

# Human in the Humanities

ELAINE AU YOUNG

I first met Elaine Freedgood seven years ago, when she sent an abstract to me after her friend and colleague, Toral Gajarawala, came across a call for papers I had posted for an MLA session on fictional worlds. Since then, I've been just one of many people who have received tremendous behind-the-scenes support from Elaine, and I want to take some time to reflect on this profound but largely invisible way in which she has contributed to the profession. At the same time that Elaine has forged lifelong friendships with her students, continuing to support them long after they have moved on to new institutions and new stages of life, she has also cultivated close relationships with countless PhD candidates, job-seekers, and junior faculty members who never had a chance to pass through her classroom. What makes these relationships so special is precisely their unofficial, noninstitutional nature—in much the same way that it can be so important and life-changing for teenagers to have a “cool” adult in their lives who is not one of their parents.

That Elaine has been there for so many of us in this unofficial capacity is really quite extraordinary. It's extraordinary because academia is characterized by a culture of scarcity—scarcity that increases in absurdity with each passing year. As we know all too well, there's a scarcity of tenure-track jobs with health insurance and retirement plans; a scarcity of departmental resources to go around; a scarcity of institutional support for the humanities in general; and a scarcity of state and federal funding for public higher education in America. One of the damaging consequences of these shortfalls is that they exacerbate hierarchical pressures that can lead even the “haves”—those members of the profession who *do* have power, status, and security—to feel that they don't have enough, to feel that they, too, occupy a precarious position with insufficient respect and recognition, to feel that they don't have enough of what *they* need to flourish. In a culture in which almost no one feels as if they have enough support, time, energy, and attention, it's understandable that few members of the profession feel that they can afford to be

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**Elaine Auyoung** is McKnight Land-Grant Professor at the University of Minnesota, associate professor of English, and affiliate faculty of the Center for Cognitive Sciences. She is the author of *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (Oxford, 2018).

*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 657–661.

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doi:10.1017/S1060150319000263

generous with others, to say nothing of putting themselves at risk by affiliating with and advocating for the “have-nots.” As a result, those at the bottom of the hierarchy—contingent faculty members, job-seekers, graduate students, nontraditional and first-generation college students—are often left to sink or swim.

I’m hardly the first to point out the supreme irony of this phenomenon: this is precisely the kind of power structure that so many literary and cultural critics devote their careers to writing against. Give us a poem or a novel, a film or a historical document, and we can discern with acute sensitivity the fine-grained ways in which troubling power structures are subtly reinforced. And yet even as we work away on our monographs and conference papers and lesson plans that bring urgent critical attention to real and imaginary persons and populations on the margins of literature and history, we do so within an institutional and professional culture that every day, in all kinds of *unsubtle* ways, perpetuates stunningly hierarchical power dynamics that adversely affect the lives of real people all around us. All of us, at some point, have been part of the have-nots of the academic hierarchy, and we can all recount painful and/or absurd occasions when we experienced firsthand the profound disconnect between the social and political commitments championed by major work in our discipline and the indignities that play out in Q&A sessions, email exchanges, conference venues, and meeting rooms every day.

In the last chapter of my book, *When Fiction Feels Real*, I note that our relationships with fictional persons and historical figures are distinctive because they’re entirely one-sided. They are nonreciprocal or, in the vocabulary of communications theorists, *parasocial*. When we attend to Tess Durbeyfield or to Victorian factory workers, we do so with the knowledge that they will never attend to us. And while knowing that our care and concern will never be returned comes with some pathos, this asymmetry also comes with certain advantages. Parasocial relationships are free from the risks, anxieties, and obligations that come with mutual relationships with actual human beings. Proust reflects that when we take leave of fictional characters at the end of a novel, it is “often only with regret. And with none of those thoughts, when we have left, that spoil friendship: What did they think of us? Didn’t we lack tact? Did we please?—and the fear of being forgotten for another” (*On Reading*, 55). The one-sided nature of our scholarly attention to persons whom we write about from a safe distance helps us account for why it can be so much more difficult to attend to and act on behalf of the real human beings we encounter every day.

And this distinction is what makes Elaine Freedgood such an unusual and indispensable force for change in our profession. Her wide-reaching, singularly imaginative, and eminently teachable scholarship calls attention to what is systematically rendered invisible by literary texts and contexts. But even as she has succeeded in being a prolific scholar and a leading voice in Victorian studies, her actions within her institution, within the profession, and within her community are in striking alignment with her intellectual commitments. For those of us who feel like we don't have enough time, energy, and support to keep up with our own work, it can be easiest to keep quiet and go with the flow. Yet Elaine has again and again taken it upon herself to speak up and take a stand, even when it comes at a cost to herself. She proves that, even in a culture of scarcity, in which nobody ever feels like they have enough, doing major scholarly work *and* translating those ideas into concrete moral action on a daily basis are not mutually exclusive.

Although the unofficial, noninstitutional support that Elaine has provided to so many throughout her career has often remained unrecognized and invisible, it has proven to be an incredibly powerful form of activism on the ground, an instrument of cultural change from within—at the scale of individual human lives. In particular, Elaine has long been a fierce advocate for women at early stages of their careers. Literature courses (and courses on Victorian literature in particular) often attract a significant majority of female students, yet women (and especially women of color) still make up a much smaller percentage of faculty members. What this means is that those who can benefit from mentoring the most are also the least likely to find it. In an environment that can lead anyone to feel isolated, inadequate, or like an outsider, it's easy to believe that you're even more of a misfit who doesn't belong when you also look and feel different from everyone else in the room. To make matters worse, scholars whose personal experiences are outside of the mainstream often have unconventional research interests as well.

This has certainly been the case for me, and it is why there have been so many moments in my career in which Elaine has been the lone voice cheering me on. For instance, here is part of an email she sent me at an especially dark moment during my job search: "Hang in there. I truly believe in you and I am *never* wrong. I just bought a new washing machine and it is the very best on the market, with a truly unbelievable spin cycle. I just have that kind of mind: I zone right in on the best. Of whatever: cakes, scholars, washing machines." She goes on to recount her own experience on the job market and signs it, "Your friend,

fan, supporter, and expert on everything, the other Elaine.” I wanted to share this not just because it captures Elaine’s generous spirit and hilarious, charismatic voice better than I can, but also because I can still so vividly remember how her words helped me scrape myself off the floor and keep going. Six years later, I’m still going because of the real difference it makes when someone whose work you admire—who is decidedly inside the world that seems determined to keep you out—insists that you *do* belong, that she believes in you and stands behind you.

Through her own labor and ingenuity, Elaine has earned a place at the forefront of Victorian studies. She has chosen to use that platform to ensure that students and scholars at precarious stages in their careers receive the encouragement and advocacy they need to write and publish, to be seen and heard, to enter the profession and to stay in it. The critic William Flesch observes in *Comeuppance*, his account of altruism in fiction, that heroic characters are distinguished by their exceptional strength because being the one to take on injustice and act on behalf of the most vulnerable often comes with risks and costs that only the toughest people can handle. Elaine is undoubtedly a heroic actor in real life. What she reveals, though, is that one of the most dazzling ways in which the toughest people display their courage is through their capacity to recognize, acknowledge, and share their own vulnerability, to recall their own moments of self-doubt, to speak honestly about their experience. At an MLA panel in Vancouver, I watched Elaine walk up to the podium and begin her talk with a self-deprecating joke. As laughter rippled across the audience, bodies visibly relaxed and softened. When Elaine invites us to laugh with her, when she displays her readiness to laugh at herself, she uses her strength to acknowledge her human vulnerability and makes it safe for others to be vulnerable as well.

As many of her colleagues know, Elaine’s luminous scholarly career was preceded by a twelve-year career as a nurse. Nurses are care workers who confront human vulnerability not with detachment, not from an abstract, intellectual distance, but hands-on and face-to-face. Elaine’s care work in the academy is similarly born of a sense that, even as disciplinary and institutional norms often prompt us to strip away the personal, to maintain professional distance and detachment, what matters is not just what is legible to and recognized by our professional institutions but the actual human beings who are their living, breathing embodiment. In so doing, Elaine reveals that the exceptionalism of literary study, the ethos that has always made it fit so uneasily alongside other

disciplines, is grounded in the fact that our commitment to the teaching of literature is inseparable from our commitment to the affective lives of the learners and laborers who, rather than parasocially related to us, are those closest to home. In a culture of scarcity, Elaine is a source of abundance—a rare and radiant human in the humanities.

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