

“Off Belay?” “Belay Off” – Old Media Studies and Plain Old American Literature

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Here’s a quick quiz. It’s a free Yahoo-type activity to kill some time and brain cells, sort of like those links that you click on when checking the radar when you should be grading papers (40 worst places to vacation...27 ugliest celebrity facial tattoos...50 best places to retire if you’re an albino...9 most common parenting mistakes that result in well-adjusted children...10 best ways to waste the next five minutes, etc.).

Of these session topics taken from actual programs for actual conferences, which of the four in each category is fictional?

#1.

- a) “Lobster and Squid, Victims of the System: The Corruption of Gilded Age Society.”
- b) “The Intelligence of Eagles Versus Dragons in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*.”
- c) “Angry Birds, Foul Deeds, Lunacy, Heroic Flyaways and Other Cocky Impediments: Reflections of Hamlet in The Birds.”
- d) “Theories of Transnational Debt: From Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?* To Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell*.”

#2.

- a) "Reading into the World of Panem: *The Hunger Games* and Storyworld Theory."
- b) "Eating Spam at the Nativity: Triumphs and Pitfalls of Modernized Student Productions of Early Plays."
- c) "Hulk as the Purveyor of Disorder: An Analysis of Desire in Superhero Films."
- d) "Emulating an Alien Consciousness: Anachronies in Ted Chiang's Story of Your Life and the Historie-Discours Relationship."

#3

- a) "Served on a Corporate Platter: Dystopian Food Consumption in Paolo Bagicalupi's *The Windup Girl* and Rob Ziegler's *Seed*."
- b) "No Money, No Debt, No Problem: The Absence of Economy in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*."
- c) "Credit and the Politics of Invisibility in Nobody and Somebody and the Occupy Movement."
- d) "Theories of Transnational Debt: From Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?* To Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*."

OK. Back to work.

This fall I had the good fortune of attending three different conferences in the span of less than a month, two of which were regional MLA events and one was the annual National Collegiate Honors Council conference. I presented papers at the language conferences – the one

held in Boise and the other in Austin – before blithely playing the part of the administrator/sponge at the NCHC affair, which is to say I drifted from session to session collecting handouts and feeling generally pleased with my place in life.

In all three cases, I spent an extraordinarily odd amount of time studying the conference programs and planning out my days. I am a complete program idiot, by the way. After I finish Post-it-noting my spiral-bound, glossy guide to enlightenment, it resembles one of those hand-traced turkeys kids make in elementary school on that worthless Tuesday before Thanksgiving break. By day two, my program will often be fat with yellow tabs, the corners swollen with dog ears and the margins filled here and there with unequivocal, emphatic notes reminding my future self, Don't miss this one! Or, Avoid this nuttiness!!! Or, just as often, my program books end up with these kinds of journal-like, trapped-on-an-island entries, such as, Why did I come in here?! Or, Don't forget to return those books on CD as soon as you get home. And, Did I park at the airport this time, or was I dropped off?

I used to be fairly alone in my fetishistic ways when it came to this kind of obsessive planning. But not so much anymore, at least not at the regional MLA conferences. Now, when I'm in the mini-lobby sipping conference coffee from a paper cup while camped out in a comfy but square, squat chair, I will look around and spot a half dozen or so other weirdoes doing precisely the same thing I'm doing, all while the actual conference is taking place in mostly empty, hidden rooms up and down the hallway. By the way, the organizer who decided to switch from tiny ceramic cups and saucers to paper cups with plastic lids should be made President of MLA next year – no vote needed; do we have a second?

Frankly, I am not certain if these conferences have changed or if it is I who has become mid-career jaded; regardless, I do not recall having this much trouble ten or fifteen years ago selecting sessions to attend. Sure, I used to whine to nobody in particular (and certainly not to my wife, who was back at home dealing with non-wish-granting diaper genies while working full time) about the fact that all of the presentations I *really* wanted to see were happening during concurrent sessions. Forced into making what I considered to be tough choices, I would when proudly padding around posh hotels with a goofy name badge dangling about my neck *actually* contemplate emailing some of the presenters in the sessions to explain that I regretfully missed their panel and wondered if they would nonetheless send me a copy of their papers. I even told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth when filling out my reimbursement forms upon return home, believing when stapling together my receipts that the people who approved my travel grant cared deeply about which and how many sessions detailing Derrida's take on deconstruction I had attended.

But these days when I'm worrying my way through the program like some Deuteronomicist historian earnestly undertaking Talmudical hermeneutics, I find the challenges to be different than they once were. I struggle to identify sessions and topics that strike me as appealing and, more importantly, useful. I am finding I want more than merely handouts that I can stuff like insulation into the bottom of my computer bag. I am so busy these days with committee work, letters of recommendation, prepping, grading, observations, advising, and more grading, that I can hardly justify giving up ninety minutes to hear about potentially arresting but ultimately obscure, narrow topics tied in some incredibly tangential way to my work in the classroom with students.

Sure, the reasons for these strangely specific topics and titles have behind them many, many motivations and justifications. First off, as the Bare Naked Ladies so bluntly stated in the titular line of their hit “It’s All Been Done,” it’s all been done. The big authors, books, ideas, and issues have been parsed out to such an extent that we are now often sifting the through fine rubble like weekend miners armed with pie tins hoping to hold up between pinched thumb and finger a tiny pebble for proof of something to justify our efforts. But, we persists because we love this stuff. And, to be sure, we do so because we need lines on our CVs if we are to get promoted. We need to carve out our corner of the corner of the corner of our area of “expertise” if we are going to get our research published by scholarly journals. We need opportunities to come out of our offices and escape our campuses and connect with other like-minded and equally unusual individuals. We need each other, basically, though we (meaning me) tend to skip too many sessions so as to leave ample time for planning, jogging, eating, and grading (always there is the grading).

And, much less importantly, though no less interestingly, we must – if we are going to be awarded the excuse to fly half way across the country to present for twenty minutes – develop topics and titles that fit within the conference theme. Why? I don’t know. Somebody at some point decided it wasn’t enough to have a conference in Las Vegas in February or in Paris in June (these people were NOT from Minnesota, by the way). We need to have themes for these events. The result: tortured, rib-tickling, sometimes enticing, often-off putting subjects and sessions that make you want to hide your program from your significant other upon your return to reality. “You were gone for *four* days and spent \$1,200 to listen to people talk about superheroes and, what is this, ‘*metaleptical*’ structure”? *Seriously?*” Ooh, you stop yourself from moaning in

protest, metaleptical structure in superhero narratives is *so* cool, before adding, “Well, ya, but.

The college paid for \$400 of that. Remember the grant I won?”

This *theme* phenomenon might metonymically represent a larger, possibly problematic trend in academics. It’s hard to say for sure. But, before going there, consider this example from the 2012 Midwestern Modern Language Association conference program (and, when doing so, see if you can’t guess what the theme was):

107. The International Raymond Carver Society

8:30 - 10:00 a.m. (Rookwood).

Topic: Debt, Indebtedness, Paychecks, and Paybacks

1. Raymond Carver's Debt to Gustave Flaubert: A Reading of "The Blue Stones"
2. Used Cars and Empty Wallets: The Politics of the Great Depression in Raymond Carver's Life and Poetry
3. The Debt of Dialogue: Narrative Thrust in Raymond Carver's Fiction
4. Double-Dip Excision: Variations on the Depictions of Working-Class America in Pre-Edited and Edited Carver

The session, apparently, had something to do with Raymond Carver. Did you get the conference leitmotif, though? No? Try this one that ran concurrently (see above for frustration related to contemporaneous, enticing sessions):

96. English II: English Literature 1800-1900 - Panel 1 of 4

8:30 - 10:00 a.m. (Caprice 3).

Topic: Debt

1. Full Faith and Credit: Social Trust and its Financial Distortions in *Emma*

2. Speculation and the Emotional Economy of *Mansfield Park*
3. A Contract of Mutual Agreeableness: Social and Financial Contracts in Three of Jane Austen's Novels
4. Putting the Bite on the Past: Travesty as Bakhtinian Tribute in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

Anything? Did you get it? It's debt. The theme is debt. You might have been thrown off by number 4, whose author apparently did not get the message before the program went to press. Still, the first three (along with the Topic) should suffice in the way of an avalanche of evidence.

Do these types of themes function generatively, say, in the way the strictures of a sonnet often lead writers to produce something more incisive and beautiful than they might have otherwise, if left to their own cognitive devices? Perhaps. Certainly theorists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, co-authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, might argue that such literary, imaginative exercises as these are not only productive (rather than reductive) but also innate. This is, in essence, how we as humans think.

Still, it seems a reach at times; and the tacit, tissue-like strength of our justifications for these junkets feels stretched thin to the point of transparent. That said, serendipity does at times smile in these instances. Take, for example, the focus and title of the next session listed in the program at this same conference:

97. Roundtable: Student Debt

8:30 - 10:00 a.m.

Student Debt, by the Numbers

No need for linguistic acrobatics or cerebral gymnastics with that one. It's spot on.

I will allow that ours is not the only profession that feels the need for imposing such superfluous hurdles and parameters on its participants. I will likewise acknowledge that ours might likely strike the ear of the uninitiated as more brazen, more outrageous; but this is doubtlessly due to our love of language and our pursuit of a smaller pool of economic resources than those in the social and hard science disciplines. Researchers in the STEM programs receive billions of dollars a year for projects with the lamest titles and most minute foci imaginable, and yet the climate continues to warm, we have no cure for the common cold, and my hairline is receding faster than the polar ice caps despite modern medicine's apparent best efforts. So, there is that.

However, this third conference I attended – the one wherein I played the role of administrator/attendee rather than academic/presenter – proved problematic. Sure, it had a theme (“Thrill of the Climb” – it was held in Denver after all). And, yes, there were a number of presenters who gave it the old college try when attempting to appeal to the selection committee: “Climb up Mountains Not over Walls: Honors at the Center of College Life”; “Climbing the Ultimate Economic Peak through HIP (Honors Investment Portfolio)”; and, my personal favorite, “‘On Belay’ – ‘Belay on’ – Support and Practice – the Value of Applying for Scholarships Early.” But still, this conference *felt* different.

I actually and honestly had a hard time selecting topics because so many dealt with my daily life as a teacher first, a faculty administrator second, and a scholar third. Not only did I want to attend certain sessions for my own intellectual edification, but in many instances I felt I needed to. I suspected I would likely find answers there to questions I had been asking or, more often, had been asked of me by my students and colleagues. Not one of my students in the past

eighteen years has yet to inquire about Financial Distortions in *Emma* or Speculation and the Emotional Economy of *Mansfield Park*; nor, unfortunately, have I had an opportunity to chat with departmental colleagues about Social and Financial Contracts in Three of Jane Austen's Novels or Travesty as Bakhtinian Tribute in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*. This, in *all* seriousness, is disappointing. Yet it does not change the fact that I spend more of my time talking with students about “the Value of Applying for Scholarships Early,” though until recently I never thought to require in advance of this conversation that – for safety reasons of course – the student calls out, “On Belay” before I return with, “Belay on.”

Do these differences represent a sort of canary in the coalmine? Do they indicate that our profession is becoming more *professional* and less academic? And does the question regarding canaries in coalmines make you wonder if maybe this paper couldn't find a home in a conference built around either an aviary and/or an extraction theme?

Sure, you're right. There is a subtext here. A friend of mine has a friend who teaches at a small liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest. Apparently, his department is struggling to attract majors, leaving him and his colleagues facing the prospect of teaching primarily – if not exclusively – service courses in the form of entry-level composition sections. They are none too pleased about this, though in his defense I will say that he genuinely enjoys these classes and does a fantastic job of teaching them. He's really something this guy.

Anyway, there is now a movement afoot to begin a new major, one that could have been cobbled together from many of the flashier and timelier topics one might encounter when dragging an index finger down the page of a common conference docket. Called “New Media Studies,” this one implicitly calls into question old media studies and, by extension, old media

analysts (i.e., readers and their teachers, formerly referred to as “English Professors”). In this brave new world, students will not so much as read but watch; they will not write but “message.” Or so says this friend of my friend.

The champion of the new new-media major – a person currently housed in communications – this past week visited my friend’s monthly departmental meeting for the purposes of asking the department’s blessing on this bold new undertaking. “Though, for the record, we do not need it,” she assured us, “we would like permission to attract your students into our program so that, rather than reading books, they might study webinars and analyze video games.” (I’m paraphrasing my friend’s précis.) My friend was uneasy. He and the others certainly like and respect this colleague from down the hall, who presented herself, fittingly, as the messenger rather than the administrative bearer of bad news. But still.

He suddenly realized that when registration rolled around each fall and spring, he would be the equivalent of the uncle who had bought the nieces and nephews “classic toys,” rather than getting them what they really wanted. More than that, though, he was – he will admit right here and now – upset that he had been scooped. He had wanted to develop courses that use these topics and enticements to draw students into massive, messy, classic texts. Now, however, if he is to teach such a course as he has been contemplating while at these conferences, he will need to do it for this new program – which, the presenter assured the hoary relics from Ye Old English Department, “would be totally welcome.”

When not grading papers and stapling receipts, I worry on some level that we in English are hamstringing ourselves unnecessarily. By focusing in our research on topics manifestly removed from the world we live in while on campus and with our students, we might likely be

making ourselves look and sound irrelevant – and even a bit silly (this from the guy who gave a paper on *Arrested Development* at a conference in Kaunas, Lithuania). Moreover, by concentrating in our mostly private pursuits on highly particular topics that do not find their way into our courses and concentrations, maybe we are rendering our work and our departments susceptible to these flashy, skills-centered, outcomes-oriented, highly-hyphenated, easily-assessable, donut-of-the-month majors, initiatives, and core requirements. It's hard to say. It's harder still to imagine attending a conference these days on American Literature or developing a program for students eager to engage "Great Books."

By the way, in the above quiz, all of the topics were actual – even the one about Panem from *The Hunger Games*!