

Why I Remain Hopeful

Kelly J. Baker

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I write depressing essays about higher education. Or so I've been told via Twitter, Facebook, email, phone, and real-time conversations. "Another depressing essay by @kelly_j_baker," reads one tweet after another. My writing on academia bums people out. That reaction still surprises and startles me because I never set out to write depressing essays. (Really, I don't). My goal is not to make readers despair or gnash their teeth, but I somehow manage to do that, anyway.

I write about the realities of sexism, racism, and labor in academia. Those are not happy-go-lucky topics, I know. But anyone invested in higher education should be engaging the bias and structural constraints that make academia an unsafe space for women and people of color and that often force scholars into low-paying, low-prestige work — or out of academia altogether.

I imagine myself to be a realist, a straight-shooter who tells it like it is. What I eventually realized is that my straight-shooting appeared to readers as anger, bitterness, and fatalism. I'm none of those things. (OK, OK, I'm still furious about the injustice of academic labor and will be for awhile). Yet I'm not some freelance version of a doomsday prophet, and I would never stylize myself as such. I'm not foretelling tragic ends to the modern university, but assessing the landscape as it stands right now. I write about current conditions, not projected futures.

Unfortunately, higher-ed writing can lend itself to the melodramatic — pivoting between technocratic optimism (*MOOCs! Online education! Virtual universities unbounded by brick and mortar! Everyone can be a college student but who knows if they'll finish a degree program!*) and routine pessimism (*The modern university is crumbling! There's nothing we can do! Academia is a sinking ship! All is lost!*). Technocratic optimism assures us the future is bright if only we allow tech to save us. Routine pessimism

convinces us that nothing we really do matters, so why try to change the system we operate under.

The optimists get on my nerves because they refuse to acknowledge structure, issues of access, and the privilege of opportunity. While the optimists might annoy me, the pessimists break my heart. Their unwillingness to imagine different futures for institutions and all the people who inhabit them makes me profoundly sad and frustrated. I hear their voices often. These pessimists explain that they cannot do anything to change academia. They can't fix the working conditions for contingent academics because "it's bad all around." They claim to lack control of hiring and departmental decisions. They place the blame on the administration but refuse to recognize their own agency. The structure is broken, they tell me over and over, all the while abdicating any responsibility for making things better.

Fatalism absolves our responsibility for the world around us. Fatalism leads us to accept the inequalities of academia as normative and unfixable. I can't bear it anymore; you shouldn't bear it anymore, either.

And yet, I remain hopeful.

A friend sent me a copy of Rebecca Solnit's recent *Harper's* essay, "The Habits of Highly Cynical People," because he thought I would like it. I do. Solnit takes aim at what she calls "naïve cynicism" — the tendency "to pronounce with great certainty on future inevitabilities, present impossibilities, and past failures." That form of cynicism attempts to simplify the world around us by creating certainty and clarity while the world only offers up complexity, nuance, and unpredictability. What concerns Solnit is that naïve cynicism "flattens the past and the future" by ignoring what we've gained but always accounting for all that failed. It "shoots down possibilities." Most disturbingly, naïve cynicism convinces us *not* to act.

Academics are a particular breed of naïve cynics, often trained to comprehend that critical thinking is most effective when it (a) involves critique and (b) minimizes an appreciation for what's already been

accomplished. I first encountered naïve cynicism in graduate seminars. Professors praised students who offered up the harshest criticisms of other scholar's works and scoffed at those who wanted to appreciate what a scholar managed to accomplish. Academics like to think that critique is hard, but I've come to believe the opposite. Criticism is easy because of its reliance on a defensive posture. Imagining new possibilities is much harder work.

In Solnit's view, it's important to hope that the world can change. Hope is open to possibilities. Cynicism is not. She looks to the successes of recent political movements — no matter how small, temporary, or incomplete — to remind us that we can't foretell the future. Small and incomplete victories can become the foundation for larger cultural movements. To have hope is to believe that the future is uncertain and full of possibilities. She chooses to hope.

What readers miss in my depressing essays about higher ed is that I have hope that academia can change. Nothing is certain, which means there are other possibilities than what we have now.

I have hope for the future of higher education because I see people fighting for new possibilities. I have hope because of the student-led movements against racism and sexual assault on campus. Protests [at Mizzou](#) gave me hope. Student activists brought media attention to racism on the campus and demanded change from university leaders. Sexual assault survivors are suing their universities for violations of Title IX. The Office of Civil Rights [opened up investigations](#) of mismanaged sexual assault cases at [161 universities and colleges](#).

These victories are often temporary and incomplete, but students made conversations about racism and sexual assault on campus happen. Their efforts removed silence and brought both issues to the attention of the media and general public. At the University of Tennessee, some of my former students have been protesting against the state legislature's attempts to [remove funding](#) from diversity initiatives, particularly the campus Office of Diversity and Inclusion. These students want to show lawmakers that they are making wrong and harmful decisions. The funding

removal became law in May, but students are still organizing around this issue. I'm so very proud of their willingness to speak up, protest, and organize.

I have hope because contingent laborers refuse to be silent about the exploitative nature of the two-tier employment system. Adjuncts speak up. They tell us their stories about the conditions under which they labor. They refuse to let us look away. Starting in 2013, contingent labor emerged in the national media as a pressing problem for Ph.D.s and academia. Sure, *The Chronicle* started publishing articles on adjunctlabor and activism well over 10 years ago, but now labor in higher ed was a mainstream topic of discussion. Scholars (like Sarah Kendzior and Tressie McMillan Cottom) broke the silence that surrounded academic labor in the news media. Articles still appear now. *The Atlantic* covers academic labor because contingency can't be ignored. Contingent workers continue to fight for better contracts and attempt to unionize, and even joined other low-wage workers in the Fight for \$15.

I'm well aware that the campaigns I've mentioned have had mixed success. Some started and fizzled out. The victories appear partial and, perhaps, even compromised. Movements got co-opted. Infighting and competing interests can dwindle their support.

Still, I have hope. These movements have shown us better possibilities. I have hope for what happens next — both with these movements and any new ones that might arise. The future is uncertain, but full of possibilities. That is why I refuse fatalism. It *is* possible for academia to become better. "What we do," Solnit writes, "begins with what we believe we can do." We need to believe that we can effect change. I believe we can. Do you?

Kelly J. Baker is the editor of *Women in Higher Education*. She has a Ph.D. in Religion and regularly writes about gender in higher ed, contingent labor, religious studies, and post-academic life