needed to come out, of course, to be eligible for the 2014 REF, and the certainty of its publication must have been at least some help in getting me my post.

So my decision to publish the book when I did turned out to be a good one, but it was not as straightforward a decision as one might expect. When I arrived at Harvard in late 2011 to begin my postdoc, the question whether or not to apply for jobs in the US system – to “go on the market,” as US-based graduate students rather depressingly phrase it – presented itself to me. It was then that I received a piece of advice from the internal reader on my PhD thesis at UCD, Sharae Deckard, herself an American. She counselled me that if I wanted to apply for positions in the US, I should not try to publish my first book in the immediate future. The way the tenure system works – pretty much everywhere except at the most elite institutions – is that you are given your tenure-track job based on your PhD dissertation and perhaps a couple of well-placed articles. You are then expected to more or less tear up your dissertation and start again, publishing your first book only near the end of your tenure clock, in the fourth, fifth or sixth year of the job.

This means that there's a fairly well-worn path in the US system that leads to the publication of the first book, a path I had to think about whether I wanted to set out on. In the UK, by contrast, we have the Research Evaluation Framework, which in various forms over the last decade and a half or so has played a big role in hiring cycles and, consequently, in the expectations of when a first book should be published. The key criterion of judgement, under this system, becomes not so much the timing of the book in a young scholar's career, but the timing of the book vis-à-vis where it arrives in an arbitrarily defined multi-year cycle. As a result, in the UK the pressure has been to publish your first book quickly, unless you are lucky enough to come across a hiring committee who retain a very noninstrumentalist sense of the meaning of research. Despite the fact that time-to-PhD in the UK is typically shorter than in the US, students recently out of PhD programmes

in the UK have up until now been expected to pitch their first book to potential employers as something close to a done deal, or at least to find a postdoctoral position that allows them to turn it into a done deal. This may be changing, since the rules of REF are always shifting, but the point to make is that the meaning of the first book is likely to remain significantly different in the UK than in the US.

And then you have the case of Ireland, which currently has neither a REF nor a tenure-track system, at least that I know of, so that the criteria of assessing prospective hires are perhaps more difficult to define than in the UK or the US. In the autumn of 2011, in any case, I had to think about how my potential first book would play in each of these three contexts.

In the end I decided not to go “on the market” in the US that autumn. I felt I wanted to settle into Harvard first, and enjoy my first few months at such an august institution without putting pressure on myself to apply for the next thing straight away (which, as many know only too well, is one of the great stresses of academic labour under the casualization ethos of neoliberalism). I was keeping open the idea of applying in the US in autumn 2012 – book or no book – but things turned out fortunately, in that I got the position at York in the summer of 2012 and my new institution allowed me to stay on to complete my time at Harvard before taking up the new post in autumn 2013. This meant that rather than prepare for a first proper job, with all the things that would entail, I was able to spend the summer of 2012 writing up my first book at Harvard. It was a blissful time, really, to write without real pressure, and I expect things will never be quite so good again.

With the exception of those few months when I wrote up my first book, though, I always saw the second book as the real deal for me, where the ideas I began exploring in the PhD would really come to maturity. To start getting at the differences between the first and second book projects, it’s worth quoting a few lines of Gordon Hutner’s editor’s introduction to the issue of *American Literary History* devoted to the second book project in a US context, out of which the idea for this roundtable emerged. I think his words capture well my sense of the differences between my own two projects:

How might second books differ from first books? First books’ debt to their dissertation origins can be seen in the way they so often proceed out of a series of close readings. Close reading may well be the very coin of intellectual commerce for these projects, the skill that can most reliably be evaluated by the largest number of people. Second books, by contrast, are often conceived and organized more variously than first books usually allow. In history departments, the assumption has been that the second book ought to deal with a bigger archive than the first book does. In English, we see that second books may draw on a professor’s teaching, on the one hand, or the free-play of research on the other.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hutner, 4.

My first book was very much built around a series of close readings, as Hutner suggests. By contrast, though close reading is still central to the methodology of my second book, I'm defining it (at least in my head) in grander ways. I'd like it on the one hand to be a defining study of the generation of American fiction writers who followed the baby boomers, who were born in a roughly fifteen-year window between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. These are writers like Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, Colson Whitehead, Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, writers whose careers began in what is now widely described as the neoliberal period of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This will be a generational study, then – looking at the intellectual influences and aesthetic innovations of a generation of writers – but it will also be the study of a particular period of American cultural life stretching roughly from the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996 to the financial crisis of 2008. Each chapter of the book will deal with a specific writer – rather than, as in my first book, a specific novel – but I also want each chapter to be about a particular arena of current debate: with regard to Wallace, aesthetics and dialectics; with regard to Eggers, subjectivity and financialization; with regard to Egan, gender and genre; with regard to Saunders, class and cruel optimism; and so on. All these topics are conceived as contributing to critical debates around the term “neoliberalism”: what is neoliberal art? How can art be critical of neoliberalism? What is neoliberal subjectivity? Can literature resist it? And so on. But finally, this is also and perhaps most centrally a book about what I call the New Sincerity, a term that itself gains both further definition but also further breadth every time I think about it or write about it.

So you can see that the way I'm thinking about my second book is still changing all the time – it's a generational study, it's a historical narrative, it's a series of interventions in debates, it's a conceptual account of the relationship between neoliberalism and sincerity. You can see, in other words, that in my head it constantly accretes in grandeur and grandiosity rather than winnowing down into something concrete and specific. I have a feeling that the winnowing-down process will eventually happen, and when it does, I'll be writing actual book chapters in earnest rather than papers and articles. And then I'll probably want to take back everything I've said here.

The title of my second book, by the way, is very much still to be confirmed, although at the moment I'm going with *American Fiction at the Millennium: Neoliberalism and the New Sincerity*. But please don't hold me to that, unless of course you're assessing me for promotion, in which case I can guarantee you that the book is in the bag.

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ADAM KELLY

## THE TWO-PROJECT PROBLEM

In academia, the “two-body problem” describes the difficulties of academic couples who are trying to find satisfying jobs in the same geographic locale. Its name puns on the similarly titled physics problem, in which one attempts to determine the motion of two bodies that interact with each other. My essay addresses another two entities that influence the movements and decisions of the early-career researcher (ECR): the PhD book and the second project. In the British academic system, hiring committees generally look for two things in the research of ECRs: a strong first book based on the dissertation, and a viable, ambitious and exciting second project. The ECR looking for a permanent job is therefore trying to balance publishing their first book with making meaningful progress on the project that will follow.<sup>1</sup> I call this balancing act the “two-project problem.”

The two-project problem is actually a three-body problem, with the three bodies being the ECR, the first book, and the second project. The bad news is that, in physics, there is no exact solution for the three-body problem. As a helpful anonymous mathematician puts it, “no real-life  $N$ -body system orbits are stable (exactly repeat themselves)” – even within the same system, the three bodies never precisely repeat the same paths.<sup>2</sup> In academia, too, there is no sure-fire path to follow. So, rather than offering “Ten Things Every ECR Should Do to Get an Academic Job,” I want to describe my experience of the two-project problem, in the hope that others facing similar dilemmas might feel less alone, and that academia might start to think about multiple solutions to the problems faced by ECRs.

From the outset, it seems important to say that I write from a position of privilege. I faced my two-project problem with an academic job that was temporary but fairly paid, and that gave me both time and money to pursue research. I have a partner who financially supported me in the period after my PhD, leaving me with only manageable student debt. I don’t have caring responsibilities at home, and I have generally good mental and physical health. I’m white, I’m a British national, and I’m middle-class. If any one of those things isn’t true, then this makes navigating a two-project problem and forging an academic career considerably harder, as you add more variables to an already difficult situation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that every academic wants a permanent job, or that only people in permanent jobs contribute to research. But getting a permanent job was my aim, and the article proceeds on that basis.

<sup>2</sup> The Physicist, “Q: What Is the Three-Body Problem?”, *Ask a Mathematician/Ask a Physicist* (2011), at [www.askamathematician.com/2011/10/q-what-is-the-three-body-problem](http://www.askamathematician.com/2011/10/q-what-is-the-three-body-problem), accessed 14 July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For perspectives on postgraduate study and early-career academia from scholars with disabilities, BME scholars, foreign nationals, and working-class scholars see the various guest posts

My two-project problem began in September 2014, when I took up a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Nottingham, nine months after finishing my PhD on Herman Melville. Full-time work and a desire to let the PhD breathe meant that I hadn't begun revising my thesis into a book manuscript when I started the fellowship. I arrived at Nottingham with a pressing sense of what I needed to achieve in my first year. I wanted to revise my thesis into a book manuscript and find a publisher. Also, because I had been awarded the Leverhulme Fellowship for research into the publication of American literature in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, I felt I had a duty to get started on my second project.

Very quickly, gaps emerged between my ambitious plans and my actual achievements. My book manuscript on Melville needed much more work than I had anticipated, and, at first, I only received rejections from publishers. I was a first-time author aiming at prestigious presses, but that was difficult to remember when the "thanks, but no thanks" letters came. Instead, I worried that my work might never be good enough. Time spent on that monograph felt wasted because it wasn't producing results that appeared on a CV, and nor was it the project I'd said I would do on my grant application. As for that project, I'd forgotten how slowly new research goes. The larger scope of my second project is a good thing in an intellectual sense, but I found myself struggling to define its boundaries. Sometimes, archives were difficult to locate, and at other times there seemed too much material to possibly shape into a coherent study. Besides which, without a supervisor and the structure of the PhD, I found it hard to measure my progress.<sup>4</sup> There was, of course, much about this new research that I enjoyed, but the scale of the questions it posed was daunting.

Switching between projects was my most difficult problem. The practical task of retrieving different sets of computer files, books and notes symbolized the intellectual task of refamiliarizing myself with different sets of ideas. I

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in Nadie Muller, 'Disability & Chronic Illness in Academia', *Dr Nadie Muller*, at [www.nadinemuller.org.uk/category/disability-and-chronic-illness](http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/category/disability-and-chronic-illness), accessed 14 July 2016; Kalwant Bhopal and June Jackson, *The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics: Multiple Identities and Career Progression* (June 2013), at <http://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Research-Report-The-Experiences-of-Black-and-Minority-Ethnic-Academics-Dr-Bhopal.pdf>, accessed 14 July 2016; Holly Else, 'The Postdoc Experience: Hopes and Fears', *Times Higher Education*, 2015, at [www.timeshighereducation.com/the-postdoc-experience-hopes-and-fears](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/the-postdoc-experience-hopes-and-fears), accessed 14 July 2016; George Byrne, 'Coming to Terms with Being a Working Class Academic', *Sociology Lens* (2015), at <https://thesocietypages.org/sociologylens/2015/04/22/coming-to-terms-with-being-working-a-working-class-academic>, accessed 14 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Leverhulme ECFs are assigned a mentor from their institution. Mine was very helpful (thanks, Graham!), but we tended to concentrate on getting the first book published because that was where I needed the most practical advice.

became anxious about spending my time correctly. The new research was more exciting than the Melville project, and I wondered how much time I should spend on a manuscript that didn't yet have a publisher. But I knew that getting my first monograph in print was vital for my future career ... and I also knew that I didn't want to finish my fellowship with no new publications to show for it. I would worry about the manuscript being unfinished, and go back to it, only to panic later that I had an archive visit scheduled and hadn't done the preparatory reading.

While revising my chapter on *Moby-Dick*, I reread a passage in which Ishmael observes that, unlike humans, whales have an eye on either side of their skull: "the whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him." Ishmael suggests that the whale's "extraordinary vacillations of movement ... the timidity and liability to queer frights, so common to such whales ... all this indirectly proceeds from the helpless perplexity of volition, in which their divided and diametrically opposite powers of vision must involve them." This passage suddenly seemed peculiarly pertinent to my own position, in the middle of two projects. Shifting between research topics, I, too, was liable to "queer frights." I "vacillated" between tasks, constantly worrying that nothing was finished. My CV seemed an endless list of "forthcoming," "under consideration," and "in progress." There was a vast chasm between my expectations of scholarly productivity, and how long it was taking me to achieve anything – a problem that is symptomatic of a culture in which scholars' ideas are deemed to have value only when published and REF-able. Aligning myself too fully with my incomplete work, I viewed myself as an incomplete scholar. The worst part of my two-project problem was feeling that two half-finished projects equalled no projects at all.

Some aspects of the research fellowship made these "queer frights" worse. I am, of course, grateful to have been given the opportunity to focus on research, but this freedom also removed any reasons for work remaining unfinished other than "research takes time." Teaching had also been a source of positivity when my PhD research was tough, and now I didn't have that to distract me from my slow progress. I was very aware that my post wasn't permanent, and so much time and mental energy was devoted to applying for jobs. Finally, as someone who was not-quite-staff, no-longer-student, it was tricky to find my place in my department, and I was spending much of my working day on my own. No longer working to the goal of PhD submission, and without certainty of future employment, I found the in-betweenness of the postdoc difficult, which didn't help my sense of being caught between two projects.

Through these difficulties, support came from friends inside and outside academia who listened when I talked about feeling unable to move forward, and who shared their own stories. Then, a small detail in a seminar about

applying for funding pushed me to reevaluate my own feelings of inadequacy: the speaker explained that even the most successful academics have a failure rate higher than 50 percent when applying for grants. Every academic has a shadow CV of rejections: some have even published them.<sup>5</sup> The idea that the people I admired were still failing more than half the time helped me to remember that my own failures were a single part of my scholarly career, rather than what defined it. And in the second year of my fellowship, the work that seemed unproductive began to bear fruit. I gave a talk that I turned into an article, and a publisher showed interest in my book. Invariably, progress happened, and it will continue to happen, in jerky movements. One project lurches forward while the other stalls from receiving less attention, but I'm learning to accept this imbalance. It turns out that research really does take time, but ECRs who are trying to develop their careers often don't have this time – especially those with families to support, those underpaid, and those with heavy teaching loads.

As I write this, I still have a two-project problem, but feel less like there is a “profound darkness and nothingness” between my first book and my new research. Revising my thesis into a book manuscript has improved the writing in my second project, and the more ambitious canvass of my second project has enabled me to consider the bigger ideas at play in my first book. Although there is much that remains unpublished, I have more confidence that it will be published. And so if I were to offer a few words to any ECRs feeling lost in the in-between, I would remind them that feeling insecure is natural when you're in a precarious situation. Balancing two projects is difficult not because you're incapable, but because it is difficult – and the current job market makes it harder. Most importantly, the perfect, precise solution to the two-project problem doesn't exist. Each scholarly career has its own peculiar orbits and, with the help of colleagues and friends, each of us must find our own.

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KATIE MCGETTIGAN

## RESPONSE 1

At the end of this roundtable presentation it was my task, as is customary for the chair, to thank the speakers. This time felt different from previous panels:

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Haushofer, assistant professor of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University, received attention in May 2016 for publishing his CV of failures. His document links to other examples of the form: Johannes Haushofer, “CV of Failures”, at [www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes\\_Haushofer\\_CV\\_of\\_Failures.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes_Haushofer_CV_of_Failures.pdf), accessed 14 July 2016.

I thanked them for their openness about the problems they'd faced getting their second project off the ground, for their honesty about the challenges facing early-career researchers (ECRs) in our highly pressurized system, and for striking a balance between the positives and negatives of their experiences. It's no easy thing to sit in a room full of academics and talk engagingly about what it is that stops us "getting on" with what we say we're getting on with (particularly if you've yet to bag that permanent job). This type of open self-reflective discussion is rare on panels at academic conferences: more usually confined, perhaps, to postgraduate seminars, or late-night bar confessions, whispered to those you can trust after the tenured professors have left the room. But the mix of attentive students and junior and senior academics in the room showed that second-project problems apply more widely. And the room was packed, riveted. No one left, I believe, because we could all relate to issues they outlined. In their lighthearted and heartfelt presentations they managed to elicit and give empathy at the same time by pointing out the elephant in the research project room. As a word-portrait it would look like this: REF (UK) Tenure (US). Funding. Precarity. Staying in the game. Leaving the game. It's surprising that any of us ever get any thinking done. Not only had the speakers achieved that; they'd come out the other side with more great projects and helpful reflections on the process.

The post-talk discussion further drew out the elastic set of demands faced by ECRs even when that hard-fought success – such as getting a fellowship, a research grant, or your first job – arrives. Taking the right track has become a perennial conundrum. For many of us who have been on "the other side" – on appointing or funding selection panels – the pressures on entry-level faculty are clear and something that we comment quietly about, usually along the lines of how much harder it's become than when we were in their shoes (despite the "hazing" of over-teaching that has regularly been the lot of junior faculty). It is far less common to openly talk about how such altered and conflicting expectations in our daily work affect our experiences and behaviour: most of us believe that there is too little time for research yet we produce more work than ever (and expect our colleagues to); American studies closures or restructures have made us all fear redundancy but also feel lucky when it's our "competitors" who go under rather than ourselves; we internalize and externalize the pressure of getting large grants while we discuss how the pot is diminishing; we feel hopelessly unable to keep up with the newest research or teaching technologies while our universities freely use temp agencies or zero-hours contracts to fulfil their undergraduate teaching obligations using ECRs who have teaching qualifications we don't. The second-project problem isn't only about the broader marketization of HE in the UK and the squeeze on public money, but I really don't believe our predecessors experienced anything similar last century. Maybe in ten

years' time academics will look back and see the pre-TEF world as easy street in comparison, but our own silent collusion in this unbrave new world needs addressing.

Why anyone would put up with all of these dark arts became clear, however: our speakers were working on fascinating projects that they just wanted to bring to fruition so that others could enjoy them, and so they could then get on with the next brilliant idea. The intellectual rewards and pleasures of working on one, or two, or even three projects at the same time was sufficient to put up with the moving goalposts they faced. The energy, creativity and equanimity the speakers displayed was an object lesson to us all to keep calm and carry on, as well as stick together, show support and solidarity, resist the atomization and park, or expose, the ludicrous demands where we can.

Now, back to that overdue fourth project ...

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SUE CURRELL

## RESPONSE 2

I was fortunate enough to attend the “second-project” roundtable at the IBAAS conference at Queen’s University Belfast in April 2016, to hear the thoughtful and wide-ranging articulations by the individual panellists, and to take part in the subsequent discussion. My initial response, then and now, as someone who has been in his first job for fifteen years, is how much more demanding it is to get onto job shortlists today and how the expectations placed on new lecturers in terms not just of publications but also of impact and engagement, grants, and teaching has increased exponentially – to the point where the profession as a whole needs to sit up and take note. This insight will produce a weary shrug from those either looking for their first post or struggling to balance the competing demands placed on them if fortunate enough to have secured a full-time position. But specifically in terms of what McGettigan called “the two-project problem” or as Kelly summarized (“You Want Me to Write Another Book?”), my initial reflections were various; how the transition from first to second book is made easier (though by no means easy) by postdoc fellowships and by contrast how much of a struggle it is for those on short-term, teaching-intensive contracts; how casualization itself is becoming a bigger and bigger problem for higher education in the UK and elsewhere (and how those of us “in” jobs have a vested interest in ensuring that the status quo pertains, namely a cheap supply of “adjunct” labour); and how researching and writing a second book is made infinitely more challenging by other demands placed on us as a profession (e.g. grants, impact etc.). There was much discussion of REF (the Research Excellence Framework) and its malign effects, especially as

these relate to the ways REF is used by university managers to coerce UK-based academics to write a book every seven or so years (an impossible level of productivity judged across one's working life). As McGettigan and others rightly pointed out, academic research is often necessarily "slow" and rushing out work before it is ready benefits no one in the longer term. (As a rough yardstick, a book-length project that requires significant amounts of new research and results in a decent, published monograph takes about ten years, give or take a few years either way). But what also emerged from our discussion was how committed we were as a group to the book or monograph as a form of intellectual enquiry. Here I wonder whether REF – at least insofar as the English literature and language UoA continues to value the book and weight it accordingly – might also be our friend; that is to say a useful ally in the struggle against an encroaching and philistine managerialism that would seek to tie our activities increasingly to income-generating targets. Though it might be heretical to say it, REF means that university senior managers need to take the challenges and difficulties we face when writing books very seriously indeed and provide all of us, and especially those newly appointed, with the time and resources to be able to produce our best work.

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ANDREW PEPPER

### RESPONSE 3

Events, dear friends, events. Since the panel, the Stern report on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Brexit vote, and Trump's election happened. Each, in their own way, may significantly alter the context, motivation, and calculation for the second monograph. Before these turns, when originally listening to the panel, I had two intertwined feelings. The first was sheer admiration for the professional achievements of this cohort. Surely American studies in the British four nations and the Irish Republic is producing its most skilful generation yet. This awe was tempered, however, by a feeling that we can't keep going on this way. The constant, and often internalized, burden to produce, produce, produce is surely a down payment on mid-career burnout and the rupture of personal relationships. Maybe every first book launch should laud the author with prosecco and deliver a copy of Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (2016).

My reading of the Stern report is that it agrees with the above. For embedded within its resolutions seems to be a desire to turn the institutional clock back to a perceived ideal of the exercise's early years in the 1980s. Stern appears to admit that the REF has created a "hurry-up-please-it's-time"

culture that has consequentially backed UK research overall into smaller imaginative and intellectual horizons. Stern's proposals – to reduce outputs per person, deemphasize individual outputs in favour of departmental ones, and require all “research” staff to submit – looks to enable a different kind of tick-tock culture, based not on disappearing time, but on one held in reserve. Much like Scorsese's “one-for-them-and-one-for-me” model of delivering a box-office film to create space for a personal project, Stern may let staff use one reporting cycle to produce shorter outputs in order to develop a more substantive one for the next: i.e. two articles (or essay collections) in one cycle and a double-weighted monograph in the next. Non-portability, even after adjustments for ECRs, will look to buttress longer-term projects by keeping staff immobile. Institutions will have less incentive to provide a retention promotion, and their competitors will be more cautious in risking an external hire who must start with a blank slate or need two cycles to deliver a magnum opus that justifies the poach.

If Stern works out this way, academic culture here should be enriched as we gain more time to have the collective discussions that are the real source of field-shaping conversation, the dialogue that was, after all, a founding principle of BAAS and IAAS. Hence the palpable anxiety about the need for acceleration might not be necessary. Yet there's a big “if” in Stern. The report has its own *Field of Dreams* imaginary in believing that there are pastoral managers who are ready to manage this cultural change by taking a longer view of staff development. Given that individuals were often placed in oversight roles because they adapted to the REF's hard-knuckle culture, it's a gamble that Stern might not win.

If Brexit occurs as Theresa May wishes it, then the perceived competition from American job applicants may decrease, as a result of limits to work visas and salaries that do not look attractive in a strong-dollar–weak-pound exchange. Similarly, Trump might help. When tuition fees began to increase, all (women's, American, area) “studies” degrees faltered due to a retreat to the perceived value of traditional degrees. Polly Toynbee was fundamentally wrong to interpret this motion as a particular aversion to American “bully” studies.<sup>1</sup> If anything, students may be even more intrigued now to study the culture of Atlas stumbling, the palpitations of a fading hegemon in the capitalist world system. Now that's a second book project!

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<sup>1</sup> Polly Toynbee, “A Degree in Bullying and Self-Interest? No Thanks,” *The Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2004, at [www.theguardian.com/education/2004/aug/25/highereducation.usa](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/aug/25/highereducation.usa).