

# The Elephants in the Classroom

Joseph Steinberg

‘I’M NOT A SALESMAN!’ PROTESTS THE ELDERLY AMERICANIST PROFESSOR ELLIOT RENTZ in Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman’s Netflix series *The Chair* (2021). Though by his own admission he’s one of the department’s tenured dinosaurs, he maintains he’s not a salesman because (unlike his colleague and addressee Yaz McKay) he refuses to ‘pander to [his] students’: in the previous episode, he looks on from the back of the lecture hall with mounting dismay as she encourages the class they co-teach to approach *Moby-Dick* as a text ripe for political critique, costumed re-enactment, and adaptation into a parodic rap. Yet if there is some truth to the idea that Yaz’s student-centred pedagogy sells itself at the expense, as Elliot not-so-subtly implies, of the discipline’s practices of comprehension, contextualisation and analysis, then we ought also to acknowledge the pragmatic force of her rejoinder: ‘You’re not a professor, either. ‘Cause you don’t have any students’.

One way of understating the achievement of Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan’s *The Teaching Archive* would be to say that it shows how professors were professors because they had students. Writing in the wake of deep cuts to state-level funding structures that have ‘left both humanities faculty and the general public with a sense that humanities teaching and humanities research were vastly different, even incompatible, activities’ (209), they seek to correct this misconception by showing how research has historically occurred *because of*—

not despite—the fact that those who conducted it spent much of their time teaching. What went on in classrooms, as Buurma and Heffernan compellingly demonstrate, shaped several of the landmark titles (T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* and I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*, to name just two) from which previous histories of literary study have routinely taken their critical bearings. Furthermore, *The Teaching Archive* posits that such histories mistakenly tell the story of the discipline's development as a tale of theoretical spats and methodological squabbles. When seen from the vantage point of the classroom this rupture-focused genealogy begins to seem tenuous at best, and Buurma and Heffernan therefore argue it should be replaced (or at the very least supplemented) by a history attentive to the continuities and collaborations that have characterised the teaching of literature over much of the twentieth century. It is this conviction that compels their bold revisionist claim in *The Teaching Archive's* penultimate sentence: 'We need to leave aside histories of literary study that accept a narrow view fabricated for the convenience of others, and replace them with a history that remembers the institutions and people who have actually made literary study in the university' (214).

*The Teaching Archive* also provides a strong explanation as to why this new history of the classroom *matters*; why it can offer an 'account of what literary study is and does, and of what its value is today' that is not only 'truer' but 'more usable' (6). One of *The Teaching Archive's* chief uses lies in its scholarly refutation of the neoliberal university's efforts to divorce 'pedagogy from the expensive stain of disciplinary knowledge', as it offers a correction to 'the foundational fiction that disciplines have never possessed serious pedagogies' on which a 'new industry of education technologists, assessment providers, and teaching and learning professionals' has been established (210). Surely not even the most condescending purveyors of for-profit webinars could possibly deny, should they ever be persuaded to crack open *The Teaching Archive*, the richness and variety of pedagogical practices unearthed therein: from the classrooms of Richards and Edith Rickert, 'which centred the work of consensus-building through the step-by-step establishment of descriptive norms, [...] exposing individual idiosyncrasies to the bracing light of collective scrutiny' in order to 'demystify literary taste' (106), to the 'workshop-style pedagogy' of Josephine Miles' collaboratively taught composition classes (156), the book abounds with evidence that the study of literature has always been about much more than the big bad bogeyman of such webinars, the (gasp, unrecorded!) lecture. Against the 'de-disciplined language of critical thinking and transferable skills so generalized as to never convince', *The Teaching Archive* sets out its evidence of expert praxis, presenting a history of disciplined pedagogy through which 'our teaching has made our scholarship and [...] scholarship has happened in classrooms' (211).

This alone would constitute a significant accomplishment. But *The Teaching Archive* also posits what its authors call ‘a new model of the canon’ or, more specifically, a reevaluation of the literature classroom’s role in the process of canon formation (5). ‘Far from only presenting contextless, aesthetically valuable texts whose selection has come down from on high’, Buurma and Heffernan contend, ‘most twentieth-century English literature classrooms have in some way discussed the making of literature itself’: the scenes of teaching they reconstruct repeatedly feature professors and students collaborating ‘in the business of creating literary value, not merely receiving or reproducing it’ (5). Witness the integrationist courses of J. Saunders Redding, the first African American scholar to hold an endowed professorship in literary criticism at an Ivy League institution, which reject the false liberal pluralist ‘analogy between inclusion on a syllabus and inclusion in American political life’ that is inadvertently fostered by the dutiful addition of minority writers to pre-existing syllabi: by assigning texts such as ‘abolitionist speeches by Black writers and anti-historical descriptions of happy enslaved people in the work of white writers’, Redding made the point that literary representation is *not* tantamount to political representation, thereby inviting his students to revalue writings from either side of the colour line by seeing them as answers to ‘the demands of political and historical exigency’ (113). Alternatively, observe the Native American Arts courses of Acoma Pueblo scholar Simon J. Ortiz, which Buurma and Heffernan argue model ‘the difficulty and promise of writing a history that does not separate the practice of critique from the making of culture’ (205): in response to ‘the pedagogical problem of how to teach a literary historical survey that didn’t position contemporary writing as belated or inauthentic’, they show how Ortiz’s syllabus eschewed chronology for experimentality, inviting his students to read discontinuously across genres and timelines in order to posit ‘a new relation between the resurgence of Native American cultural production underway at the moment of his teaching and the millennia-long oral tradition with which the new work enjoyed an important and necessarily complex relationship’ (198-9). Though Buurma and Heffernan’s objective is to construct a disciplinary history, such rich case studies as these could and should inspire other scholars to pursue a longer genealogy of the decolonising classroom. They also make plain the pressing need for a project that would process the syllabi housed in archives as canonical data, thereby allowing us to begin properly disentangling (or indeed, reconnecting) the writers canonised by researchability from those canonised by their teachability.

But if I were called upon to speculate—and I take the invitation to participate in this forum as a free pass to do so—I’d hazard a guess that a less perceptible impact of *The Teaching Archive* is likely to be a methodological one. Not every literary scholar who reads it will be out to rewrite the discipline’s history; many, however, will work on authors who were shaped by the classrooms they occupied, whether they did so as students or as teachers. Aren’t these authors and their works

innumerable points of entry into the great lost mass of unpreserved classroom materials that Buurma and Heffernan dramatically dub the ‘true, impossible teaching archive’ (2)? Why shouldn’t we all take up their assertion of ‘the presence of classrooms within all kinds of published scholarship’ as an invitation to attend to what they have meant for published (or for that matter unpublished) *writing* more generally (3)?

My own answer would be not only that we should, but that we have already begun to do so. Buurma and Heffernan do so themselves, when they refer briefly to Redding’s campus novel *Stranger and Alone* and at greater length to N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, observing that the latter’s most ‘proximate formal history lies in Momaday’s education at the University of New Mexico (BA, 1958) and Stanford University (PhD, 1963)’ in the sense that it is less a case study in modernist fragmentation than ‘a kind of syllabus, an outline for the study of Kiowa history that accommodates the presence of gaps and breaks’ (200). This is an incisive reading of Momaday’s genre-bending memoir, but it simultaneously made clear to me one of *The Teaching Archive’s* limitations: it pays surprisingly little heed to what D. G. Myers identifies as ‘the *real* “excluded conflict” in our histories of English study’, the clash between creative and scholarly approaches to the teaching of literature mapped out in his history of creative writing *The Elephants Teach* (10). No doubt this limitation is in part necessitated by *The Teaching Archive’s* scope—in a curious echo of Eliot, whom Buurma and Heffernan note declined his students’ request to study living authors (57), they do not advance their case studies through the classrooms of the last four decades to directly examine current praxis, and thus cannot possibly register the full pedagogical impact of creative writing’s rise—but the conflict between creative and scholarly teaching is also excluded from (or at least downplayed in) some of their case studies. Myers’ parallel history of literary teaching is one within which dinosaurs-cum-elephants like Miles, Redding and Ortiz could equally have been located; Buurma and Heffernan note Redding was appointed the James Weldon Johnson Professor of Creative Writing at the Hampton Institute in 1965 (108), and Ortiz attended the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program on a fellowship from 1968-9 (187). All three taught creative writing for many years, and Miles’ forty-five-year career at Berkeley even receives a brief mention in *The Elephants Teach* (153). In fact, many of the progressive pedagogical practices Buurma and Heffernan clearly admire—including, most notably, the student-centred approach John Guillory sees informing the research method of *The Teaching Archive* itself—seem at times more closely aligned with the composition-oriented praxis of the creative writing workshop than the interpretative methods of the literature classroom. So it comes as no surprise when Buurma and Heffernan note approvingly that Ortiz’s desire to ‘actually re-create the *experience* of the oral tradition’ expressed itself not as an attempt to reconstruct that tradition’s pre-colonial alterity, but in an attempt to immerse his students in the

tradition via creative writing and translation assignments (189). Here their new history of literary study is at once at its *newest* and at its least recognisably concerned with the disciplinarity of *literary studies*, as here and elsewhere student-centred progressive pedagogies blur the distinction between the literary studies classroom and the creative writing workshop. As Myers suggests, the text-focused and objectivist approach of the former to literary works is at least somewhat at odds with expression-oriented and subjectivist methods of the latter (175-7). Yet *The Teaching Archive* never really draws out this distinction—perhaps understandably, given on many campuses today the teaching of literature, creative writing, and composition is performed by the same band of beleaguered sessional tutors and adjuncts—so I want to conclude by briefly suggesting that the question of what creative writing’s emergence has meant for literary studies is worth pursuing further.

In *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl has provided a powerful and influential answer to this question in the form of a plea: ‘We need to start documenting this phenomenon, moving out from the illustrious cases of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and Stanford University and a few others to grasp the reality of an enterprise that now numbers some 350 institutional participants and continues to grow. This enterprise is our literary history’ (xii). Creative writing is an important new cultural phenomenon, and literary scholars are uniquely well equipped to document it. It has provided us with a grand new institutional object of study, one that shows few signs of slowing its spread across campuses, national borders, and hemispheres. As Seth Abramson writes, ‘the first discernible boom in creative writing occurred in the 2000s, when nearly 10 new terminal-degree programs were founded each year’, a 272 percent increase over the previous decade that marked creative writing’s ‘first statistically significant spike in popularity’; it was promptly exceeded in the 2010s, which saw the per-year program creation rate at ‘an astonishing 40 percent above even the historic expansion of the discipline in the 2000s’ (237-8). And this boom reverberated throughout the antipodes, as Sarah Holland-Batt and Ella Jeffery note: ‘whereas in 1999 there were eight PhD offerings in creative writing available around Australia, that number had grown significantly by 2010, when 25 doctoral programmes in Australia and New Zealand were on offer’ (339). While these are phenomena beyond the hemispheric and temporal scope of *The Teaching Archive*, which confines its focus to Anglo-American classrooms and winds up with Ortiz in the seventies, they map out the international terrain of a possible sequel, which would combine archival with sociological and quantitative research methods to develop a still more accurate picture of the institutional forms that literary study takes today.

Which is not to suggest that inaccurate pictures of institutional life aren’t interesting. *The Chair*, with which I began, is certainly both. Near the end of the

final episode, Professor Ji-Yoon Kim is cosily ensconced with her students in a book-lined lacquered wood classroom, where they are discussing the poems of Emily Dickinson. In response to a question about the Dickinson's predilection for dashes, she truncates her own scholarly thoughts in order to bounce the question back at the student: 'But—what do you think?'. At this moment her classroom faintly resembles those discussed in *The Teaching Archive*, if only in the sense that it aspires to be a place where 'literary value [...] is made by people' and 'collective making can be practiced and witnessed' (6). But without wanting to make a mountain out of a narrative molehill, it's worth reminding ourselves that there's nothing *inherently* collective about the rather on-the-nose one-line commitment to student-centred pedagogy with which this scene ends. If anything, it singles the student out. Though we don't hear her response, we're given little reason to believe she could spontaneously come up with a scintillating reading of the poem by herself. After all, that's what she's probably going into debt to learn to do. Like most students, she'll do her best to express what she thinks she knows, and try to imagine what she doesn't. If self-expression is the primary aim, as it is in some creative writing classrooms, then this potentially isn't a problem. But if the aim is to cultivate aesthetic judgment, then what the non-expert student happens to think can only get us so educated. And we should aim to make educated judgments, as Michael W. Clune has recently argued, because 'the elimination of aesthetic judgment leaves market valuation the undisputed master of the cultural field' (9). Bringing the varied institutional grounds of judgment and dissidence back into historical view, *The Teaching Archive* makes good on its promise of a new history of literary study. And in doing so it posits avenues for a further revisionism, one which might see such grounds in relation to the acts of peer judgment demanded by the then-nascent discipline of creative writing.

**JOSEPH STEINBERG** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge, where he teaches courses in modern, contemporary, and postcolonial literatures. His research examines how the form of the novel has been shaped by pedagogical practices, particularly by the emergence of creative writing as a subject at university. More generally, he is interested in how cultural institutions shape the production, circulation and valuation of literary fiction across a variety of anglophone contexts. His articles and reviews are published and forthcoming in the *JASAL*, *Australian Literary Studies*, and *The Cambridge Quarterly*.

### Works Cited

Abramson, Seth. 'From Modernism to Metamodernism: Quantifying and Theorizing the Stages of the Program Era.' *After the Program Era: The Past*,

- Present and Future of Creative Writing in the University*. Ed. Loren Glass. Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2017. 233-48.
- Buurma, Rachel Sagner, and Laura Heffernan. *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Clune, Michael W. *A Defense of Judgment*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Guillory, John. "Flipping" the History of Literary Studies.' *Los Angeles Review of Books* 29 July 2021. <<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/flipping-the-history-of-literary-studies/>>. 31 July 2021.
- Holland-Batt, Sarah and Ella Jeffery. 'Twenty-First-Century Australian Poetry'. *The Routledge Companion to Australian Literature*. Ed. Jessica Gildersleeve. New York: Routledge, 2021. 335-343.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Myers, David Gershom. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.