**The Rogue Scholar**

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I recently resigned from my tenure-track position in an English department to pursue an alt-ac career away from traditional academe. In the days and weeks leading up to this decision, I found myself feeling both elated and slightly sheepish about my choice. It is one thing, surely, to dabble in the world beyond academe once you are well established, or to seek it out when tenure-track positions are not forthcoming. It is quite another to leave a perfectly good position in uncertain economic times. After all, I had no dispute with my department; I got on well with my colleagues. The position, like many, was taxing and often arduous, but not impossible, and I had achieved a great deal in three years’ time. What could possibly induce me to leave?

  I imagine there are a number of junior scholars who feel just this way. They entertain a shadowy doubt that this is not where they belong, coupled with desperate gratitude to have a job at all and trepidation about venturing back onto the job market. Tenure-track junior faculty are in a uniquely vulnerable position; unlike the new job-seeker or the safely tenured professor, they can rarely be open about their job search. Inquiries must be discreet, for they cannot risk losing the position they have — not with so many new graduates more than happy to take their place. And so most cling to their posts despite the difficulties of distance or teaching load or problematic “company fit.”

  In my own case, the biggest problem was a commuter marriage and a lack of viable work for my spouse. But this was not the only shadow troubling my employment happiness; a medical humanist scholar and managing editor for a medical anthropology journal, I began to wonder if I were in the wrong department altogether. As much as I love teaching literature, I increasingly found that my heart lay elsewhere — in medical history, museum collections, health communities and public outreach. I had come to see literature as a tool or a lens for exploring medicine, rather than the other way around. I loved my students, I had great colleagues, but was constantly nagged by the suspicion that there was something else, somewhere else, I was better-suited for. And I am not alone.

  Attendees to the recent Modern Language Association annual meeting will have noticed a new enthusiasm for revising graduate education in light of economic uncertainties. Numerous panels and discussions reflected a growing concern about “coverage,” something Scott Jaschik discusses at some length in his Inside Higher Ed article [“Ph.D.s Without 'Coverage' (Horrors!).”](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/07/mla-not-quite-consensus-reforming-doctoral-education) Changes to graduate programs are necessary, certainly, but those changes tend to be slow in coming. Students graduating this year — or next year — won’t have the benefit of these new arrangements. Early-career scholars who are on the market now or who have already been working in tenure-track or non-tenure positions cannot take advantage of systemic changes unlikely to be implemented over the next decade. Given this disadvantage, how do early-career scholars turn their expertise into successful alt-ac careers? In what follows, I will describe my own trajectory as a case study.

To begin with, I did what I was strongly encouraged not to do: I resigned before I had secured a position elsewhere. This is not, I’ll admit, the route for everyone. But it has several key advantages, not the least of which is the ability to seek for employment as openly as a freshly minted Ph.D. It also means you have the support of your department and can seek a network of like-minded peers through word of mouth. If this seems like a terrifying prospect, let me clarify: I had made up my mind already that this would be my final year. That means I had committed to getting any other kind of position — in industry, in finance, in administrative assistance, even in retail if nothing else availed itself. This is more than a career change; it’s a mindset reboot.

As Ph.D.s, we tend to think of market searches in terms of the tenure-track system — a frustrating yearlong process wherein the seeker remains in limbo for enormous periods of time, likely to end with nothing and forced to start again the following season. One of the benefits of alt-ac and industry careers is that they do not obey the semester; a candidate may hear within weeks, sometimes within days, and positions open up at regular intervals throughout the year. Having informed my department in September, I had a year to plan my career move.

After making my announcement official, I began an active campaign that has involved tapping networks, using technology, and aggressively pursuing every opportunity in the fields of my interest. I am essentially building a career out of those passions that mattered most to me while on the tenure track, but which were slightly derailed by time commitments. To achieve this, however, I had to do much more than wave my arms and shout “I’m alt-ac now!”  I had to do it online, and in hi-def.

**Playing to Your Strengths**

As emphasized by the MLA roundtable ["How Did I Get Here? Our 'Altac' Jobs,"](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/04/mla-meeting-new-phds-talk-about-landing-jobs-they-never-expected) there are many different paths to follow; the important point is that you follow the path that energizes you. What do you care deeply about? What excites you? We all have something that works like high-grade jet fuel to our intellectual systems: concepts, ideas or projects that we can talk about without tiring, without noticing the hour — and sometimes without ceasing. If you aren’t sure what yours is, ask a colleague; they sometimes know better than we do. For me, it has always been the history of medicine. When the other children were reading Nancy Drew, I was reading the history of the Black Death in Europe. Yes, really.

I received a Ph.D. in 18th-century literature, but my research and publication record testifies to my continued interest: 18th-century birth technology, epilepsy and Radcliffian Gothic, syphilis and Dracula, moral insanity and the works of Charles Dickens… literature interested me primarily at its intersection with medical history.

I am at home in museums; I love the materiality of medical history. But as a passionate teacher, I wanted to do more; I wanted to share my fascination — thus, I was also seeking out public engagement opportunities. My task in the search for alt-ac careers was to make this love more widely known.

**Using Your Networks**

  “The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot.” (Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers, 19).

In my position as assistant professor, I spent a lot of time talking to my students about the pros and cons of social networks. There are abuses. They can be a time-eater or a procrastination tool. But online networks can also be incredibly useful — especially when combined with other media. I used to work for a private equity company, and while there, I learned web editing. I therefore designed a comprehensive website that listed my interests, explained “medical humanities,” and provided links to my current projects. I used a web crawler to make it more Google-searchable, and I added it to my LinkedIn account and to my blog. I then created a Facebook and Twitter account to talk about my research and to find like-minded persons working on related projects. The nexus of my website, blog and social media sites had unexpected results.

My new associates introduced me to their peer networks — many more medical historians and medical humanists than I would have encountered otherwise. Many were also working in public engagement. I was so excited to have made contact with these colleagues — a number of whom work outside traditional academe — that I asked to feature their work on my blog. This led to more contacts, more collaboration and a number of face-to-face meetings.

  As more people heard about my work and my interests, I began to receive additional invitations. I am giving two invited lectures for the Morbid Anatomy Library and planning a conference in Los Angeles with a group of like-minded people on cultural conceptions of death. Realizing the amazing potential of these networks, I collected the Twitter and Facebook handles of fellow presenters at an [Inter-Disciplinary.net](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/) conference in Oxford, England in the fall — and somewhat unexpectedly, was asked to lead two conferences for IDnet in Prague for 2013. I used my blog and Twitter to advertise these, with astounding results, and of course made new connections with new colleagues along the way.

Linking each resource means that my blog has more viewers, which means my webpage has more viewers. When I was contacted recently by a publisher about a possible monograph, they had seen my site and downloaded my printable project stat sheets. Not bad for eight months of work.

**Applying Your Skill Set**

  By the holiday break, I had created a personal narrative that included my passions, my publications and my current research interests, and I had advertised them widely to a network of peers who all knew I was on the market. I next had to find a home (or homes) for my skills. Prior to taking the tenure-track job, I had lived in Cleveland, Ohio. My spouse had a job and family there, and we owned a house that was presently standing empty. These were strong motivators, but there was more: I had done my Ph.D. research in Cleveland, had a large network there, and still managed (remotely) a journal housed in Case Western Reserve University’s anthropology department. More importantly, one of my favorite museums was nearby, the Dittrick Medical History Museum. I had spent many hours in its collections, and the curator, James Edmonson, had been instrumental to helping me access a collection abroad for a course I taught in Paris on midwifery. Over the holiday break, I scheduled a meeting with him, inaugurating a developing relationship with the museum and library. I hope to use my networking and marketing skills to promote these and other excellent collections.

I will also be returning to the office of Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, which I have managed remotely for three years. My editor and I already have plans for ways of increasing our readership, and look forward to face-to-face collaboration. I am also developing the journal’s first medical humanities special issue, which I hope will go live in December of 2013. Having more time to dedicate to anthropology will also be helpful to a third commitment, my work with Inter-Disciplinary.net. The conferences I am leading through this consortium have attracted anthropologists, medical humanists, clinicians, literature scholars and independent researchers.

On one hand, my project leadership is not a paid position — but on the other, it is increasing my reach, adding colleagues, and providing yet more experience in the areas of my specialty. In fact, I have been solicited to be part of the IDnet research nexus to help expand their medical humanities outreach — and much of this happened in the three weeks between Christmas and the start of the spring semester. In less than a month, I had opened up several avenues, and this was followed by additional consulting roles.

  I recognize that, at first glance, these are very nonstandard positions and all in their infancy. But that is partly what I enjoy about the alt-ac track. I am creating this job for myself. As it takes shape in the coming months, I will continue to plan for future engagement activities; meanwhile, I have the time — and because it is my passion, the energy — to collaborate with other medical humanists, curators, historians, librarians, researchers and, somewhat surprisingly, writers of historical fiction. And best yet, the new role(s) will still provide me with the opportunity to give lectures and even to teach, all the while pursuing an active research agenda into the weird and wonderful intersections of literature and medicine.

**Standing on Giants’ Shoulders**

The last leg of this journey is still ahead, and this rogue scholar is still hatching plans. One thing I have learned along the way is that I am not a lone radical but rather a member of an incredible and growing revolution. If you are considering a career as an alternative academic, go searching for others. Attend panels and roundtables. Reach out to authors who write on the subject, join discussion groups, watch #altac on Twitter. I have been astounded by the variety or positions available and by the boundless energy and passion of those who hold them, and I will be featuring some of them on my blog (searchable as Rogue Scholar Salon) in the coming weeks. Becoming one of this august crowd is not nearly so dangerous and difficult as I originally imagined. At its most essential, it takes recognition that there is more out there — and the boldness to embrace those opportunities as active choices and not as passive consequences. Alt-ac is not for everyone; but of course, it is also true that the tenure track is not for everyone. Choosing one over the other should be neither an indictment nor a retreat, but a recognition of valuable and productive variation.

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/02/11/essay-pursuing-alternative-academic-career#ixzz2kYC4n9mX>

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