

Academia in Medias Res

by [Gracjan Kraszewski](#) (March 2021)



Penguin, Wood Gaylor, 1917

Ben and Pat arrive on campus at 7:30. Today is Day one of *Beyond the Box*. By 7:40 they're in the classroom, seated; Ben and Pat. Although twenty minutes early, everyone save for the professor is present. Ben looks about the room, registering some quick first impressions. Two seats to his left is a black man in a gray suit who appears to be in his mid-twenties. Next to Ben is Pat. On Ben's immediate right is a white man with short black hair covered by a backwards New York Yankees cap. To this man's right is a young woman busy popping bubble gum, the only sound in an otherwise silent room. She has blonde hair and blue eyes. Next to this woman is another woman who looks like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. When she tells the class her name is Holly, just like Holly Golightly, Ben smiles, assured all is well with the world.

On this woman's right is the final person in the class. He is a large man, forty years old perhaps, brownish-red hair, full auburn beard. He is wearing a red T-shirt with a picture of an angry looking man, old and white-bearded, more Coca-Cola Santa than Karl Marx, under whom is written, *WOTWU: You have nothing to lose but your chains!*

Finally, the professor enters the room. 'First,' he says, holding his index finger aloft while he pauses and scans the room, person to person, 'introductions.' Then, he starts singing. '*Intra-duck . . . a'intra-duck, intra-duck, yeah it's time for intraaaaaaaa-duccck-tions . . .* My name is Sir Doctor

Harvey Powers McWilliams-Tonnelsby. Good question, that unasked "why all the names?" Okay, I'll humor you. I was born Harvey Boo in Saskatchewan (*starts singing the Canadian National anthem at full volume*), yes, yes, you know the rest. Born in Canada but made my mark in Burlington, Vermont. When I got married I took my wife's last name, Leslie Powers McWilliams-Tonneslby. The next year I earned my doctorate from Columbia. I did a post-doc at Harvard and then a second post-doc at Yale before accepting a third post-doc that had the potential of turning into a fourth post-doc with the possibility of that becoming a part-time instructorship that just might, should the chips fall right like rain, segue into a permanent position in Dartmouth University's history department, this, all of this, after making my living for two years on an unpaid coffee barista internship and as a weekend nights social media virtue signaler. It worked out. It all worked out. I taught at Dartmouth for thirty years, retiring right at thirty years on the clock, not a second plus or minus; thirty years exactly. (*in song again, inspired by the musical Rent*) *Fifteen million, seven hundred sixty-eight thousand minutes, how do you measure, measure a career? How about diversity? How about no men whatsoever yeah never? How about gender equality?* (*done singing*) I consider my greatest accomplishment[*] in academia founding the "Lifeform project" at Dartmouth now in its tenth year. The Lifeform project is dedicated to breaking down all systematically deep seated confectioned constrictors and erroneous "labels" of any stripe whatever kind and type, all of which are artificially imposed by cultures themselves factitiously erected by time sensitive ethnological presuppositions of the most grandiose yet false notions of us, them, they, we, and "others." I consider the terms 'humankind' and 'mankind' incalculably offensive. Both, by including the word 'man', imply a longing for a return to patriarchal dominance and unfair discrimination against non-human-...I mean, non-Tier seventeen Lifeforms . . . by teaching the new generation of students, especially college freshme-, freshhuma, first year-sentients, to relegate anything that

includes the word 'man' into the dark and superstitious past, well, I think you will all agree we've achieved something progressive and monumental. A final thing: I know my name is long, so please just call me SD, as in Sir Doctor, but, if you really want to pay me a compliment feel free to call me Sir *the* Doctor, or STD.'

'Why "sir"?' the man in the Cresco shirt asks.

'Why the universe?' SD responds. "Why the oceans? Why music? Why trees and tires, why not be tired of tree cover tire shops treating trick or treat tricks thought treats and tricked out Chevy Silverados? Why you and why me, mister...'

'Madula. Ted Madula.'

'Ah yes,' SD says. 'Mr. Madula. Well, all of these questions we will be investigating here in this room, in real time. But first, intraduuuuuuu-'. He points to the black man in the gray suit.

'I'm Chris Walker. I'm from Chicago. I completed my undergraduate degree in comparative literature at the University of Chicago and then studied at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship.'

'Okay, very good,' SD says. He looks at Pat.

'Hi, I'm Pat Trollyrider. I'm from Moscow, Idaho, best known for being the home of the University of Idaho Vandals. I went to school at Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho, near Boise. Uh, yeah.'

'Thank you, Pat,' SD says.

'My name is Ben TyVole and I'm also from Moscow. Pat and I went to the same high school. On a side note, about Pat, he's really, really good at baseball. He would never tell you himself, but he can throw one-hundred miles an hour-'

Madula laughs out loud. 'Oh-okay.'

'No, seriously,' Ben protests.

'Riiiiiiight,' Ted says, looking down and flipping a pencil side to side on the table.

'Gentlesentients gone feral,' SD interjects, 'this is not a sports theory class. Make it a sports *gender* theory class and I might be interested. But let's get back on topic. Where'd you go to school, Ben?'

'At East Southwestern South Northeastern West North American University of the Arts and Logic. It's an independent school in New Mexico.'

'That's quite a mouthful,' SD says, chuckling.

'Yeah,' Ben replies. 'The acronym is ESSNWNAU-AL and to make it easier to say we just call it "Ess-wall" for short.'

'Okay,' SD says, 'Ted.'

Madula, who had been slumped back in his chair, leans forward and flips the pencil one more time before speaking.

'Ted Madula; you already now, don't forget it. Pleasure's yours, I'm sure. MBA Harvard. MFA NYU, film. If you wanna know what I've worked on, find a filmography. I've done a lot. Happy to be here, getting less happy by the moment.'

'I'm Holly Andrews. I'm originally from a small town in Illinois, Savoy. I studied economics at the University of Illinois, earned a Master's Degree in Russian from UC-Santa Cruz, Russian was my minor at Illinois, too, and I just recently earned my JD from Pepperdine. My specialty is Agricultural Law. If I practice law, it'll be back home for sure.'

'UC Santa Cruz,' SD says. 'The Banana Slugs.'

Holly smiles and nods.

SD looks at the girl with the blonde hair and the pink bubble gum.

'Hey, y'all,' she says with a huge, ear to ear, smile on her face, her right hand raised, royal-waving to each person in turn. 'I'm Shelby Davis. I am so, so very happy to be here with y'all. Each and every one, I just have to say that I am so thrilled to be here.'

Madula audibly exhales.

Shelby continues, 'Like I said, my name's Shelby. I'm twenty-three and just finished my master's degree in history from Davidson. I have to say, SD, I'm so thrilled that you're into gender theory because I specialized in gender theory during my undergrad and master's programs. I just think...wow! You know? Also, I am a former Ms. Alabama runner up! I know, I know, how hypocritical, right? I'm now this total womondofemy and at the same time a former participant in beauty pageants: a subterranean organized, womonodofemy demeaning event that I should be fighting against with every fiber of my self-empowered being, but, I mean, hello, I'm not a robot, right, SD?'

SD must not have heard the question because he is still smiling and nodding. Finally, 'Yes, of course. Definitely.'

He then turns to the final student in the room and says, 'And you, sir?'

'Hello,' the man says. It is immediately apparent that he takes the meaning of 'measuring your words' to a further place than most.

"My . . . name . . . is Richard. Richard . . . Jacobson. I . . . am thirty-eight . . . years old. I . . . I .

. . . earned my . . . PHD in . . . anthropology . . .
. . . from Harvard. Then . . . I completed . . . a post-doc . . .
at Yale. Following that . . . I worked . . . I worked for . . .
. Greenpeace . . . for ten years.”

‘I love the shirt, Richard’ SD says. ‘It’s always refreshing when a student realizes the true meaning of history and the undeniability of economic determinism. Very commendable. I must say, if I may, that I’m impressed. Very, very impressed. Keep up the good work.’

Richard nods, slowly and deeply, lowering his head to his chest. His eyes are closed the whole time.

‘You do realize that the USSR no longer exists, right?’ Ted asks.

‘Yeah,’ Pat says chiming in. ‘I’m not saying this out of knee-jerk American pride, but it’s been shown pretty clearly that communism is a flawed system at root and is fundamentally impossible considering the reality of human nature.’

‘The *so-called* reality of Tier Seventeen LifeForms, in your opinion,’ SD says.

Richard gets back into the discussion with, ‘Unite! Workers . . . Workers of the . . . World . . . unite.’

‘Why can’t we all agree?’ Shelby asks, smiling. ‘Why can’t we just say communism is right for some and not right for others? Why do we have to be so judgmental?’

‘It’s not about passing judgment,’ Chris says. ‘It’s about reality. Communism is an irrational philosophy leading to corruption and misery and that’s the best-case scenario. Because of natural differences in talent, society is unequal. It’s not a systematic, structural prejudice, it’s not built in. Some people are smart enough to be brain surgeons, others

have the cognitive ability for only the most menial tasks. There's nothing wrong with that, that's where we don't pass judgment. But because of this, some make more money and live more materialistically enriched lives because of their more abundant talent. This is basic stuff. Communism, in worshipping equality, brings everyone down. You can't make everyone a doctor. But everyone can have nothing together.'

'So capitalism is the panacea?' SD counters.

'I didn't say that,' Chris responds. 'Capitalism has its own flaws. Economically speaking, I'm a distributist.'

'Alright. I guess you and I will have to agree to disagree on this first topic,' SD says, 'but I'll digress and return to my compliment concerning Richard's shirt. He gave me a wonderful idea. Since communism really is all about equality, why shouldn't we bring that spirit into this class? So, to install this right at the beginning, from now on we will call each other "Comrade" as in Comrade Richard, Comrade Pat, Comrade SD-d'

'No,' Madula says. 'I'm not doing that.'

'I agree with Ted,' Chris says. 'And I'm not supporting the coercive stuff, even the smallest things like controlling salutations, speech codes, speech restrictions in general.'

'Let's compromise,' Shelby suggests. 'How about we just call one another "C-rad," that way we still have the whole original meaning thing but we've taken out a few letters to appease Chris and Ted and whoever else doesn't want to do this.'

'No, no, no,' SD says. 'Let me give you all an itsy-bitsy lesson from all my years in academia. Academia is a wonderful place of openness and tolerance where no one gets to force their ideas on anyone else. Chris, you're violating that

by forbidding everyone here from using a title that I believe, no, *know*, implies liberty and equality and fraternity and that everyone agrees is a good thing. You wouldn't want me to force an idea on you, right? So, in the spirit of tolerance, I rule that your objections are overruled and we proceed with calling everyone Comrade. That way no one is forced to do anything they don't agree with.'

The class is momentarily silent. Then, SD breaks into song, again, having pulled out a photo of the Polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. The photo is leaned against his coffee cup right in front of him. He sings *to* the photo, this time the pre-Y2K so about a billion years old and not having aged like wine, not at all, boy band Backstreet Boys song 'I Want it That Way.'

'Okay, got it?.' SD asks. 'I want it that way, period. This class, we call each other "Comrade." Now that we have the introductions out of the way, it's time to take a brief look at the class syllabus.'

He passes out six green sheets of paper, keeping a seventh for himself.

'As you see, this course is entitled *Thinking beyond the Box: Outside is no longer sufficient*. This because it has been scientifically proven that individualistic traits are wholly inadequate in the face of problems that can only be solved with a collectivist approach.'

'Bullshit,' Madula says.

'Comrade Ted,' SD says. 'Please. Lower your voice. I order you to check your aggression. Check your male privilege, too, while you're at it.'

Richard scowls.

Shelby pops another bubble.

'But like I was going to say,' SD says, pointing over his left shoulder, 'there is a camera set up giving a live stream feed to Comrades Alouette and Cantor. Since they will be your employers, they have the final say about who will get the job. If this all sounds a bit "big brother" to you just remind yourself about equality and tolerance and how every problem in the world is the fault of Western men.'

'SD,' Shelby says, 'you said the "m word"...m..a..n...'

SD pauses, realizing his gaffe. 'You're right, please excuse me. Western Tier Seventeen Lifeform-pale and/or bleach-blached eggshell paint variant. Each week we have a new topic of discussion. Today's is "Absolute Truth?" Since all of these require an exposition of each of your most intimate philosophies, I think it would be prudent to go around the room and have everyone state their own personal philosophy, your deepest held beliefs. Comrade Ted, we'll start with you. Comrade Ted?'

'No, SD' Ted says, rocking back and forth. 'You can go pound sand.'

'Okay, then,' SD says, turning to Shelby.

'Okay. Well,' Shelby says, clasping her hands together, 'my entire philosophy is based upon loving the now. Forget the past, forget the future, embrace the best version of yourself here and now and really hold on tight. For me, I mean in my opinion, and I don't mean to offend anyone by this, for me my whole attitude boils down to this: never say anything to anyone that could in anyway be interpreted in an offensive way by any person at any time, no matter the time, place, or the time of day.'

'I'm a . . . secular . . . humanist,' Richard says. 'Everything . . . is relative. Everything.'

'So there's no right or wrong whatsoever, all that

matters is what a person claims is right or wrong. It's totally subjective?' Chris asks.

'Ex . . . actly,' Richard says.

'So you're cool with setting cats on fire?' Pat asks.

'Wha . . . uht?' Richard asks.

'You're cool with setting cats on fire. And while we're at it, skinning dogs alive and biting strangers on the street?'

'What Pat means," Chris says, "is within your philosophy where everything is permissible, where do you draw the line? If right and wrong are either completely fluid concepts, or don't exist at all, you can do anything you want because any person can justify his or her action as "true for me".'

'No,' Richard says, 'that's not . . . it. That's completely . . . wrong. Obviously you can't . . . hurt . . . other people, or hurt animals . . . Especially not . . . animals . . . or the environment or, or . . . Teletubbies and, and . . . ba, ba . . . beanie babies. I'm talking . . . about the realm . . . of . . . personal choice.'

'But no one chooses in a vacuum,' Chris says, 'every personal choice somehow affects other people. You need one standard, a set of rules, so everyone knows what's right and wrong and what can be appealed to for disputative judgments.'

'Ok, Comrade Chris,' SD says, 'since you're so sure of absolute truth why don't you give us your philosophy. On second thought, never mind,' throwing up his hands, 'I've heard enough pontificating from you. And I can guess that you really are *pontificating*, I can just tell where you draw "your truth" from, it's just blindingly obvious, especially the

whole distributism thing. Pretty soon we'll all be gagging on Chesterton, Belloc, and Rerum Novarum. Comrade Shelby, what do you think?'

'The now is what matters,' Shelby says, 'in matters of truth, in matters of love. Embrace the now and you have truth, you'll find the reason behind the process in front of the thing next to the thing that matters pointing to all that has ever mattered. The time you freed your mind, close your eyes and go there now, the way you always wished to re-enter the past, that past is now the NOW, it is accessible, kind of sassy too, in like a no way LOL girl are you for real, TFW LMAO bae but, k, right?, and all you have to do is believe that it is, and it is, and all will be harmoniously interconnected by yes.'

Silence falls on the class like fresh now at 1:17 in the morning. Yellow lights from streetlamps piercing the black night less black thanks to moonlight refracted back on pastures of untouched white fluff. But quiet, yeah it's quiet, the class is just so quiet right now.

Holly raises her hand.

'You wanna know how it is, what's it all about? Okay. The left and the right in America, both, have been total embarrassments for more than a century and a half now, all the way back to the 1960s, 70s. Each saying and promising sweet nothings for votes, nothing more, abandoning any real promises made from first foot through the doors of power. What did the right, "conservatives," mean once upon a time? Traditional values like faith and the family, passing values along like paying it forward, both time-earned lessons and financial footing too, that fourth-generation baker taking over a business with no start-up fees, no loans to haggle for, and a long line of customers stretching out the door down the block. But soon conservatism became neo-conservatism and the proliferators were placated by slogans and statements all the while

being told to turn blind eyes to this Middle Eastern country then the next being turned to rubble from fire from above, often only to get that black gold from below. Conservatives abandoned the family and the family business in favor of policing the world for profit, whereas the left had long ago followed suit on Foucault's 1975 Death Valley LSD trip deal with the devil—give us, the left, unlimited sexual freedoms and we'll stop criticizing your avaricious economics—they too, the left, once the side *on the side* of the common man and woman left them all high and dry to join hands with the right on Wall Street. I promised to tell you *what it's all about*, remember? The family and food on the table. There's your basic recipe for a political platform that won't lose congressional seats or steam for decades. People, all people, want to know that people, all people but especially *their* people, are at the center of a platform; just living wages, vibrant small businesses, true communities, good schools, the butter and salt basics of life. But no one, by that I mean no one on the 'left' or 'right,' is interested in this because a true people-first platform would mean the end of left-right politics, the end of hand over first profits, the end of 'the system' in sum. Remember some people thought the dropping of the hydrogen bomb in 2055 might change things, provide perspective. How long did that last? Two months? Both sides want nothing more than power and profits, it's just that they go about the distractive euphemisms differently. The right pays lip service to "patriotism" and "security" and "strength" while meaning endless fattening of the military-industrial complex. The left distracts with sex and virtue signals. I find the suffragists enormously inspirational; Emmeline Pankhurst, Annie Kenney, Constance Lytton, these women are some of my personal heroes. Is that what they fought for, SD, so women today would avoid saying the word "man"? Did they fight so hard so that women today would be distracted from further necessary fights because buzzwords like "tolerance" and "equality" mean these ideals have actually been achieved? Are we supposed to feel better about sending a missile into a

wedding in some remote mountain town halfway across the world because talking heads tells us it's a "patriotic" act assured to increase our and the world's "security"? A German mayor, he drunk on this poisonous doublespeak, once upon a time opined that his town "might be poor, but at least we're sexy." When a person, or a party, finally realizes that people would rather feed their families, have good jobs, send their kids to good schools, and generally mind their business rather than be "sexy," "patriotic" or every form of what used to be called "woke," then true change will come, and maybe for the first time.'

The next two and a half months of class fit into the basic mold set during this first meeting. Ted played the obstinate contrarian, tearing down others' views piece by piece without ever offering a positive prescription of his own. He once told Shelby he might consider going out with her but he'd rather she be 'closer to a nine' than the 'six point five you actually are.' Shelby told him to stick his head in a toilet and flush repeatedly. Then they started dating. Richard was without a doubt SD's favorite student. Shelby could always be counted on for conciliation. Ben and Pat and Holly and Chris usually found themselves on the same side of an argument.

Yes, the next two and a half months of class fit into a 'basic mold' alright. Madula started smoking a pipe during the third meeting and didn't quit; Shelby tried telling some jokes early in the meetings but nobody laughed so she stopped telling them; Madula once said the following to SD, rhyme-edited for censorship pass ability, 'You lucking duck, don't you honestly understand how bucking pathetic everything you crucking believe is? It's not a mucking joke, it's downright stucking embarrassing, seriously, you fun of a snitch, dastard piece of spit, dog-sit, horseskit fourth rate excuse of a professor;' to illustrate a point, Chris acted out an argument with himself, one of the roles being spoken in French and the

other in Spanish, two sides of the same dialogue coin with an Italian joke included; upon completion, SD exclaimed, 'And this, comrades, is the reason we should all support public education, especially in underserved communities,' to which Chris replied that he had never attended public school in his life and was not from an underprivileged community but from an affluent suburb of Dallas, Texas; Ben never fell asleep in class and always took plentiful notes; Shelby once asked the class if werewolves were real; Madula was visibly embarrassed when it was revealed that the prime, recurring role from his self-proclaimed vaunted filmography was of a character who got beat up and then disappeared from the show because as an NYU Film School professor explained in an interview to *The New Yorker*, in an article entitled 'The Fine Art of Pain in Film,' 'look, easy enough, yeah? Casting the leads and all that. Anyone can do glamour. But the genius in my field is filling in the blank spaces and, let's face it, the reason you, the viewer, love action films, love the guy doing the ass kicking is because there's some far less known actor who's a master at getting his ass kicked. Let me tell you, I had this student once here, a kid named Ted, man, his face, it just screamed, "come and kick my ass," and, let me tell you, he was good at it. Anytime I needed someone to show up on screen and get a behind the shed ass whoopin', he was my go to guy;' Richard once carried a hunger strike into class protesting human indifference to bees; a week later Madula brought along a bacon, egg and cheese bagel and waited to see if Richard was still striking and when Richard confirmed he was Madula stood up and threw the bagel directly into Richard's face and Richard, stunned momentarily by the velocity and accuracy of the bagel throw, came to his senses and in one fell swoop, disrobed completely and jumped onto the table, scarfing down the bagel while making sounds that can be described as 'moaning,' 'pining,' 'grouching,' 'hankering,' and 'itch-yearning.'

[*] SD also developed a product called the *Woke Keyboard* that earned him everlasting fame in Ivy covered safe spaces and schools of thought dedicated to political correctness with unflinching determination. Here is the product description.

Woke Keyboard: Do you miss the good old days of speech codes and treating the First Amendment like the worthless rag it is? Listen up: our keyboard system prevents you from ever employing in the service of a thought crime. Each time a person attempts to type any of the 68,226 banned words our system puts up ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ on the screen. Here is an example sentence of the service we offer. A. The former, wrong words way. B. the corrected, officially approved right words way.

- A. Since the dawn of time, human beings have sought the truth irrespective of culture or geographical location. This because independent thought and freedom are hardwired into the belief systems of all men and women, and must be, in the final tally, found in accord with ultimate reality or discarded for good.
- B. Since the ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ of ~~ACCESS DENIED~~, ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ have sought the ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ irrespective of ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ or geographical ~~ACCESS DENIED~~. This ~~ACCESS DENIED ACCESS DENIED ACCESS DENIED~~ and ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ are hardwired into the ~~ACCESS DENIED ACCESS DENIED~~ of all ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ and ~~ACCESS DENIED~~, and must be, in the ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ tally, found in ~~ACCESS DENIED~~ with ~~ACCESS DENIED ACCESS DENIED~~ or discarded for ~~ACCESS DENIED~~.

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Gracjan Kraszewski is the author of two books: a novel entitled *The Holdout* (Adelaide Books, 2018) and a Civil War history entitled *Catholic Confederates* (forthcoming with The Kent State University Press, 2020). The first chapter of another novel (currently in progress), *Job Search*, was published in *Eclectica* Magazine. Short fiction has appeared in *New English Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *The Southern Distinctive*, *PILGRIM*, *Bull: Men's Fiction*, *The Coil*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *RumbleFish Press*, *Five on the Fifth*, and on The Short Humour Site with pieces forthcoming in the *Tulane Review* and *Riddle Fence*.

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