January 2015

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An Interview with Dr. Laura Penny, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kanye

by Jaime R. Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney

Dr. Laura Penny teaches legions of students eager to demystify society and its contents. Currently a “contract-mode” (post-adjunct, pre-tenure-track) assistant professor in Contemporary and Early Modern Studies at The University of King’s College in Halifax, she publishes columns for major newspapers such as the Globe and Mail and the National Post and has written two books: Your Call is Important to Us: The Truth About Bullshit (2005) and More Money Than Brains: Why School Sucks, College is Crap, and Idiots Think They’re Right (2010). Her work reminds us that, despite sustained attacks from every front, the arts and humanities are here to stay.

In mid-November 2013, Penny, an alumna of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism, returned to Western under the auspices of The Society of Graduate Students to deliver her conversational lecture: “Full Fees and Empty Pockets.” Penny noted the post-1996 additions to the Western campus, especially the new Richard Ivey School of Business; as detailed below, she has proposed an initiative to “burn down all the business schools and salt the ashes so no more MBA-lings could spring up from the ruins” (More Money Than Brains 124). During her sojourn in London, Ontario, Penny kindly allowed us (Jaime and Jamie) to interview her on behalf of The Public Humanities @ Western. The Public Humanities aims to address common problems as well as opportunities that arise between the campus and community, thereby cultivating a renewed spirit of citizenship through arts and humanities. Penny is also a major contributor to Halifax Humanities 101, a program that teaches the liberal arts, opening the way for “disadvantaged people to begin to participate in the life of the community, to engage in the political life in the widest sense.” As Penny discusses in the lines below, the anti-elitist, contra-classist mission of the Halifax Humanities 101 centres on offering an accessible liberal arts education to those who are “outside” the traditional university orbit.

As a self-described “hood-rich” assistant professor (raised “prole,” currently living on a bourgeois income), Penny is perfectly poised to address our questions on the complex interrelations between Kanye West (pop culture), the stock market (anti-intellectual corporate values), and bullshit (the challenges facing
academia). In this interview, Penny elaborates on what she would alter/amend if she were crowned Queen of Pop Culture. From the pop to the cultural, Penny adds critical theory to the mixture without leaving behind the trendy and smarty.

Her office door brandishes quotes from Montaigne, Nietzsche, Deleuze, and of course—Kanye West. These intertexts are to hedge fund managers as garlic cloves are to vampires (she also teaches a course on vampires at King’s). Kanye’s entranceway quote is “the greatest tragedy of my life is that I will never get to see myself perform live.” If the Dionysian and Apollonian birthed tragedy, Kanye is the baby-daddy of its rebirth. (Penny might smile that “baby-daddy” is in the OED.) As Penny argues below, Kanye belongs in the academy; Homer belongs to the masses. But, beyond popularizing “high art” or legitimizing the scholastic critique of “low art,” Penny is annihilating the distance between art’s highbrow, lowbrow, and no-brow. There is no brow that is safe from her—she’s interrogating or furrowing them all, one by one. For that reason, it’s a great tragedy that she will never get to interview herself.

Jaime R. Brenes Reyes and Jamie Rooney: Is there “bullshit”—to use your term—in the liberal arts?

Laura Penny: No, I actually think there’s a lot more bullshit in other more explicitly careerist departments. At least in the liberal arts most of us now are fairly frank about the fact that this may not qualify you for a job, and you may have to do other things as well. The idea of greater bullshit is that everyone should be an engineer, or that everyone should be a commerce student. And, if anything, I actually think that we [in the liberal arts] get a hard time for not being rigorous, which I don’t think is fair; other more careerist disciplines are a lot less rigorous than we are.

JBR/JR: In The Star’s synopsis of your book, *More Money than Brains*, they say that, “Today’s emphasis on training, money, and jobs means the real purpose of higher learning—critical thinking and literacy—has been lost to the corporate agenda” (Robertson). At Western University, many professors argue for the maintenance of civic values “in the face of intense pressure to capitulate to corporate logic” (Alison Conway, qtd. in Samu-Visser and Budabin McQuown 67). Within the university, when are these civic values at odds with corporate values?

LP: I’m not wholly compelled by the argument that civic values are a given, because it makes us sound like missionaries. And, I don’t think that kind of missionary position—to be puckish—is necessarily a winning argument or that it’s necessarily true. As for the corporate values, the big problem is that corporate values tend to be values of short-term expedience. Temporality as we know it has been telescoped to the next fiscal quarter or, politically, the next election. So, actually the thing I like about the liberal arts and that I think is valuable about the liberal arts is the “long-term.” Making kids read the Greeks,
the Romans—get acquainted with the Middle Ages, get acquainted with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment—gives them a sense of just how short-term our values are. That’s the actual value of the liberal arts—seeing how many times we’ve made civilizations and destroyed them is a good way to realize that what’s happening is contingent, is provisional, that this is not the only way to live and this is not the only way people have organized themselves.

The empathy argument and the citizenship argument, both of which are kind of moralizing, would also disclude a lot of our syllabi. If you’re going to follow Martha Nussbaum’s argument—“The humanities are important because they teach us to be good citizens”—well then why are you getting your kids to read the Marquis de Sade? I would have to change my syllabus a lot if that was the goal of the liberal arts. So, it’s more again a sense of the long term rather than the short term; the corporate agenda at the university has to do with fulfilling our short term needs in a way that is going to be ultimately self-defeating.

JBR/JR: I wanted to know about your own experience at Western, because the Western motto is to provide the best student experience in Canada. And, they want to be global . . .

LP: Best student experience in the world! Suck on that U of T!

JBR/JR: What do you think Western means by experience here?

LP: This is something that has everything to do with the growth of administration, with the—I would say—cancerous growth of administration at every university. I do think that emphasis on experience is something that comes from administration, and it usually means buildings and services. It never means instruction; it never means we’re going to pay people lots of money to teach you. It never means how little they’re willing to pay to teach people even though this is what they always talk about on the website. They don’t talk about the fancy dorms on the website; they talk about “how committed our teachers are, [and] how much they love teaching you.” So, experience is just a code word for aspects of university life that are not scholastic. This is the kind of thing that administrators think of when they think of experience—basically the experience of everything peripheral to learning.

JBR/JR: In your 1998 MA thesis in Critical Theory, “Spent: On Economic Metaphor in Post-Structuralist Philosophy,” you propose a demystification of “the economic” as “the first step towards revoking its dangerous deification” (7). In Canada, have the economic and business elements of universities taken on a sacred status, making them beyond legitimate critique and judgement?

LP: Economic language is essentially for us what the Catholic Church would have been for the Middle Ages. It’s the main type of interpretative mode; it’s the thing to which all things must appeal. I do think it demands demystifying because, on one hand, it does have this power and authority precisely because it doesn’t make much sense to people. In a lot of ways the

“Pop/Corn”
right market fundamentalists are much better postmodernists than any liberal arts person: all market values are absolutely relative; a lot of them are fundamentally simulacral. So, my basic argument in *More Money Than Brains* is that a lot of things that people say about the liberal arts are actually much more applicable to the financial class which, like the administrative class in the university, has grown precipitously and has gone from being managerial to being a parasite that’s eating its host.

**JBR/JR:** Tenured faculty appear as a figure we need to demystify, at least to the public. At the same time, adjunct faculty is on the rise; people don’t know about the percentages, but at the same time student satisfaction is not going down. So, what the hell is happening?

**LP:** One of the things that I’ve found repeatedly is that there is this assumption that everyone who works in a university makes 100 Grand. People read “sunshine lists,” they see professors on them, and they just assume that if you’re a professor, you are making good money. I find people are consistently shocked [about] the actual situation of adjuncts, it’s the best kept secret in education. Again, no university website ever sells anything to parents and students but high quality teaching. I’m sure if I looked at Western’s website right now, they would be like: “Our teachers are the best, they care so much, blah, blah, blah.” But, increasingly, because most tenured faculty are hired on the stats based on their research more so than their teaching, increasingly those functions of the university that the general public thinks of as being the primary functions of the university are falling to adjuncts, grad students: the underpaid.

I’d say here is that if you look at things like the dialogue on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), that there is, on the one hand, they want the university experience to be more boutique-esque, to compete with MOOCs, but on the other hand, the actual job of dealing with undergrads is not one that the university values as much as it should. When I started telling people how much money I made, they were shocked: A) They were shocked that I would tell them, because it’s Canada—you can talk about your colonoscopy, you can talk about your sex life, you can’t talk about how much money you make, which only benefits the wealthy, and only makes people blame themselves for structural problems and for wage erosion; B) They were shocked at how little money I made. I do think there is this culture of wanting to blame individuals for structural problems, and we at the university don’t seem to be doing a better job of dodging that than the rest of the culture. Even though a lot of people here have read Karl Marx, that doesn’t seem to change the deeper situation.

**JBR/JR:** As a follow-up question, your dissertation proposes the demystification of “the economic” as “the first step towards revoking its dangerous deification” (7). More recently in your book, *More Money than Brains*, and in interviews, you have proposed an initiative to “burn down all the business schools and salt the ashes so no more MBA-lings could spring...
up from the ruins” (124). Are the kernels of your books and works found in your MA and PhD work?

**LP:** The reason I wrote that MA thesis was I was really struck by the fact that after May 1968 did not work out as people like Deleuze—my hero—had hoped, that immediately you have Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Guattari, all writing these books with these sustained economic metaphors. So, why is it that that’s the language that they choose to talk about this “Why do revolutions fail?” problem—which is still a huge problem. I’m very lucky; my campus at King’s is actually pretty political. We have the lowest rate of student debt in Nova Scotia, because we do get a lot of affluent students from Toronto. But, we also have the highest turn-out for things like tuition protests, because even if students aren’t in debt, they see this as a real problem, they see this as an intergenerational inequality, which is a huge issue, which is what I’m writing about in my next book.

I’ve been interested in economics for a long time just because I think that again, this is kind of our primary way of assigning value to things. I’m definitely on “Team Nietzsche”; we’re compulsive value assignors, that we cannot but interpret things, that we cannot but make meaning all the time, wherever we go. And, it’s curious that this is the system that we’ve chosen to be the big system, the one that all the other systems have to account for and answer to, ultimately. So, I can do a good job of making arguments about the liberal arts from an economic perspective, that culture is a multi-billion dollar industry, that I’m pretty sure J.K. Rowling doesn’t regret her liberal arts degree. I can do that and I’m happy to do that because that’s one of the flanks that we have to defend ourselves on, but I also think that we should be asking why this is the system through which we interpret everything. When people talk about the ‘real world,’ what they generally mean by that is the economy, but so much of the economy is purely notional and purely emotional, that even Keynes wrote about the animal spirits, that things are valuable because we think they’re valuable, things are valuable because we feel they’re valuable. So, I always find it really strange when people say, “That won’t work in the real world,” when they mean an economy that is so fabulated in so many ways.

**JBR/JR:** From the marginal perspective of the liberal arts, should we take a kind of “guerilla” tactic or should we just ignore what the critics say?

**LP:** Ignoring is never good, especially when they have so much of the mainstream press in their clutches. You can make the argument that in fact a liberal arts degree is not a life sentence to “baristadom,” and what’s more is that this is a totally post hoc ergo propter hoc argument—problems with youth unemployment are structural problems with the labour market, structural problems of intergenerational inequality—to come along and be like, “Cus you like English that’s why you can’t get a good job.” First of all, that’s again reducing a structural problem to an individual choice. Second of all, it’s also just not
empirically true. If you look at the history here, people in the humanities generally have a couple of rough years when they first get out of school where they have to find a career, because they’re not as immediately legible to human resources departments as a commerce grad, or an engineering grad. But after that, their earnings catch up, and what’s even more significant is a recent study in the States: The American Academy of Arts and Sciences said that 84% of people were happy they’d done a humanities degree (3). So, I do think that you have to make the argument that kids are going to have to invent their jobs increasingly. If there’s no guaranteed prizes at the top of the greasy pole then kids are going to have to be a lot more inventive and flexible, and again this is one of the things that the liberal arts is good for.

That there is an economic value to studying the liberal arts, I think is an argument we have to make. But, also, there’s a way that it allows you to criticize the notion that economic value is the only value. This is one of the other things that you get from the “long-term” in the liberal arts: the notion that this economy that we have is just one way to put together people. Because the imagination deficit, the poverty of imagination, the fact that it’s hard to think of other ways of doing things—this is a serious problem. This is as big of a problem as fiscal deficit and political deficit. A couple of weeks ago I was teaching my homeboys Deleuze and Guattari and one of my students was like, “I’m not sure how this is political.” We were doing “The War Machine” essay and I was like, “Well, if we can’t think differently, if we can’t have different shapes of thought, and the only way we can think is hierarchically, then how are we supposed to live differently?” This is one of the reasons that I’m so madly in love with Deleuze, is because his whole career is devoted to this question of “How do we make different ways of life possible?”

JBR/JR: Your work focuses on a contemporary “campaign against intellectualism,” especially in the arts and humanities. On one side of the argument, Margaret Wente has repeatedly written articles such as “Fries with that BA? The declining value of a degree,” arguing that a BA in English is “not the wisest choice of major” and associated with widespread underemployment (1). As a counter-point, The Atlantic recently published, “The Best Argument for Studying English? The Employment Numbers.” The article uses employment survey data to demonstrate the pragmatic value of a liberal arts degree. What are the best ways/means for arguing for the legitimacy of the liberal arts within the university and a broader public intellectualism?

LP: Well, the first thing you have to do is establish that Margret Wente is an obsolete privileged boomer. I remember when I first started at the Globe, because I used to write a little bit for them, one of the things that a lot of Globe columnists would do before everybody had the Internet was just rewrite something that had been in the New York Times last week. Now that we have the Internet we don’t need her to do that anymore. She is literally obsolete. She is a
Walkman. She is an eight-track cassette tape. She’s everything I hate about that generation in one smug package. She’s a typical “pull the ladder up behind her.” This is a woman who has an MA from U of T in English. She’s had a very fine career as the editor of The Report on Business. I’m not sure how her MA in English qualified her to do that, according to her own arguments. And, again, she’s one of those people—this is what bad boomers do—who cannot abide the notion that other people are young. She cannot abide the idea that anyone else protests things: “O, we did that in the ’60s, we ended racism, sexism, and homophobia by fucking in the mud at Woodstock so whatever you’re doing now is just derivative.” And, I do think that she’s a great example of pseudo-contrarianism. I would put [Kevin] O’Leary in the same camp, where you have the tone of a contrarian, like, “I am speaking truth to power,” except that you’re saying everything that power wants to hear.

JBR/JR: You have made suggestions for post-secondary education as Queen of the Colleges. If you were instead Queen of Pop Culture, how would you alter/amend the popular vision of universities or pop culture itself?

LP: I actually think that this is something we do a fair amount at the university I work at. Like, right now, I am teaching a course on vampires. I don’t actually have a lot of Twilight kids, mercifully—although we did talk a bit about Twilight last night—it’s great to start where the kids are. So, we have other courses on things like Pirates, for example. And these courses are wonderful traps. You give this course a cool title, and then I actually make them think and read things that are really hard. And, again, it’s very easy to assume that kids coming in know nothing, but you’re absolutely wrong to think that. They are not tabula rasas at all.

What I want to say here is that a lot of pop culture is actually quite sophisticated. On the door of my office, I have a quote from Michel de Montaigne, a quote from Nietzsche, a quote from Deleuze, and a quote from Kanye West. The quote from Kanye is, “the greatest tragedy of my life is that I will never get to see myself perform live.” I love it. It makes me laugh every time I look at it. I actually just had a discussion with the school paper about his new album Yeezus. Kanye is really smart, and that we see a lot of the dismissal of anyone under 40, the infantalizing of black people, the failure to understand hip-hop culture—which is really the only new culture produced in the last twenty years, unless you want to count the Internet—but that’s more of a recycling of what has ever been, as Marx says of capitalism. So, I like pop culture as it is, and I think that pop culture is complex and sophisticated in ways that other things we’re giving to young people aren’t. Again, it has failed kids far less than the government, far less than most schools. If you are a kid growing up in America right now, there is more of a chance that you’re going to develop an acquaintance with high art through Kanye or Jay Z, than there is through your failed, crappy, underfunded schools. Blaming pop culture for social problems is just wrong. There are lots
of things that are mercenary in pop culture, lots of things that are sexist, racist, homophobic, but again, pop culture is a lot more honest in some ways than mainstream media, than what currently passes for education.

JBR/JR: So, are we talking here about cultural studies, or the integration of pop culture within English, or literature, or education?

LP: The big thing in education, or this is the way that I see it, or how I try to do it, is getting students from where they are to where you want them to go. And, so, it’s always good to start from where they live, to say this is what you think about vampires, but there is an actual history of this metaphor, and this is how it intersects with sexuality, this is how it intersects with the Catholic Church, and there is a lot of overlap between vampires and Jesus that is extremely anxiety-making in the 17th century for certain Catholic bishops. We have to give the kids some credit for what they already know. If you treat the kids like they don’t know anything, that’s patronizing, and patronizing is never a good way to start educating anyone—you cannot teach anything if you’re going to condescend to them. I taught in Buffalo, when I was doing my PhD there, and I had a student from Baltimore who was a free-style rapper, and we were doing Dante, even though my boss told me not to because it’s too hard. That’s me flipping the bird for the recording. I had a huge fight with her. The minute you decide that something is too hard, you’re not teaching anymore—that you’ve just given the fuck up. And I got in trouble, but I didn’t care. And so we were doing Terza Rima, and this kid could turn anything into Terza Rima; it was amazing. After I showed them what Terza Rima looked like, everyone in the class had to write down a non-explicit sin that they had committed recently, and he was just converting them into Terza Rima on the top of his head.

I had this argument going on with one of my favourite colleagues, a very friendly and affectionate argument, that it’s actually easier to teach poetry now than it was twenty years ago because of rap music. Students are habituated to the idea of rhythmic language; they’re habituated to the idea of a rhyming language. The other thing I needle him about is that he’s one of these “all men are pantywaists now” people: rap music is the only cultural expression where verbal dexterity is wedded to an aggressive, abrasive masculinity, like, “Why do you not love Kanye?” The new Pusha-T album is incredible! So I’m slowly winning him over. I really love hip-hop and that we are living in its golden age, and a golden age of television. All these declinist narratives about pop culture are from old people who cannot get over The Beatles, old people who are entirely too suffused with nostalgia to see that there’s a lot of good stuff out there. It’s very easy to assume that things were better when you were young. There are a lot of golden ages happening right now that give me great hope. So, yeah, I love pop culture. It’s a good way to help explain old stuff, but it’s also a good place to start with your students because they’re already soaking in it. It’s not like
they come to us with no culture; they come to us with a host of different assumptions that we have to engage.

**JBR/JR:** Can you tell us more about the Halifax Humanities 101?

**LP:** It’s such a great idea. One of the things we have to be vigilant about is appearing as an ivory tower and that you can only study the liberal arts through the great books if you are bourgeois and have leisure. Halifax Humanities is actually a version of something called the Clemente Program that is all over North America. There are eight in Canada: there is one in Vancouver, there is one in Calgary, some in Ontario, and they are trying to start one in New Brunswick. We have been doing ours for eight years. I’ve coordinated Section 4, which is roughly the eighteenth to nineteenth century, where we read things like Kant, and I have also done Section 5, where we read things like Elliot, Nietzsche, De Beauvoir, Arendt, and it’s great. We are actually having next weekend a fundraiser, which we have done before, where we have 24 teams read all 24 books of *The Odyssey*, because we are not fun-run people, we are reading-people. Yeah, people really get into it, and one of the things I love about it is that we have a lot of our former students, we have current students, we have “old money” who are good enough to donate to us, so it’s a great way to break down those class barriers. It’s amazing, first of all, how interesting the readings of stuff are—you get a very different interpretation of “The Waste Land” from an eighteen-year-old who is fresh out of high school.

One of the things that is really great about Halifax Humanities is a lot of programs for poor people are about trying to make them economically viable: they are job-training programs. We are emphatically not that. Many of the people we deal with are people who are physically ill, or mentally ill, or older, or single-parents and will never be proper capitalist units. But, it’s really amazing to see how they bond between each other, because another problem with being poor is isolation, that you feel that you’re the only one in this situation and that it’s your fault, that it has nothing to do with the structure that you live in, that it has nothing to do with being physically ill, or mentally ill, or, again, a single-mother. “It’s your fault,” is what the economy wants to tell you ever repeatedly, to individuate this or to protect this—as Margaret Thatcher once said, there is no such thing as society. One of the great things about it is that I have never had a professor go in there and come out disappointed. Most of the professors I’ve asked to do this are like “Oh my God, they are really into it.” They can just talk about it without the pressure to get a good grade, or to get a recommendation for grad school—there is no kind of end. And it’s exactly at the point at which we have to start a second year seminar for them, because they didn’t want to leave. And, then, we had this seminar where they decide the topic every
year. This year they’re doing religion—I haven’t been in there yet because it’s not where I shine. I guess I’ll teach Nietzsche—maybe later!

Halifax Humanities, I love it, because it’s a good example, first of all, that the humanities need not be elite. Again, people that society routinely dismisses are actually quite brilliant, if you give them a chance to read and to speak. The conversations they have with each other and the fact that they have this community now, I am deliriously happy about it, and I’m really looking forward to reading The Odyssey with these people again next weekend.

**JBR/JR:** One last question, the final one: if a popular culture of meritocracy or mediocrity flourishes, are we more likely to become a society of bullshit (bluff, fakery, and phoniness) or corniness (unsophisticated, ridiculously old-fashioned, and sentimental)? Where does ‘truth’—from the title of your book—fit into this dynamic?

**LP:** You mention meritocracy, and I want to take advantage to tell you the coolest thing I learned when I was researching for my last book, and that’s the reason why I write books: to learn stuff, as well as to try not to explode with rage—to try to convert as much of my *ressentiment* into jokes as possible. It’s all about how to manage the *ressentiment*. One of the best things about meritocracy is that the guy who invented the word didn’t intend it in the way that everybody uses it—that the cream rises to the top, the best get the best. The guy who invented the term meritocracy was a British sociologist named Michael Young who wrote a dystopian novel called *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which was about the fact that a certain phylum of people who were really good at taking tests, and really good at getting into elite schools, and really good at becoming stockbrokers, were running the world. He actually had this great article in *The Guardian*, just before he died, where he says that at least in the good old days when people got by on nepotism, they had a certain measure of humility: they knew that part of why they had a job was chance or that they knew somebody. So, I feel so sorry for Michael Young, because people constantly use meritocracy as, you know, “this is what justice would look like,” and that is not how he meant it at all. He meant it as a pejorative. And, he was writing in 2008 in *The Guardian* about the financial crisis; after the financial crisis you have this whole narrative, again of “we almost blew up the world, but we’re the only people who know how to fix it . . . you cannot expect people who study English or philosophy to understand credit default swaps.” So, he was talking specifically about this kind of competence that we constantly reward. Imagine, making up a pejorative term and then everyone thinks that that is the way things should be.

What I want to say about mediocrity is that there is a lot of pop culture, which is genuinely excellent. I see a lot more well-compensated mediocrity amongst the managerial class. One of the arguments I make in *More Money than Brains* is that I never get mad about Miley Cyrus or athletes making a squillion dollars, because: A) they are genetic freaks; B) they have no private lives whatsoever. They are being cannibalized by *TMZ* and things like that on a daily
basis—and I say that as someone who loves *TMZ*. I think gossip is intensely pro-social and ethical. They are the people who are earning their money in a lot of ways, if for no other reason than giving us all objects to talk about in our offices. There is a certain sort of brutal democracy in pop culture: if you make a bad record, if you don’t please your audience, you’re fired. On the other hand, you can drive a corporation into the ground, and still get a multimillion dollar golden parachute at the end of it, and you get that from a board of twelve motherfuckers exactly like you. This managerial class reproduces like spores and has infiltrated our world and is now cannibalizing us.

**JBR/JR:** That outstanding pop culture—is its enemy bullshit or corniness (unsophisticated, old-fashioned, sentimental)?

**LP:** I don’t mind unsophisticated. Unsophisticated can be very good. Again, I love Kanye, I love my Basquiat, and a lot of rap that people may see as unsophisticated—which is wrong. So, unsophisticated doesn’t bother me as a “prole” (proletarian), because sometimes sophistication can be a way of concealing vacuity, like a lot of art-house movies that I never want to see again as long as I live. There are certain types of literary fiction that are “middle-age-person-has-problems” and “first-world-problem” at that; unsophisticated is not necessarily a bad thing. Sophistication can be almost like a guarantee that you’re getting your “cultural kale,” like “we’re going to the symphony now because that’s what sophisticated people do.” It’s a terrible reason to go to a symphony. I don’t mind unsophisticated. I do not like sentiment. I am not a big fan of sentiment. This is probably because I am intensely sappy. This is definitely a self-loathing position on my part. But I do think that sentiment is manipulative, and that sentiment always goes hand-in-hand with that kind of calculation. There is that great passage in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, that you cannot give kids presents anymore because they are wondering what your angle is, that gifts are now ways to sell toothbrushes and soap. I do have intense suspicions about any movie that wins an Oscar, for example, that sentiment is a way for us to pretend that we are doing something about all the damage wrought by calculation. But we are not. We are just feeling in someone’s general direction, again in this condescending and patronizing kind of way. So, yeah, if we are talking corny-sentimental then thumbs down, but if we are talking corny-crude or apparently-unsophisticated then thumbs up, because this is where a lot of interesting things actually come from.

University of Western Ontario

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1 In *More Money Than Brains*, Penny provides her platform as the hypothetically coronated “Queen of the Colleges” (124).
Works Cited


