

A Straight Man & A Microphone: Making *The American Vandal* Podcast

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The two most recent mass culture dramatizations of the academic humanities, *The Chair* (Netflix, 2021) and *Lucky Hank* (AMC, 2023), follow more or less identical plot lines. A middle-aged white male tenured English professor, distracted by personal crises of his own making, says something offensive in class, outraging students. He dismisses their ensuing protests as juvenile censoriousness and refuses to apologize despite entreaties from colleagues. The controversy emboldens academic administrators already targeting his department for austerity cuts. Greater harm promises to fall disproportionately on his co-workers, especially women and scholars of color, but he remains entirely oblivious to this because of his alcoholism, depression, and/or narcissistic self-pity, which he sets aside only long enough to flirt with much younger women, some of whom he also professionally supervises. He remains, to the last, steadfastly devoted to the proposition that his wit and wisdom is its own reward. Damn the consequences, which, for him at least, are ephemeral.

Lucky Hank is a loose adaptation of Richard Russo's 1997 novel, *Straight Man*, accurately indicating that this has been the archetypal story of humanities academia in the popular imagination for a long time. The above plot summary can be almost perfectly fitted to *Wonder Boys* (1995), *White Noise* (1985), and their film adaptations (2000, 2022), to a whole subgenre of campus novels since the 1960s, and to a growing corpus of clickbait journalistic profiles. To tell a story about humanities academia which does not ascribe to this archetype is potentially to lose the interest of legacy periodicals, trade publishers, television networks, and film studios.

To do public scholarship in new media as an academic humanist is, to some degree, always an act of resisting or reinforcing the assumptions about our profession produced by such archetypal narratives. If you are, like myself, a white male tenured literature professor, a potential "straight man," reinforcing the archetype is tempting indeed. Railing against political correctness, or wokeness, or Cultural Marxism, or snowflake students, or Critical Race Theory, or jargon, or affirmative action, or cancel culture, or abolition, or gender studies, or Keynesian redistribution, or DEI has the rhetorical advantage of not only confirming popular delusions, but also demarcating for one's self the familiar role of straight-talking, truth-telling rebel professor. And the best part: I don't actually have to tell the truth or rebel against anything! Protected by the anti-labor and anti-humanist culture of neoliberal university administration, I could lie profusely about my job - as long as the lies conform to the archetypes - with no risk of meaningful professional censure. As these narratives make abundantly clear, if I play to my archetype, the only thing that can really cancel me is my own romantic woe.

But new media also opens up space for telling different stories about the academic humanities, for centering different characters, and potentially for debunking some of the myths which archetypal narratives reinforce. Among these, that academic humanists are antisocial misanthropes, turgid and awkward conversationalists, who with few exceptions (usually “straight men”) haven’t the capacity to effectively explain their work or advocate for themselves. In *Lucky Hank* this myth is foregrounded via a series of scenes in which several English professors, all of them women or people of color, go before the dean to make cases for themselves as interim department heads or survivors of the austerity cuts. Each comically fumbles the task, and leaves the dean’s office more precarious than when they entered it. At one point the dean, accustomed to in-fighting from this department, says, “One day I’m going to meet an English professor who understands the world is full of lots of people and ideas—” before being cut off by his aggrieved interlocutor, who chastises him for being “insulting” despite having just (more vigorously) insulted several of her colleagues in his presence.

All of us, of course, have a repository of anecdotes about humanities scholars behaving in a manner which conforms to the archetype, although I would hazard that such behavior is no more common in literary studies than in other disciplines. But, in its totality, my experience has been that the vast majority of humanities academics actually excel at communication in many mediums and circumstances, perhaps most of all in conversation. I was myself so indoctrinated by the archetypal narrative that it wasn’t until I was working in near isolation, during the COVID-19 lockdown, that I realized how integral to my professional career had been the long series of workshops, symposia, formal receptions, conference happy hours, and, most of all, informal chats which dated back to my earliest days in graduate school.

Nearly every epiphany I could remember having about my research and teaching could be traced to conversations with other scholars about our work. My publications are littered with references to books recommended by others, or which I read and discussed as part of an informal reading group, as well as with ideas which I worked out in dialogue with peers.

Under the pandemic lockdown conditions, it quickly became clear that these forms of social knowledge-making - in part because they aren’t integral to archetypal narratives, or to conventional documentation for hiring and promotion - are the first things to be cut under crisis conditions. And in a state of permanent polycrisis, reinforced by shock doctrine and Ponzi austerity, there is no guarantee there will ever be a return to normal when institutional supports for social knowledge-making reappear. It’s not just that funding for professionalization is drying up. Faculty are perpetually being asked to do more teaching and service work. Many cannot find time to participate in projects which are not explicitly prescribed and rewarded by their employers.

Whether they are self-conscious about it or not, scholars are being intellectually starved by isolation from one another. It is a contributing factor to slowed research productivity, burnout, rising dropout and resignation rates. Those who are self-

conscious of the deleterious effects of austerity, actively look for social outlets. And sometimes they create ingenious, independent collectives! But, more often, they engage with each other via social networks, where one can, undeniably, foster a sense of community, but where our professional discourse is also surveilled, policed, and decommodified. Each unfolding scandal related to Facebook-cum-Meta and Twitter-cum-X reminds us that the satisfactions felt in communities mediated by Big Tech come with countervailing psychic and social costs.

It was under these conditions that I launched *The American Vandal Podcast*. In retrospect, it's obvious that in order for me to continue to teach and write I needed to be able to talk to other people who were teaching and writing. And across the first two dozen episodes which I produced in the inaugural year almost every guest, sometimes tearfully, commented on how relieving they found it just to talk to somebody about their work, to have it treated as something worth doing and worthy of others engaging with.

The format, framing, and production values of *The American Vandal* have changed radically in the ensuing eight seasons, but what I've retained throughout is the idea that conversations between scholars about their research and other professional labors are productive unto themselves, regardless of whether other scholarly media follow directly from them.

I was able to take advantage, cynically, of the logic of the neoliberal university. By packaging these conversations in the podcast form I increased the incentive for my professional peers to keep talking to me. Coming off a period during which we had been required to dignify digitally-mediated work so our employers could maintain tuition revenues, it could not coherently be said by those employers that a podcast was not a legitimate professional activity. If digital courses and conferences could be placed on a CV, why not academic podcasts? After all, *The American Vandal* carried with it an academic imprimatur.

It did not surprise me that this was an effective rhetorical device, one which I used in my correspondence with prospective guests and which they could use in turn, when necessary. What did surprise me was that by the end of my second year of podcasting, at which time pandemic conditions were starting to recede, I felt like what I was saying was undeniably true. Podcast episodes were widely valued, not just by the people who made them, but by their professional peers, as well as by a listening audience which was larger and more engaged than any I had previously encountered through my academic, para-academic, and journalistic writing. This audience was spread all over the world. *The American Vandal* has charted in the Books, Arts, and/or overall categories on Apple Podcasts in more than forty national markets, topping one or more of those categories in countries on three continents.

This audience is not passive. On multiple occasions, the creators of films, novels, and television series discussed on *The American Vandal* have reached out to featured guests or myself. By the end of 2023, I was receiving so much email from listeners to the podcast that I could no longer respond to more than a small fraction of it. But I

remain resiliently curious about who is listening and, most of all, why? What have we done to earn their time and what could we do to remain worthy of it?

As best I can surmise our audience has three main constituencies. The first, the only one which I dared to hope for when I launched this project, is literary studies scholars. The second is academics from other disciplines, ranging from those which the podcast frequently engages, like Media Studies and heterodox economics, to hard sciences and professional programs. Finally, there is a sizable cross-section of non-academics concentrated in secondary education, labor organizing, journalism and publishing.

Testimonials from all three of these constituencies converge on a simple taste: they like it when scholars speak spontaneously and enthusiastically about why they do what they do and what they learn by doing it. It does not matter how esoteric the topic, how “famous” the scholar is perceived to be, or what kind of disciplinary vocabulary they deploy. In spontaneous conversations, many of the so-called pretensions which alienate even highly-educated audiences from academic experts are disarmed.

The well-documented parasociality of the podcast form contributes, undoubtedly, to its popularity with these audiences, but also, where else can tens of thousands of listeners hear academic humanists perform in what I believe is their strongest discourse mode? Certainly not in heavily edited and abbreviated television interviews. Nor in carefully composed and curated public lectures. Even in the seminar room, where many academic humanists do shine, conversational objectives are more circumscribed, and the audience is far smaller and more homogeneous.

By promoting what I see as the advantages of the podcast form for academic humanities scholars, I do not want to be mistaken as derogating other scholarly media. To the contrary, one of the best interventions academic podcasts can make is as a gateway and supplement to print scholarship. I’m sure even the most devoted listeners to *The American Vandal* only read a small fraction of the scholarship discussed and alluded to in the course of our series, but I suspect that is more than they otherwise would have, and that when they engage these texts they find them more accessible because of the parasocial relationships they have formed with the authors and critics who produce, promote, and interpret them. I do my utmost to encourage the mobility from podcast to print, foremost by creating exhaustive, hyperlinked bibliographies for every episode, but also through promotions and partnerships with journals, presses, and academic organizations.

It is my firm belief that you would like your local academic humanist if you stopped to chat with them, and that that chat might entice you to read something they’ve written, and if you do, you will be shocked by how incisive and exciting it is, how full of people and ideas, how impoverished our society would be without it.