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Revolting Youth: The Conflicted Representation of Students in Netflix's *The Chair*

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The Netflix series *The Chair* (2021), created by academic Annie Julia Wyman, and actor, writer, producer Amanda Peet is set in the privileged enclave of an American liberal arts college. The anxieties portrayed in *The Chair* are varied, but the primary one is the students. Students in this story determine directly or indirectly who is vulnerable to firing and the shape of the curriculum; academics are terrified to be alone with a single student in case of accusations of sexual impropriety; and in the central story students exercise political power through their condemnation of an academic who gives a mock Nazi salute in a class.

The Chair's main characters are in awe of, and often contemptuous of the student body in whom, despite their protestations that they lack a voice, the power to censure and censor resides. The show invokes wider contemporary discourses about the resilience of the young, the effects of social media, the decontextualisation of events, struggles over meaning, and the elision of morality and identity.

This analysis of the representation of students in *The Chair* reveals a complex and conflicted set of ideas about generational differences, the marketisation of Higher Education, and the nature of knowledge in the academy; it also examines the mobilisation of liberal and conservative critiques of students and reveals both to be ultimately unsustainable.

The Chair (Peet & Wyman, USA, 2021), a TV miniseries of six 30-minute episodes, created by academic Annie Julia Wyman, and actor, writer, producer Amanda Peet, was released on Netflix in August 2021 and depicted in comic/dramatic terms a short turbulent period in the life of the fictional liberal arts college Pembroke University.

This analysis of the representation of students in *The Chair* reveals a complex and conflicted set of ideas about generational differences, the nature of higher education, and the contestation of knowledge in the academy. I suggest that the programme offers us a romantic portrait of the passion and commitment of the student body, whilst undercutting this with a representation of young people who are quick to judge, unwilling to question, and easily offended. Ultimately, despite a resolution which suggests that differences between students and faculty have been resolved, these conflicts and contradictions are not. Why this might matter is because it provides ways of seeing and understanding contemporary students, particularly at a time when many are protesting visibly about global conflicts, when the "value" of degrees is being challenged by politicians and journalists, and when the stakes for freedom of speech on campuses have never been higher; *The Chair* plays an active part in contributing to the cultural and political mythology around higher education.

Much of the initial response to *The Chair* focused on verisimilitude; on the announcement of the show there was much speculation about the degree to which the show would be able to reflect the realities of university life (Reisz 2020), and when it appeared this conversation continued, with one academic commenting that it was 'painful to watch in many ways because it was almost too close to home. I watched scenes and realized that while other people would find them funny, I couldn't laugh because it was too true…' (Reisz 2021).

My purpose here is not to pursue this line of enquiry (although its realism makes it amenable to such readings), but to examine how *The Chair*'s representation of the student body explores issues at the heart of the higher education sector – issues which are pertinent to all western democracies, not just the USA. I have argued previously that 'imaginative stories about pedagogy always embody, more or less explicitly, theories of learning, and theories of learning are always based on concepts of the subject, the status and nature of knowledge, and ideas about the value and utility of education' (Readman 2016: 3). The imaginative terrain of *The Chair* is fundamentally ideological in that it dramatically explores questions about the nature of higher education, the mindset of contemporary students, and the nature of contemporary learning in the academy.

My approach draws on textual analysis, and is driven by the key questions outlined by Catherine Belsey in her description of this method:

> What is it about? What kinds of prior knowledge might illuminate it? What difference does it make if we locate the work textually and historically? What position, or range of positions does the text offer its reader? How can we best let the text itself set the agenda for research that will generate insights? And finally, how far, as a result of all this labour, can we expect to arrive at a definitive interpretation? (Belsey 2013: 160–161).

The strategy, then, is to analyse how students are portrayed, how their relationship with the university is dramatised, and to examine how particular interpretative positions are created for us. I argue that the central story is driven by a misconstrued (and misguided) rhetorical device in an English lecture (a lecturer gives a Nazi salute), and that the subsequent escalation is due to a dispute over interpretation. By the same token I want to examine how the show's own rhetorical and narrative machinery produces a figure of the contemporary student which is similarly conflicted.

Context and background

Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh), professor of English Literature and recently appointed as the first woman, and first person of colour to the position of Chair of her department faces a number of problems: she has inherited a department almost entirely composed of old and middle-aged white men who, at best, are going through the motions of teaching; enrolments are shrinking; her Dean (David Morse) insists that she get rid of some of the highest paid and least effective staff; she is asked by an older female colleague, Joan Hambling (Holland Taylor), to support her discrimination claim against the university; her desire to promote her young black female colleague, Yaz McKay (Nana Mensah), is resisted at every turn; and worst of all, her romantically freighted relationship with a recently widowed friend and colleague, Bill Dobson (Jay Duplass) is tested to its limits when he makes a mock Nazi salute in a lecture and she feels obliged to defend him against a student movement calling for him to be sacked.

Meanwhile Bill struggles with grief for the loss of his wife and the absence of his daughter, who has just left for college, Joan is outraged by crude, offensive, and anonymous student feedback and enlists a colleague in IT to track down the culprit, and Ji-Yoon struggles to build a relationship with her adopted daughter Ju-Hee.

The opening sequence of the first episode is about the power of tradition – a sequence of shots of historical buildings attributed to Ji-Yoon's point of view as Vivaldi's *Gloria* plays over. Ji-Yoon's expression indicates trepidation and the wide shot as she ascends the steps to the grand entrance reinforces her size in relation to the weight of history and status. There is a sequence culminating in Thomas Hardy-esque bathos before the

title: she allows herself a small smile of satisfaction and pride as she contemplates the sign on her door with her name and title; she then unwraps an irreverent humorous desk sign from her colleague, Bill, which reads "Fucker in charge of you fucking fucks", and as she appears to allow herself to relish this new position of power she is literally brought down to earth with a bump as her chair collapses beneath her. The symbolism is not exactly ambiguous – this seat of power is unstable; power, it seems, does not reside in titles, buildings and institutions, but as Foucault (1977) argues, is dispersed, enacted, contested, and constitutive of its various actors. As such, we should be prepared to be alert to the ways in which power operates in this world and how we are invited to see resistance to it as legitimate or illegitimate depending on the representational architecture.

In the fictitious setting of Pembroke University, power is at stake in most interactions – the power to recruit and dismiss faculty, the power of tenure, the power of reputation, the power of language, the power of knowledge, the power of money, and the power of students. The representation of students in *The Chair* oscillates between two modes; on one hand they are immature, illiterate and quick to condemn, but on the other hand they are idealistic, energetic and unafraid to call power to account. The fact that the narrative engine of the show depends upon the former means that the resolution must effect a sleight of hand in order to bring about some kind of reconciliation and new state of hope. In one review of the show Caroline Framke argues that

> In less deft hands, the inciting event of Bill [Dobson] playacting a "Sieg heil" during a lecture could be a clunky, didactic nightmare. Credit where due to this series, then, for almost entirely sidestepping that outcome. Where other TV shows would place the blame at the feet of hysterical students or else evil teachers, *The Chair* manages to demonstrate the layers at work without equivocating too much, so that it still has bite (Framke 2021: 80).

I will return to this notion of equivocation, but for now it is enough to say that, although I agree that *The Chair* is not a 'clunky didactic nightmare"', its ending indicates a genuine struggle to bring about a resolution which is satisfying in narrative terms and which also resolves some of the central conflicts which are played out.

"Professor Hitler must go!"

Of the various storylines running through *The Chair*, the primary one is what we might call "the witch-hunt of Bill Dobson", although I realise in writing this that I should acknowledge my own identity as a white, middle-aged man who is probably more likely

to see Bill as the victim than the perpetrator. Jennifer Esposito, conversely, declaring her identity as a 'Latina academic department chairperson' (2022: 98) defines Bill's action as 'hate speech' (2023: 961). The incident which sparks student protest and which, in turn, puts unbearable pressure on his friend, boss, and potential romantic partner Ji-Yoon, is a Nazi salute which he gives in a lecture entitled 'Death and Modernism'. The escalation of the protest which this precipitates is driven by outrage from the students, but is also shown to be facilitated by an environment of surveillance (mobile phone recordings) and a tendency to interpret actions literally, which is in tension with some of the pedagogy we witness, which encourages questioning and dialogue. *The Chair* dramatises the power of these characteristics, showing how they create a powerful presence on campus which leads to the destruction and damage of at least two careers.

The first time we see Bill teach he arrives late, untucked and dishevelled. His teaching assistant, Lila, has sent him a nudge at 9.50 and it's now 10.15. He spends a minute or so hooking up his laptop to display some images, and on a large screen suddenly appears a video of his half naked, now-deceased wife in labour. Bill is lost in a reverie as he watches the video on his laptop screen and is jolted back into reality by Lila. He shuts the laptop, apologises to the shocked students, introduces Lila, complimenting her on her dissertation (promising her quietly that he *will* read it soon), and then erroneously welcomes the students to 'Contemporary Lit', before being corrected by Lila and changing it to 'Death and Modernism'. Unlike the students, we see Bill's life away from campus – his emotional drunken response to his daughter leaving for college – and we infer that his wife has died recently. He is unprofessional and a mess, but not a Nazi.

The purpose of this scene is to prime us for the incident which creates the vortex at the heart of *The Chair*. The incident occurs at the end of the first episode, where there is a scene of a second lecture. Bill looks up from his laptop at a group of expectant students and asks 'How many of you did the reading for today? [several hands go up] I mean honestly [most of the hands go down]? How many of you are drunk right now? Or stoned? [one hand goes up] See, that's fine'. At this point two students produce phones and start to record the lecture – the implication is that Bill Dobson is not like other professors, something entertaining might be about to happen.

Bill writes the word 'ABSURDISM' on the blackboard.

'Life isn't what you think. It'll never be what you think.'

Bill writes the word 'FASCISM' on the blackboard. There are now three students recording him on their phones.

He gestures at the word 'fascism': 'all meaning is ascribed to the state' – his arm straight, his hand open.

He points at the word ‘absurdism’: ‘there is no meaning’. As if noticing his own pose he clicks his heels, thrusts his arm forwards and says ‘Heil Hitler’. The students exchange alarmed, surprised looks – heads emerge as if to say ‘what just happened?’

> DOBSON: The idea that we exist in a purposeless universe came about after two World Wars, 85 million dead including the camps. What do Camus and Beckett have in common?

At this point there is some phone activity – one of the students recording proceedings seems to be doing something – typing, sharing it with another student.

> Student: They both fought in the resistance.
>
> DOBSON: Yes. For two people who were convinced that there’s no cure for being on this earth, that there’s nothing to be done, they still tried. Cesare Pavese wrote that the only way to escape from the abyss is to look at it, measure it, sound its depths and go down into it.

As the episode ends the camera tracks back to reveal students sharing the video of Bill giving his Nazi salute. Despite the context for his performance, despite his reference to the death toll in the concentration camps, despite his invocation of staring into the abyss, it is the decontextualised action itself which is interpreted as a statement of authentic belief. And in order to eliminate any possibility of ambiguity of interpretation for any other recipients of the video, we see at the beginning of the second episode that the students have edited, aged, and manipulated the video so that Bill now appears in an SS cap and armband giving his salute in a sepia-toned simulation of historical footage.

The students’ reactions to this performance are shock and bafflement which make it possible to read this scene as an indictment of their interpretative abilities; if the work of students of English is essentially hermeneutic, then this group is shown to be lacking essential skills. For them, there is clearly an unproblematic connection between a sign and its referent. I am clearly drawing on the lexicon of structural linguistics here – for Saussure (1959), the sign was a fixed unit with a transparent relationship with the object to which it refers. To place the theory in this context, if one makes a Nazi salute one is signalling obeisance to Hitler. But the study of English is full of contradictions and competing interpretations; the lecture which Bill has only just commenced has already commented on fascism and absurdism as different responses to a meaningless universe. Bill’s mistake, then, is to assume that he is able, in a class full of students

– scholars of meaning-making – to enact a sign in (to use Bakhtin's term) the 'dialogic' mode. As Terry Eagleton clarifies:

> ...the sign for Bakhtin was less a neutral element in a given structure than a focus of struggle and contradiction. It was not simply a matter of asking 'what the sign meant', but of investigating its varied history, as conflicting social groups, classes, individuals and discourses sought to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings (Eagleton 1983: 117).

Bill's students, it seems, interpret the world through a Saussurean lens, but Bill assumes that, as students of English, sensitive to complexity, they are equipped with a Bakhtinian lens. He assumes, apparently, that his students command the same rhetorical resources that he does; he also assumes a connection with them that allows him to make a rhetorical flourish without being misunderstood. Bill's mock Nazi salute is clearly not a sincere expression of ideology and, therefore, it requires some interpretative resources in order to make sense of it. It is an ironic gesture which is performative and context-dependent; he enacts the Nazi salute in an exaggerated manner to both mock it and to draw attention to it as committed reaction to political chaos. It is, in itself, an absurd performance of fidelity to the concept of fascism, which sits on his blackboard above the word absurdism.

I am clearly reading Bill's gesture as having some kind of pedagogic and performative weight – it may be a generous interpretation. Jennifer Esposito argues, conversely, that it has no pedagogic purpose and that, therefore, it fails to meet one of the criteria for freedom of speech:

> It is never made clear why Bill made the Nazi salute. Was it to jar sleepy students as some sort of pedagogical shock? He never addresses the pedagogical use for the salute, so we are left to ponder the reasonableness of its use in the classroom devoid of necessary context (2023: 965).

We are not privy to any comparable discussions among the students and the absence of any scene in which competing interpretations are offered makes it difficult to attribute to them the habits of mind which were once (and perhaps still are) the essential characteristic of a liberal education – what Stefan Collini describes, in his discussion of John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University*, as 'avoidance of the excited, the passionate, and the partisan...a disposition towards, or perspective upon, knowledge rather than knowledge of anything in particular' (2012, p.45). On the contrary, by the end of the second episode the students protesting outside Ji-Yoon's office have decided that there is enough evidence to demand 'no Nazis at Pembroke!' and 'Professor Hitler must go!'

Culture and Anarchy

What is at stake here is the status of liberal arts – the extent to which students are participants in a process of becoming 'wise'. There is little evidence of empathy, critical thinking, of 'respecting the grey between the black and white' (Haberberger 2017: 1054), even though this is the position espoused by Ji-Yoon in the first episode when she says to her class: 'you don't have to have an answer. I'm more interested in your questions than your answers. It's not about having a fixed analysis'. Written on her blackboard is a quote from Gloria Anzaldúa (2021: 59) 'my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence'. This, together with a quote from Audre Lorde (like Anzaldúa, a woman of colour, lesbian, and intersectional theorist) in a later episode reinforce the ethos of the liberal education – the encouragement to question, to challenge, to critique. And Bill initially supports the students' dissent, even when it is directed against him – he argues to the Dean that direct action is characteristic of students in higher education. He relates their protest to his own protest as an undergraduate: 'universities are supposed to encourage dissent – we should be proud of these kids - this is what they do. In fact, when I was an undergrad I sat bare-ass on that very desk [pointing at Dean Larson's desk, who shifts uncomfortably] for South African divestment'.

But again, Bill fails to recognise the difference between contemporary students and his own undergraduate identity; his protest for South African divestment as an undergraduate was political – directed at the institution and an objection against institutional investment in a regime built on apartheid and the abuse of human rights. This is different from students objecting to the behaviour of an individual and attempting to assert the right to oust that individual; the manipulation of boundaries is significant – Bill's protest involved occupation of privileged space in order to exert influence on institutional policy, but his students have mobilised outside this space in order to insist on his ejection from it. Ji-Yoon says to her students: 'when I get up in the morning I'm excited to come to class, not because I get to teach you, but because I get to learn from you' – an admirable statement of her commitment to decentring herself as an authority figure and to ceding power to her students. But one reading of *The Chair* might be that a degree of 'power literacy' is necessary, otherwise one authority is merely replaced by an immature autocracy. This is congruent with wider concerns about the perceived power imbalance in American universities; Bill Maher in one of his regular diatribes against contemporary higher education on his show, *Real Time*, argued recently that: 'College life today is... a day care centre with a meal plan, except the toddlers can fire the adults' (Maher 2023).

Maher's dyspeptic views of young people and higher education notwithstanding, there is an inversion at work in *The Chair* – it is the 'grown ups' who get drunk and stoned, who behave childishly, swear, are dishevelled and forgetful, who have awkward sexual encounters, urinate in public, and whom (in Bill's case) we see riding a child's bicycle. In contrast, the students are strict, disciplined, and censorious and, apart from a giggly incident when the student Dafna (Ella Rubin) drops off a flirtatious pie for Bill, they are rarely shown having fun, and even this moment of levity is crushed by her friend Capri's stern judgement: 'You just gave your pie to a Nazi'. One other scene depicting students having fun is Yaz McKay's class on Melville in which her students have created songs and poems about *Moby Dick* – there is much laughter, whooping and applause, although their delight is anchored very firmly in earnest critiques of masculinity.

The Uses of Literacy

It is a cliché that students in higher education do not read any more (e.g. Zeivots 2021; Gorzycki et al. 2019) and *The Chair* reinforces this image in a number of ways. Sometimes this is used for comic effect, but it resonates with a wider implication of illiteracy of various kinds. I will consider a few key examples and then consider how the implications for university pedagogy are played out in what we see of Yaz McKay's classes.

The tone is set from Ji-Yoon's initial address in the first episode to her colleagues, which she begins by identifying the perilous state of enrolments:

> ...we have to prove that what we do in the classroom is more important than ever... what we teach them cannot be quantified or put down on a resumé as a skill...We need to remind these young people that knowledge doesn't just come from spreadsheets or wiki entries. I was thinking this morning about our tech-addled culture and how our students are connected 24 hours a day, and I was reminded of something Harold Bloom wrote; he said: 'information is endlessly available to us. Where shall wisdom be found?'.

This lofty appeal to wisdom is belied by later scenes, not least the shots of the demonstration at the end of episode two in which we see a poster of Bill's face, obscured by the word 'SCUM', with a swastika on his forehead. Another poster features a face made up of half Bill's and half Hitler's, with the legend 'Professor Hitler'. Another student with a megaphone leads the chant: 'Professor Hitler must go – send Professor Dobson home!' The contrast between the ambitions of liberal arts to bring about nuanced debate, and the actuality of brutish rhetoric and volume, rather than reason, is striking.

In episode two, at the faculty party, slightly stoned and drunk, Ji-Yoon again reflects on her disappointment in the literacy of students:

> I've been thinking a lot about this generation of students and why they're not interested in literature and sometimes I get it – they must think 'why am I scanning this sonnet when there are so many things to be worried about?' Climate change, racism, the prison industrial complex, homophobia...

When Bill is given a lift by the student, Dafna, and reflects on her fawning description of his reputation (she says he is a 'god' in her house) he quotes Prufrock (Eliot 1930: 15) 'I grow old...I grow old' and is surprised when she completes the line: 'I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled'. In response to his look she reacts with amusement 'what? I read!' The function here is not to challenge the assumption that students do not read (even students of English Literature), but to reinforce it through the fact that it is surprising and worthy of comment.

I have commented already on Bill's assumption that his students possess what we might call 'rhetorical literacy', but there are clearly more functional issues on display. When Joan Hambling (Holland Taylor) finally, and reluctantly, reviews her student evaluation forms in episode three, we see that the first one struggles with the spelling of Chaucer's period, calling her course 'Midieval Litterature'. Later, exasperated with the need to consult 'RateMyProfessors.com', she tells her ally from the IT department 'I already know what they're going to say anyway, that I shouldn't teach any books that are more than 300 pages long'. We catch a glimpse of some of the reviews from her students which serve as indictments both of their literacy and the practice of anonymous reviewing:

> 'Worst professor ever!'
> 'Kill me now...'
> 'I want my tuition back!!!'
> 'Avoid avoid avoid'

The most egregious ('Professor Hambling is what I think about when I'm trying not to come in my girlfriend') is what prompts her to crack the façade of anonymity and track down her student, Steve, who has posted this. As Taylor and Fraser argue:

> Student anonymity and their customer-reviewer status mean staff can be policed (rightly or wrongly) for their teaching content, physical appearance and presentation. Opening up spaces for critical discussion can be difficult, if not downright scary (2021).

This is not just an indictment of students, but of higher education's embrace of the logic of consumerism. Unless the relationship between students and institutions is negotiated and established in terms more nuanced that those between customer and online retailer it is, perhaps, inevitable that the responses are similar.

It is in Bill's 'Town Hall' meeting (which he calls in the mistaken belief that he can, by speaking with the students rationally as equals, bring an end to the protest) that the students are presented as particularly censorious. The poster which advertises the event promises that it 'will be an occasion for students to ask questions and share their perspective' but it quickly becomes apparent that the students are not prepared to engage in dialogue. Instead, they have come to repeat slogans and censure:

> DOBSON: Obviously, I am not a member of the Jewish community, and I'm not in a position to tell you what is or isn't offensive. But I am a member of the Pembroke community, as are all, and I want to understand your point of view.
>
> CAPRI: No Nazis at Pembroke.
>
> DOBSON: I agree. There should be no Nazis anywhere.

As a 'point of view' the statement is simple and unarguable – but it suggests that Capri might believe that this liberal professor of English Literature is actually a Nazi. For Esposito this is not an unreasonable position – she argues that 'without Bill explaining his pedagogical purposes, the salute appears to harm students emotionally more than help them intellectually' (2023: 965).

The next student comment, 'hate speech has no place here' is also unarguable – of course hate speech has no place at Pembroke, and the categorisation of Bill's action as 'hate speech' is a deft move; there are now two propositions that need to be dealt with – one that Bill is a Nazi, and two that hate speech is unacceptable. Bill's attempt at rational, historical argument is also rejected; in response to another student's question 'are you a Nazi?', he responds:

> No, I'm a professor. Nazis hate professors, because Nazis are enemies of thought. One of the greatest gifts that American universities ever received was the influx of intellectuals who fled the Third Reich, writers like Thomas Mann, Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno. Many of them wrote invaluable studies of the fascist mindset – invaluable defences of freedom of thought.

This gesture is rebuffed by Capri, who says (not without a hint of threat): 'I wouldn't use the stories of Jewish refugees here, if I were you' and by another who asks 'Are

you comparing yourself to Hannah Arendt…after saluting Hitler in your class?' There is a refusal here to engage in an argument, a rejection, again, of Dobson's rhetorical resources – he has no right to invoke Jewish intellectuals, or even allies of Jewish intellectuals, because he is already, demonstrably, a Nazi. There is no space for dialogue, no room for argument, no acquiescence in a process of exchange of ideas. Dobson eventually is driven to confront their interpretative skills: 'If you are suggesting that what I did is the same as propagating neo-Nazism, that's inaccurate; that's a wilful misrecognition of what was clearly…' but is interrupted by a student who has little tolerance for interpretative play: 'This is how it always goes. You do something that's objectively fucked up, and then we call you out on it, we get accused of getting it wrong'. For the students attending Dobson's Town Hall meeting the world can be divided into those things which are 'objectively fucked up' and those which are not.

The students at this gathering are represented as inhabiting a binary world of certainties and with little appetite for critical thinking. The immaturity of their arguments is echoed when, later, Dobson is suspended and he and Ji-Yoon's daughter (suspended from school for biting a peer) swap the chore of writing apology notes. The apology Ju-Hee writes for Dobson goes: 'I am sorry I made you think I like Hitler, because I do not. I know he is the worse person who ever lived.' The childish naivety is comedic, but matches the discursive sophistication of the protest; the scene of reversal positions the accusations of the students as absurd and childish – the immaturity of their arguments matched by the literal immaturity of Ju-Hee. It is conceivable, the connection suggests, that had Dobson offered the apology written by Ju-Hee's the students might have accepted it.

Clare Skea (2023: 4) relates the Dobson incident to the wider debate about academic freedom, suggesting that 'all of these subtle changes to the campus climate have resulted in a closing down of dialogue and debate in HE, and in turn there is an ongoing fracturing of the "we" which underpins genuine dialogue between staff and students'. She suggests that the increase in students' power as consumers may lead to academics self-censoring and avoiding controversial topics, and, drawing on the case of Kathleen Stock at Sussex University (see Adams 2021) comments on how some students used their fee-paying 'consumer' status to call for Stock's dismissal. We catch a glimpse of something similar in episode six by which time Ji-Yoon has been accused of issuing a gagging order to Dobson's teaching assistant, Lila; the Pembroke student newspaper features the headline: 'CHAIR OF ENGLISH DEPT. IMPOSES GAG ORDER ON STUDENT OF COLOR', beneath which we read: 'Molly Rubenstein, a sophomore English major, recently expressed concern over the latest events. I no longer feel safe on campus here, and I'm disgusted that my tuition money is going to support…'

The irony, for us, is that it is Ji-Yoon who is scared to show her face on campus and, despite being made to feel like 'Stalin and Pol Pot' it is the students who wield power. They have the power to determine meaning and, through ubiquitous technologies of surveillance, manipulation and dissemination they are able to record, decontextualize, accuse and condemn – all characteristics, one might argue, ironically, of fascism.

Students, *The Chair* suggests, lack the ability to ask questions without limiting the possible answers, and lack the ability to engage in a critical dialogue. The power of such dialogue has been abandoned and devolved into covert recording and distribution, or anonymous reviewing in the most offensive terms. So how might we interpret this mobilisation of power? Is this indictment of students also, or rather, an indictment of a higher education system which has failed (them)? *The Chair* is equally critical of Pembroke University and, by implication, higher education generally and, therefore, it is possible to build an argument that the behaviour of students is partly, at least, a product of an environment which seeks to mould them in its image and is ill-equipped for the inevitable resistance.

Students as critics of privilege

As I have suggested, *The Chair* requires a powerful antagonist to precipitate the personal and institutional crises in the narrative and to perform this function the student body is depicted as implacable, humourless and censorious. But there are other elements in the show which provide opportunities to empathise with them through a critique of the edifice of higher education.

In the first episode Capri asks Ji-Yoon at the end of a class to sign a petition to save Ethnic Studies – a student petition but she says that they are trying to get 'some faculty of colour on board too'. This provides a foundation for a later scene in episode four when Capri and a white male student confront Joon-Yi in her office to deliver an ultimatum. It is a moment which epitomises the dual critique of students and institution; adducing the denial of tenure to the only person of colour in 'Poly Sci', Capri says that they are worried about the future of Yaz McKay. They draw on the scholarly discourse of ethnicity to present Ji-Yoon with a litany of injustices experienced by faculty of colour – 'black faculty are held to different standards, their research isn't considered as rigorous, they're assumed to be more disorganised, less collegial'. Ji-Yoon's sympathetic acknowledgement becomes more strained as the white male student explains to her: 'they get invited less often to their colleagues houses for dinner', repeating 'I know. Trust me – I know', her face registering a trace of impatience as he lectures her. In case we miss the point, we witness a conversation later between her and Yaz in which she relates her experience of being a young academic, a peer of Bill Dobson; he was invited

to dine with senior faculty member Elliot Rentz (Bob Balaban), whereas she was left out. Ji-Yoon, and we, are left at the end of this scene with a letter of support for Yaz McKay and a threat from the male student: 'If she is denied tenure we plan to take action'. Despite irritation at a white male student explaining to a female faculty member of colour exactly what her experience is, audiences likely recognise the legitimacy of the argument; despite the indictment of students, *The Chair* invites us sometimes to side with them against an institution and curriculum which are monolithic, predominantly white and male, and implemented by uncritical authority figures such as Elliot.

Yaz McKay's pedagogy, for example, is depicted as a refreshing and engaging alternative to Elliot's lectures; Elliot's pedagogy entails reading from an elevated lectern in a panelled room, paintings of distinguished (white male) figures aligned behind him. He fits well into this company. It is an old-fashioned pedagogic model – it is exemplary of Paulo Freire's (1997) 'banking model' of education in which the knowledge capital of the authority is transmitted to the recipients. No dialogue is involved and the students are rendered passive. In a key scene a student interrupts Elliot's lecture on *Moby Dick*, which includes a reference to Melville's letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne, to ask whether Melville was a 'wife beater' – a question which Elliot rejects because it is about the human being, not the author. The tension is an epistemic one – Elliot adduces Melville's letters to Hawthorne because they are in the service of an aesthetic thesis (that is, *Moby Dick* will not be appreciated until after his death), but for questions of a moral nature the human dimension is marginalised or (for Elliot) irrelevant. Yaz reassures the students, 'we'll cover the wife-beating in my section' and she wins nods of approval from the students when she adds that she'll also consider contributions to Melville's work by the women in his life. Students, here, are shown to be more attuned (whether consciously or not) to contemporary debates about artists and their characters and, as Erich Matthes (2021) explores, the nature of the relationship between morality and aesthetics.

Audiences are invited to side with Yaz and the students here through the opposition between: youth and age; socially attuned methodologies and Leavisite appreciation; progression and stagnation; privilege and struggle. The narrative conflict, and visual rhetoric creates a position in which it is difficult to endorse the notion that knowledge should continue to be defined by those who have dominated the academy for (as Yaz says later) 'the last 40 years'. Despite having dedicated a book 'to my students' (Yaz picks it from his shelf at a faculty party) Elliot seems to have given little thought to pedagogy and, therefore, is baffled by the enthusiastic engagement of her students. He derides her strategy of getting students to tweet their favourite lines from *Moby Dick* as 'low hanging fruit', but her argument that it encourages close reading suggests that

she is also a scholar of teaching and learning. The tension between the two invites us to question the nature of scholarship and knowledge – Elliot believes that Yaz is popular because she seeks to entertain her students rather than teach them, thus destabilising the power inherent in the dissemination of knowledge. And although we may wonder what kind of learning takes place through the earnest singing and rapping in Yaz's class, we may also be resistant to Elliot's dismissal of it as 'pandering'. *The Chair* begins to suggest that there may be a connection between being told what knowledge is and is not legitimate, and the reaction when something seems to cross the line.

Although we know that Bill Dobson is not actually a Nazi, as Ji-Yoon points out, there is also an element of arrogance in his facetious responses to the Dean and Chief of Communications and an acquired sense of privilege which stems from his validation in the academy. Ji-Yoon says: 'this is about whether you're one of those men who, when something like this happens, thinks he can dust himself off and just walk away without any sense of fucking consequence'. So, on one hand we have Ji-Yoon's criticism (and she is a sympathetic character – she is our lens) of Dobson's white male privilege, which makes his assertion of his inviolable right to free speech sound like entitled whining; on the other hand we are given privileged access to the fomenting of student resistance which seems to be wilfully ignorant of context, nuance and (ironically) rhetoric. Bill's brandishing of his privileged tenured position is also reminiscent of Nicholas Lyndhurst's character, Alan Cornwall, in the 2023 reboot of *Frasier* which sees the eponymous Frasier teaching at Harvard with his old Oxford friend. Cornwall, a Harvard professor, uses the word 'tenure' like a shibboleth, taunting, airy and smug, his status as tenured giving him licence to do (or, more pertinently, not do) anything he pleases. Esposito's reading of Dobson's narrative arc is more damning:

> It was his white male privilege and status as a tenured professor with a well-known publication record that insulated him for so long. White women faculty and faculty of color of all genders would never have been allowed to be incompetent for such a long period of time (2023: 958–959).

A Sense of an Ending

Despite Framke's comment quoted earlier that *The Chair* manages to play out the conflict between students and staff 'without equivocating too much', the end of the story effects some kind of narrative resolution more through stylistic means than logical ones. The final sequence, before a coda with Bill and Ji-Yoon, attempts to persuade us that problems have been solved and that order is restored. It opens with Ji-Yoon conducting

a tutorial on Emily Dickinson, her handful of students in a respectful circle nodding sagely and assiduously taking notes. She reads 'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers and then asks questions, inviting comments:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

The second stanza, in which the bird metaphor is made explicit, has been omitted, perhaps so that Capri can offer the insight that hope is 'airborne like a bird', thus indicating that she (who has been one of the most vocal and resistant students) has been won over by the promise of liberal arts, that perhaps she has become wise and empathetic. She continues to suggest that Dickinson uses the image of 'the tune without the words' because 'hope looks different for different people – it can't have specific words, just a melody' – an appreciation that different perspectives are possible. The engagement is apparently infectious – a few seconds later we hear one of her fellow students suggest that hope is like 'a beat – the sound of life'.

The dialogue from the tutorial continues over a montage of scenes, providing, through the juxtaposition, a commentary which anchors these images both in the literal hope in the poem, and the implied hope of the tutorial: we see Yaz in control of her lecture with Elliot reduced to passing out her handouts (a demotion of the old guard and the ascendance of the new); Bill furiously annotating a manuscript (having rediscovered his passion); Lila receiving her manuscript from Bill with a note saying that he'd recommended it to his publisher (finally being given validation), and Joan taking possession of her new office and opening the gift that Ji-Yoon was given by Bill – the desk sign which reads 'fucker in charge of you fucking fucks' (finally gaining a room of her own and recognition of her status). As Ji-Yoon says earlier, 'it's a shit job, but it comes with an office'.

There have undoubtedly been some reversals of fortune, but how significant are they? In Bill's disciplinary hearing, a scene which takes place just a few minutes earlier, Ji-Yoon says:

> Firing him isn't going to change the culture here…if you think Bill is a Nazi then by all means fire him, but if you're hoping that just by getting rid of him you're going to stop what's going on outside, they're going to see right through that. What do you think is going to happen if he's fired and nothing else changes?

But is this not exactly what happens? So, the restoration of order must be, to a degree, illusory – the changes that we see in the final montage indicate change, but not of 'the culture' and probably not of things that the students care about. One possible exception is the presence of Yaz McKay in command of her lecture – although it's surely too soon for her to have been given tenure, do we assume that assurances have been given which have placated the students? The problem with the ending of *The Chair* is that it cannot resolve the intractable conflicts on which it has been built and, therefore, must efface them with the rhetoric of montage and an emotive optimistic piano melody on the soundtrack with ascending strings. In the coda Bill tells Ji-Yoon 'I want to teach' – a desire to enter into critical dialogue with students, to enlighten, to discover – and the romantic resolution to this imagining of the university, although not convincing, is seductive.

Through this textual analysis of *The Chair*, and by focusing specifically on the representation of students we are able to see how contemporary myths are played out in a narrative framework. Students in *The Chair* are 'revolting' in both senses of the word – crude in language and argument, but passionate in their resistance to authority and their pursuit of justice. The ending is indeed equivocal because higher education has created the environment which has produced them, and which fails to contain them. Ultimately *The Chair* cannot decide whether students are the future of free thinking, or its enemy.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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