

Poli & humanities -ep 1

[00:00:00.18] TOM MERRILL: Hello. This is Politics and Humanities, a podcast out of American University. We're going to be talking about books, ideas, and liberal education. My name is Tom Merrill. I'm a faculty member in the Department of Government at American University. And I'm here with my friend and colleague, Sarah Marsh. Sarah, why don't you say hi?

[00:00:18.29] SARAH MARSH: Hello, everyone. Greetings from American University. I'm Sarah Marsh. I teach in the Department of Literature and the Department of Critical Race and Gender Studies.

[00:00:29.58] TOM MERRILL: And Sarah, we should say something about why we're doing this podcast.

[00:00:34.62] SARAH MARSH: So as the pandemic wore on, Tom and I became more and more convinced that there ought to be a place where we could talk to our friends at AU, our students, and also folks elsewhere about the importance of books, ideas, and liberal education in this moment, especially when these things are in increasingly dire crisis.

[00:01:02.35] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I mean, my own feeling is that we're all stuck in our living rooms or our bedrooms on interminable Zoom calls, and we just need something for people to be able to talk to each other and have some kind of anchor for people to focus on as they're thinking about what does it mean to be a part of a community that cares about books and ideas and things like that. So that's the reason why we're doing this. Sarah, before I get started, I have to ask, have you done a podcast before?

[00:01:31.50] SARAH MARSH: This is my very first one.

[00:01:33.33] TOM MERRILL: So if we mess up, we're going to take it in stride, correct?

[00:01:38.64] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:01:38.79] TOM MERRILL: This is also my first.

[00:01:39.72] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:01:39.93] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] have to say that as a disclaimer. Sarah, we're both people who care about books, and to the extent that we can't have a conversation without having a text in front of us. I think that's a fair statement. And today, we're actually going to talk about three different texts, but we're going to start with two texts that were published in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Do you want to introduce those?

[00:02:04.17] SARAH MARSH: Absolutely. So the first one is an article that was published by Jonathan Kramnick. It's called The Humanities After COVID-19. And the second one is from a little bit longer ago. It's called Academe's Extinction Event by Andrew Kay. And Tom selected

these readings for us to start with because I think, Tom, you felt that they summarized some of the difficulties that the university, in general, and liberal arts, in particular, are facing right now. So do you want to say a little bit more about why you picked them?

[00:02:44.37] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I mean, I just wanted to start with kind of an idea of where we are and what our context is. I mean, I think in later episodes, we're going to be talking about a lot of books that are not of our exact time, but I just wanted to start by thinking about, like, what is it that we're doing, and why is it that we're doing it. And I picked these-- I think they're both interesting pieces. We're actually going to put the links up on the episode page for this episode on our website.

[00:03:15.48] But they, I think, just help us start thinking about what exactly is the problem that we're going through. I mean, everybody knows that we're in the middle of a pandemic, but I think the humanities, in particular, are going through a crisis that's deeper and broader than the pandemic. The pandemic may be accelerating certain tendencies, but without understanding what that broader crisis is, we can't really think about what the future should look like or what we should be doing in this moment.

[00:03:43.22] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And I think for our students who are tuning in, we might want to just define some terms really quickly for them. So what do we mean when we say liberal arts, and what do we say when-- or what do we mean when we say the humanities? Do you want to take a swing at the liberal arts, and then I'll do the humanities?

[00:04:02.00] TOM MERRILL: Sure. I'm not sure-- I hadn't thought of a definition in advance. I guess, off the cuff, I would say liberal education is about reading texts that are going to force you to think about your own deepest beliefs, and to really become clear on and question beliefs that you hadn't thought about before, and that the way that we do that, or at least the way that I think about what I do in class, is I try to pick texts that are going to create a certain amount of cognitive dissonance and force people to think about issues that we often don't bring up or we don't talk explicitly about as questions. And the texts are also important for other reasons, that they tell us about important parts of our history or traditions within which we live, but the core is really that process of self-examination and, ultimately, self-ownership, I guess I would say.

[00:04:56.83] SARAH MARSH: I think that's right. I think that the humanities, in much the same way, are about entering into conversations with other people from other times who have faced the same questions that we all grapple with. You know, why am I here? Why is there suffering? What should we do about it? These are questions that people have grappled with in writing for hundreds of years.

[00:05:25.22] And one of the important things about the humanities-- and I say this as a literature scholar, in particular-- is entering into dialogue with people across generations. And as you say, Tom, the different historical contexts that people write out of give us a lot of important information about history and the kinds of progress, or not, that we've made, but they also tell us something about universal human striving, as you say, to own oneself, to be in charge of one's own life.

[00:06:07.31] TOM MERRILL: Right. And I should say that, I mean, you come from literature, I'm coming from political theory. Political theory is a part of political science, and so I'm in a department of government, which is often in the social sciences, but political theory is a part of political science that's closest to the humanities, although I think we center the political dimension more so than you do. And we could talk-- well, I'm sure we will talk about that over the course of this episode and other episodes.

[00:06:34.94] SARAH MARSH: Absolutely.

[00:06:36.95] TOM MERRILL: So how do we feel after reading these articles?

[00:06:42.19] SARAH MARSH: Right, so getting back to the articles by Jonathan Kramnick and Andrew Kay, the general tone of these articles and a lot of things that are published in The Chronicle of Higher Education is one of impending doom. And--

[00:06:59.50] TOM MERRILL: It's kind of a genre, isn't it?

[00:07:00.97] SARAH MARSH: It really is.

[00:07:03.10] TOM MERRILL: Like, the world is ending.

[00:07:06.49] SARAH MARSH: And you know, Kramnick's thesis is that the crisis that had begun in the humanities maybe about a decade ago has now become, with the advent of COVID-19, a complete catastrophe. And he situates the source of this in that there is no academic hiring of any meaningful kind going on. And those of us who do watch the MLA job list and who pay attention to the academic job market I think will see that that is increasingly the case this year.

[00:07:43.51] I think Kramnick posits that there may not be any jobs at all this year, next year, or the year after that. And he talks about the fundamental problem this creates for higher education, which is that there's going to be a generational lag in the transmission of knowledge. The new energy that young scholars would bring to their fields is going to be lacking or not really there at all.

[00:08:21.49] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I mean, so I was trying to think about what's the genre of this article as opposed to the Kay article. This feels to me like it's a memo that you write to your dean, and then you're like, hey, wait a minute, maybe I could get this published in The Chronicle of Higher Education. But I mean, there is something important in difference between the two articles, that Kay-- or Kramnick is a-- I believe he's a full professor at Yale, isn't that right?

[00:08:43.03] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:08:44.11] TOM MERRILL: And it feels very serious, and very much like what are we departments going to do in order to overcome this, the crisis, which, by the way, is not just-- number one, it's not just within English departments or literature departments. I mean, I think that political theory jobs-- I think I saw somebody on Twitter said that there are only two jobs posted for the entire country for the year. So I think this is a more widespread thing.

[00:09:13.01] But it's also not just because of COVID-19, right? I mean, this is because of trends that have been going on for some time. And that COVID seems to have really brought a focus to or brought things to a head, but that the underlying trends are not new.

[00:09:30.08] SARAH MARSH: That's right. I mean, for a very long time, I would say probably for the last 10 years, in my field, there have really only been between five and 10 jobs advertised nationally. And so that is a good deal smaller than the number of PhDs that are being produced every single year. And so the crisis of COVID-19 is, I think, a long time in the making, and the pipeline is incredibly clogged.

[00:10:01.63] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, no, I think that's very much my sense. I mean, in political theory, for the past 10 years or so, for a while, foundations were funding postdocs, but the problem was that postdocs just meant there were more people on the market for longer, and without a corresponding increase in the number of actual jobs that were out there. And so I guess part of the message here is it's not clear that a PhD in any one of these fields is a very sure investment for a person's life chances.

[00:10:32.74] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And I think when you consider that the PhD often takes folks up to a decade to complete, maybe longer--

[00:10:41.35] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:10:41.68] SARAH MARSH: --and that that decade is [INAUDIBLE]

[00:10:45.86] TOM MERRILL: It's prime time in your country, in your life, right?

[00:10:47.96] SARAH MARSH: --absolutely prime real estate of one's own life. And so I think that there are questions that are very real questions about to what degree should someone commit this very valuable time to earning a degree that may or may not position one to have meaningful or gainful employment on the flip side.

[00:11:10.29] TOM MERRILL: So I have some somewhat contrarian views, or at least I want to make the opposite case.

[00:11:16.13] SARAH MARSH: Sure.

[00:11:17.12] TOM MERRILL: I mean, for one thing, I mean, the hallmark of the COVID time is that we all think the world's ending, and so we sort of act as though everything-- it's like that passage from the Communist Manifesto, all that's solid melts in air. But I just really wonder whether, in six months, the COVID thing will seem more manageable than it does right now, and that we'll be back to the problems that we had, say, last January, which were serious and long-standing. But I'm not so sure that COVID represents sort of the end of academia as we know it, or at least not in any way more than the place that we were before.

[00:12:00.83] SARAH MARSH: I think you're right, Tom, to point out that we should not let the pandemic distract us from the deeper systemic issues that were in play long before this virus

emerged. And I think those ought to occupy our efforts to really try to expand hiring again, and to support new graduate students not just with postdoctoral fellowships that maybe last for two or three years, but for longer-term, more meaningful employment. And that's a much bigger question.

[00:12:36.74] TOM MERRILL: And can I just say, I mean, from a political economy point of view, I mean, it's not quite true that there are no longer jobs for people doing liberal education like things, right? I mean, we don't want to talk about our own university too much, but one fact about American University is that the percentage of faculty who are in full-time but non-tenure track has grown incredibly over the past 15 years. And so there are jobs there, but they're not tenure track jobs, and they're not always attached to departments.

[00:13:12.20] And so which, to me-- and there's a lot of things that could be said about that situation, but to me, that says that there really is a market demand. I mean, there still are 18-year-olds who are coming to college who need to be shown something about the world and taught how to think for themselves. And so that market demand hasn't gone away, but the departments haven't done a very good job of somehow speaking to it or filling that need.

[00:13:39.74] SARAH MARSH: I think you're right. I mean, my own experience reflects the very forces that you're talking about. I came to AU as a member of the writing program, even though I was not trained as a compositionist, I was trained as a literary critic. And I worked for a long time in the writing program, and then I began to branch out and teach other things. And so I think that this demand is absolutely there.

[00:14:09.23] And the students I meet in first-year classes at American University are hungry for the kinds of work that we do. And in that sense, we ought to be celebrating, because I don't know that the kinds of intellectual work that we're doing with undergraduate students are really available in any other place. I think that we have to do a better job of making the case for that kind of intellectual work, which is, again--

[00:14:41.12] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:14:41.40] SARAH MARSH: --the point of this podcast is talking about what that work is.

[00:14:45.99] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, I very much agree. And I'd also just say, on the side of feeling optimistic, at least at AU, about the future, I mean, there are many colleges and universities that are going to have real problems, and some of them will go under. And I have friends who are at different places who have already lost their jobs, and that's a real human suffering. But at AU, I mean, when you think about who comes to AU, people who are interested in politics, because you're in Washington, DC, and the demand to be in person, because you can go off and get internships, I mean, sometimes it seems like that's the only way that we ever sell the place. And I hate to say it, but that's like an oil well that's not going to dry up anytime soon.

[00:15:24.72] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:15:25.02] TOM MERRILL: I mean, we can't, obviously, now that we're all virtual for the fall, it's a slightly different situation. But that won't be forever. So I still think that that-- I mean, sometimes I think we can screw up in 10 million different ways because the demand is so strong, at least for us, given where we are.

[00:15:44.37] SARAH MARSH: I agree. And I think that when students come to Washington, DC, they have a particular kind of idea about what they will do, right?

[00:15:51.96] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:15:52.68] SARAH MARSH: They'll go down to the Hill and have an internship, or they'll--

[00:15:55.32] TOM MERRILL: Misguided though it may be.

[00:15:57.60] SARAH MARSH: --and they'll become involved with the think tank, or-- there are lots of different ways that students imagine their involvement in the city. And what I find so wonderful is that, once we have students with us on campus, it's also possible to take them down to see the monuments on the Mall, go to the Smithsonian Institute, go to the Library of Congress, and really help them to tap into that history of ideas that we were talking about at the beginning of the podcast, where they enter into conversation with interlocutors from all across history. And there's no place like Washington, DC, for doing that kind of work, I think.

[00:16:44.31] TOM MERRILL: Right. Right. We should turn to the Kay article, which is lively and entertaining. And I recommend it to all of our listeners.

[00:16:54.30] SARAH MARSH: So this is Adam-- I'm sorry, Andrew Kay's article called Academe's Extinction Event. And the subtitle is Failure, Whiskey and Professional Collapse at the MLA.

[00:17:05.18] TOM MERRILL: Is the whiskey the cause of the professional collapse?

[00:17:08.51] SARAH MARSH: It may have a role to play.

[00:17:11.55] TOM MERRILL: Or is it the effect of the?

[00:17:14.07] SARAH MARSH: So again, for our students tuning in, the MLA is an acronym for the Modern Language Association. And every year, the MLA has a convention where folks get together and give papers about literature. And they also use this convention as sort of a hiring symposium for all of the new PhDs who are looking for jobs. And so Andrew Kay decides that he's going to go to MLA one year and just write about it from a sort of journalistic standpoint, not as a participant.

[00:17:53.55] TOM MERRILL: But you have to say that he does have a PhD in English from--

[00:17:57.83] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:17:57.93] TOM MERRILL: --University of Wisconsin at Madison. Quite successful for somebody with a PhD, right? He's got articles published. Failed to get a job. And so this is in the genre of academics who are dropping out of the academy. And I think that there are many texts in this because there are many such people.

[00:18:18.51] SARAH MARSH: Right. I mean, this is a growing genre. And I have to say, the year after I earned my PhD, I worked in the government for about nine months before getting my job at American University. So this is a very, I think, common pathway, and increasingly common as we navigate the stalled pipeline. But Kay writes in the opening of the article, he says, "how can I conjure MLA 2019 for you?"

[00:18:51.93] And then he says, "Have you ever seen that viral picture from 2017 of a party of Oregon golfers calmly putting while, in the near distance, a wildfire consumes the landscape? Trees blackened, smoke, pinkish gray, shrouds everything in [INAUDIBLE]. Nature itself seems to creak, groan, and, at last, give way. But the golfers go blithely on. The conversion of this edenic space into Dantean incandescence won't interfere with the gentile game they know and love, or, if it will, they are determined to get in one last round before the region is razed. 'Eye on the ball, Chet,' one can hear them saying, 'not on the cataclysm.'"

[00:19:38.85] TOM MERRILL: Eye on the ball, Sarah. Eye on the ball.

[00:19:42.87] SARAH MARSH: And so this is the language that Kay is using to try to get us to think about what having a convention, usually at a fancy hotel, in the midst of disciplinary catastrophe and broader institutional collapse, like how can--

[00:20:00.60] TOM MERRILL: And this is all before the pandemic.

[00:20:02.89] SARAH MARSH: Exactly. I mean, this is a whole year ago. Right.

[00:20:07.09] TOM MERRILL: And one of the funny lines in this was that, at the end of the article, he calls up some of his former graduate school classmates, none of whom got jobs. And he says, "using a video conferencing app called Zoom." Like, you didn't have to put that in there if this had been written in 2020.

[00:20:25.74] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, that's right, it was before all of our lives had migrated online. So I think that Kay's very funny and self-effacing mode here covers up what is I think real anguish over the state of things, not least of all because what we do is so important. And I think-- and Tom, you might want to say more about this from the context of political theory, but I think, in literature, there's this real sense of not knowing what is going to happen at the same time as being deeply connected that this work absolutely must not die.

[00:21:13.13] TOM MERRILL: So I feel that very much, as well. I mean, I guess the thing that I was struck by, I wonder if one has to ask, and without wanting to be rude, one has to ask to what extent is this a real diagnosis of a crisis versus-- is this a professional crisis or personal crisis? And I think there is a tendency to exaggerate the, like, everything's going to hell. And look, it's a very traumatic thing. And I think part of the problem of graduate school is that you are, on the

one hand, having kind of an existential crisis over figuring out what your own identity is in a very kind of deep way.

[00:21:56.98] And on the other hand, you're trying to get into this guild which, like all guilds, wants to have a high bar to keeping people in. And there are many, many intelligent people who I think deserve places in the university who fell off of that train, right, through-- I wouldn't say exactly no fault of their own, but just because the process is weird and complicated and there are landmines that you're not expecting. And there's always some part of you that's like, well, I would rather go and have a regular job that is controllable. Did you ever hear this joke when you were in graduate school, why did you start smoking? I started smoking because I wanted to start something I could finish.

[00:22:45.46] SARAH MARSH: I haven't heard that one. Our joke was just that it was like an exercise in sitting in front of a mirror for 10 years.

[00:22:55.12] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Well, yes, that's very much in the same spirit. The thing that I love about this article is that it's a little bit like Hunter S. Thompson goes to an academic convention. Right? Because he's drinking, he's going up, he's accosting random people who turn out to be former presidents of the MLA, he's going to panels and he's making fun of panelists. You know? Which, I mean, so I've never been to the MLA, I know nothing about it, but I do have my own conference, or political science has its own conference, the American Political Science Association Conference, that meets every fall.

[00:23:30.25] And the experience is very much the same, right? It's kind of like a comic novel of there are the big fish, and then there are all these people who are on the make, right? Who are trying to impress people. So you're really excited when some famous person shows up at your panel. And of course, they promptly go to sleep, and then all of your points get avoided. But really, you could easily-- and there have been many academic novels, right? And David Lodge comes to mind. So I just enjoyed it. And the guy has real insight, right? I mean, he really understood something and painted a picture.

[00:24:08.98] SARAH MARSH: And he's an excellent literary stylist. I mean, this is a person who has a very deep grasp on how to tell a story, how to set up a scene. And he's doing it as a journalist here, but I think there's so much of the article that bespeaks real talent in literature and in literary studies. So the thing that really struck me about the article are the way that the big personalities kind of come in and out. And they--

[00:24:46.37] TOM MERRILL: This is your world, so you have some idea who [INAUDIBLE].

[00:24:48.86] SARAH MARSH: I do, right. And so these are all names-- when he's talking about the names of the people he meets at MLA, and then sort of like tosses back a tumbler of whisky and goes over and introduces himself, I can totally relate because, as a person who never actually went over to introduce herself, this is the other side of it. And I do know something of the-- what is it? It's the terror of being found out [INAUDIBLE]

[00:25:16.94] TOM MERRILL: It's imposter syndrome.

[00:25:17.87] SARAH MARSH: Exactly. And everyone talks about it. And I think a lot of people, even people who have academic jobs, the lucky folks who made the transition like me, I've got it, too. And it's funny in the ways that it persists. And it really directs the way we interact with one another. I think it's like the worry of not having read the thing that comes up.

[00:25:42.03] TOM MERRILL: Yes. I mean, academics are a deeply insecure group.

[00:25:46.61] SARAH MARSH: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:25:49.13] TOM MERRILL: I'm not sure why that is, but it's just-- I mean, because from some point of view, I mean, given all the horrible things that are going on, and the job insecurity and so on, but it is like the best way of life, right? I mean, it's a privilege to be in the classroom with students. It's a privilege to be able to read whatever crazy book you feel like reading, to write what you want to write, to really study something and fall in love with it. I mean, I just-- it's-- why aren't we happier?

[00:26:18.86] SARAH MARSH: I do, I always tell my students that I have the best job in the world. And then I am persistently caught up in questioning whether or not I'm qualified to have it.

[00:26:30.71] TOM MERRILL: Yes.

[00:26:31.73] SARAH MARSH: But I think that comes with the territory, right? I mean, we're trained to question and to doubt and to do that self-examination. And so to the degree we're turning our methodologies in on ourselves, I mean, a certain amount of that has to be par for the course.

[00:26:50.15] TOM MERRILL: Yes, and even healthy.

[00:26:51.68] SARAH MARSH: I think so. Eye on the ball, Tom.

[00:26:54.05] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, eye on the ball. That's right. That the volcano is [INAUDIBLE].

[00:27:01.01] SARAH MARSH: I want to get back to your insight that there really is still a demand for what it is that we do. We were talking about how we do it in the context of our campus at American University. Do you have any thoughts, Tom, about sort of a wider national message about the importance of higher education, or the ways we might rewrite the narrative on the flip side of the pandemic?

[00:27:28.52] TOM MERRILL: Oh, well, I mean, I do. I'm not sure if you really want to hear them. I mean, look, I mean, I guess I think that the politics part is really important. I mean, that's why I wanted to have the politics in the title of the podcast. So I don't know why the humanities are in decline in a long-term way, but I am pretty sure that universities have a very hard time actually talking about politics, which means talking to people that you disagree with.

[00:27:54.83] And I mean, look, it's like a stunning fact that 95% of academics are folks who present themselves on the left. And I think the university has just, as a whole, has had a really hard time talking to the folks on the conservative side. Now, that's in part because the folks on the conservative side are sometimes crazy, right? That's certainly true. But I see it in the university sometimes when you talk to people, and you ask about their class and say, well, what about conservative students in your class, and they look at you like, well, you stepped in the dog poop, you know? And there's this kind of just like, ew, like, do we really have to talk about this? Like, this makes me feel uncomfortable.

[00:28:41.27] But I mean, I would guess probably 30% or 40% of the students at even American University identify, self-identify as conservatives. And if we're unwilling or we telegraph that, like, we think that you're really icky, then it's not surprising that they sort of react negatively. So I think that's part of the problem. That's not to say that we should agree with them. I mean, you know, you'd have to go issue by issue. But I just think that's the long-term-- like, somehow we've gotten away from where kind of like the cutting edge of the conversation in the country is, partly because, as a country, we're so bad about actually talking about things.

[00:29:25.35] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:29:26.81] TOM MERRILL: And so we've kind of sequestered ourselves talking to the people that we want to talk to, people that we think are like us.

[00:29:32.87] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:29:33.68] TOM MERRILL: And we can't stay in that place. So that's my version.

[00:29:39.49] SARAH MARSH: I always engage my students in a discussion about what our classroom is for. And it's tricky for students, especially first-year students, I think, who are coming out of high school. And for the longest time, the project of learning has been to figure out what the teacher wants you to do. And I think that's the first thing that university students have to unlearn whenever they arrive in college. And I always tell my students, the trick here is not to think what I think because I'm already doing that.

[00:30:24.26] You got to think what you think. And my job is to be a conduit for you to have your ideas. And by having your ideas, become who you are. And that is a very, very hard thing for first-year students to learn how to do because they've been so deeply socialized, many of them-- not universally-- but many of them have been deeply socialized to try to figure out what the authority figure in the room wants them to do. And I have to busily show them that I'm not really the authority figure in the way that they think. So that, I think, is part of it.

[00:31:05.73] There's also a really interesting narrative out there, I think, among conservative commentators, some of them-- not universally-- that the university is a site for liberal indoctrination. And I think that that doesn't come from nowhere. I also think that it's a problematic claim when I have a really difficult time persuading my students to, oh, I don't know, like, staple the pages of their papers together.

[00:31:37.76] Whereas on bigger ideological questions, I don't see the classroom as a place for that kind of work. But I do wonder if students expect it, especially now, when national activism is really at a high pitch in response to the killing of George Floyd, the pandemic, the upcoming presidential election. I mean, do you think students really expect that kind of engagement in the classroom?

[00:32:14.52] TOM MERRILL: I do. And that's not an illegitimate expectation, that students understandably want to know-- want us to be talking about the things that they care about. And I think that's just completely normal. That's a very human thing. I wanted to say something about the conservative critique that universities are indoctrinating people.

[00:32:35.86] Now there's a wide variety, so one ought to be skeptical about generalizations. But one response to that is, well, what is it that you want in response? Is it what you want is simply indoctrination the other way? And that often feels like what they're really asking for. So we're going to create a conservative university of our own, where we're going to have the true teaching. And I think that that's also opposed to the spirit of liberal education.

[00:33:07.18] The second response is, actually, the conservative students get a better education, oftentimes-- not in every case. I mean, there's sometimes when kids feel put down and feel very unhappy. But it's a way of showing your respect for someone to disagree with reasons. And for conservative students to have to make their case to somebody who is skeptical is a gift.

[00:33:33.31] SARAH MARSH: Yes, we talk a lot in class about extending to one another the dignity of critique, that that's the highest form of appreciation or recognition is to genuinely engage a person on questions, on disagreements, and to understand the classroom as the place for that kind of work. It's not for delivery of content. It's certainly not for yes-and-no debates about individual issues. It's about--

[00:34:16.68] TOM MERRILL: Right. The last thing you want us to-- is to like, and now, the conservative point of view, and now-- like, oh, please, shoot me now. [LAUGHTER]

[00:34:24.24] SARAH MARSH: Well, and this is why we talk about this a lot. I mean, this is why historical texts are so incredibly important to what we do because they denaturalize our contemporary commitments to particular issues and questions. And they give us opportunities for considering these very human problems under completely different historical pressures. And that's why I think, as a person who studies the 18th century, that's where a lot of the energy from my classes comes from is from that strangeness of history and from the very different ways of considering problems that history offers us.

[00:35:09.20] TOM MERRILL: Oh, yeah. I think that's a really nice way of saying it, that it somehow scrambles our expectations and scrambles-- we're not sure which side to be on. Now, in some cases, we know which side to be on. But that process of estrangement, that even if the historical texts weren't there, we would have to create something that would serve that pedagogical function.

[00:35:32.49] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, that's right. And if I could make just a really quick plug for reading literary text and, especially, reading fiction. You know, fictional text-- there's this question, well, why should we read fiction? What good is that? They're just pretend or imaginary. And the answer is, yes, and that's exactly why we need it because it offers us these counterfactual instances to consider situations, problems, questions in a completely alternative reality that can nevertheless give us insights and information about where we find ourselves with the benefit of that experimental frame.

[00:36:20.91] And so whenever I teach Frankenstein, for example, or Pride and Prejudice, we talk about, why should we read these very old books? Isn't Pride and Prejudice just a love story? And it is, but it's many, many other things besides. And it's that long-form engagement with the text that I think is most of the point.

[00:36:47.22] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, it's a training of your imagination to get outside of your own head.

[00:36:50.52] SARAH MARSH: Mm-hmm. Yeah, live in the life of someone else, even if only very briefly.

[00:36:58.86] TOM MERRILL: Right, right. So Sarah, I actually brought a passage that helps me think about what liberal education is or can be.

[00:37:06.87] SARAH MARSH: Wonderful.

[00:37:07.28] TOM MERRILL: Do you mind if I read it?

[00:37:08.47] SARAH MARSH: Please do.

[00:37:09.99] TOM MERRILL: So. this is a passage from the book, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, written by Frederick Douglass. And of course, everybody knows Frederick Douglass-- starts his life as a slave on the Eastern shore of Maryland, frees himself and goes on to become the greatest abolitionist of the 19th century but also one of the most important American statesmen of the 19th century. And we're not supposed to be political on this podcast, but I think I can say, I would be very pleased to see Frederick Douglass on a piece of currency.

[00:37:47.22] SARAH MARSH: Oh, that would be terrific.

[00:37:48.94] TOM MERRILL: I think that would be an appropriate place for the country to--

[00:37:52.51] SARAH MARSH: Let's get that movement started.

[00:37:53.70] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, right. So I'm going to I'm going to read a passage from, I believe, it's chapter 10 of The Narrative of the Life. He tells the story multiple times in different books. But this is the first time he tells it. So the dramatic highlight of the text is this famous confrontation wrestling match that he has with Covey, the slave breaker, that people may

recognize. And my students are reading this in their class this term. So hopefully this will help. So I'm going to just read.

[00:38:26.99] "Our House stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever-white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of free men, were, to me, so many shrouded ghosts to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay and traced with saddened heart and tearful eye the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean.

[00:39:03.17] The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance. And there, with no audience but The Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complained in my rude way with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships.

[00:39:19.43] You are loosed from your moorings and are free. I am fast in my chains and am a slave. You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I, sadly before the bloody whip. You are freedom's swift-winged angels that fly around the world. I am confined in bands of iron.

[00:39:40.61] Oh, that I were free. Oh, that I were on one of your gallant decks and under your protecting wing. Alas, betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on. Go on. Oh, that I could also go. Could I but swim, if I could fly.

[00:39:59.51] Oh, why was I born a man of whom to make a brute? The glad ship is gone. She hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. Oh, God, save me. God, deliver me. Let me be free. Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught or get clear-- I'll try it. I had well die with ague as the fever.

[00:40:28.85] I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it-- 100 miles straight North, and I am free. Try it? Yes. God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall bear me into freedom.

[00:40:52.40] The steamboat steered in a northeast course from North Point. I will do the same. And when I get to the head of the bay, I will turn my canoe adrift and walk straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania. When I get there, I shall not be required to have a pass. I can travel without being disturbed. Let but the first opportunity offer and come what will. I am off.

[00:41:15.33] Meanwhile, I will try to bear up under the yoke. I am not the only slave in the world. Why should I fret? I can bear as much as any of them. Besides, I am but a boy. And all boys are bound to someone. It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming."

[00:41:36.11] SARAH MARSH: Thank you, Tom.

[00:41:40.87] TOM MERRILL: So what should we say about that?

[00:41:42.77] SARAH MARSH: So I think one of the reasons we wanted to bring the passage to the podcast is as a response to the first two articles about the unfolding catastrophe in the liberal arts and in the humanities, in particular. And Tom, you were talking about how this passage is a model for thinking through some of our present difficulties.

[00:42:13.21] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, I guess, I would say, I mean, sometimes, people say that liberal education is opposed to activism, that they're different models of what people should be doing in their college years. And I think that's wrong. I mean, I think that they're different, and it's important to see that they're different. And that if we try to collapse them, then we're not going to do either one very well. But this is a text-- Frederick Douglass, at this point, is trying to prepare himself for this heroic act of moral responsibility. This happens immediately before this famous confrontation with the slave breaker.

[00:42:51.16] And Douglass knows full well as he's giving this speech what he thinks he has to do and but also that the consequence is very likely that he'll get killed. And so he's trying to, as it were, put on his mental armor for this heroic act of activism, which is really the beginning of this incredible career of freeing himself and then becoming a public figure and an advocate for the end of slavery and then after the war, for the social and political conditions of Black people.

[00:43:26.92] But I think that all of that couldn't have happened without this moment of reflection, without this moment of contemplation in which he gives a speech, as he says, with no audience but The Almighty. And to me, that's what we're supposed to be doing with liberal education, that we are trying to figure out what we think. We're trying to get a clear grasp in our own heads about what kind of a world we live in, what do we think is the truth about the world? I mean, it's an existential question-- God or no God?

[00:44:02.17] SARAH MARSH: Right. And the very God that he addresses at the top of the passage, he goes on to wonder, is that God even there?

[00:44:13.04] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, for sure. And how could you not for a person in his condition? That the universe seems to be indifferent to the suffering and to the just demands of Frederick Douglass and of others like him.

[00:44:27.83] SARAH MARSH: And the thing that prompts Douglass' insight while he's looking over the Chesapeake Bay is the low moment of the narrative. Just a few paragraphs before, he says, Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. And of course, Douglass has been sent to Covey to break him of his resistant spirit through violence.

[00:44:55.76] And he says, "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed. My intellect languished. The disposition to read departed. The cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died. The dark night of slavery closed in upon me. And behold, a man transformed into a brute."

[00:45:22.07] And he's lamenting the animalizing effects of this persistent violence. And the thing that is so telling about this to me is that it's marked by the departure of his desire to read. And that is the darkening effect of this condition of bondage.

[00:45:50.54] TOM MERRILL: Well, or to put it slightly from the other side, I mean, Douglass has to have to liberations. There's the moral liberation and the physical liberation that is symbolized by the fight with Covey. But there's also this internal liberation that corresponds with reading the books and with the speech to the Chesapeake in which he really owns his own place in the world. So there's a spiritual tyranny that goes along with the physical tyranny, I guess, would be one way of saying it.

[00:46:28.13] SARAH MARSH: Right. And earlier in the narrative, Douglass identifies learning how to read. So when his enslaver, Sophia Auld begins to teach him the ABCs, he immediately attaches to that intellectual work as a way out of the mental darkness of slavery, even if his physical condition of bondage of being the chattel of another persists, he knows that he can locate an internal intellectual freedom that, I think, is the manifestation of that is on the banks of the Chesapeake when he's looking out at the ships.

[00:47:15.38] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, I mean, I think that it really is a contemplative moment or a reflective moment. And I mean, you think about parallel examples. But one might think of the philosopher in Plato's Republic, who gets outside of the cave and is somehow able to see the world in its totality, but it's that moment of vision that somehow is very, very important for Douglass as he prepares himself for this titanic struggle.

[00:47:47.09] I guess, I mean, I think about what we do in the classroom is that we're trying to preserve that moment of contemplation, that we're trying to help people somehow think through for themselves. And the texts that we give them are-- sometimes, I think about a gym, like, they're different exercise machines.

[00:48:04.70] SARAH MARSH: Yes.

[00:48:05.27] TOM MERRILL: And everyone is trying to work out a different muscle or help you see a different part of life. But it's not, I guess, I would say, the contemplation is that the soil or the preparation for the act of moral responsibility that has to come later.

[00:48:22.26] SARAH MARSH: I think that's right. And I think the point you made earlier, Tom, about the relationship of intellectual work to activism is here, really, fully elaborated by Douglass because it is the preparatory work of moral groundedness of the insight that he knows he will risk his own life in order to free himself, that he's not going to wait for someone else to free him. He's going to take his life into his own hands, quite literally-- his lived life into his own hands and confront Covey.

[00:49:04.58] This is the kind of importance I would attach to the classroom, where we're helping students work through questions and problems to get them to insights, so that they've got them whenever it's time to go out into the world and do the thing instead of thinking about the thing. And of course, thinking about the thing is always important. But making the transition is, I think, the real value of a liberal arts classroom, is teaching people how to transform what they've thought through into meaningful ways of being in the world.

[00:49:51.36] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, for taking responsibility, which means, in practice, not just in an MLA conference, where everyone's showing off and trying to impress the big Harvard professor, or whatever. I mean, I guess, another way of saying this is, why do we read this text? Well, partly, we need to read this text because as Americans we need to the truth about what slavery was and the reality of racism across American history. And without that, we can't really navigate the world that we live in. That's one reason.

[00:50:28.24] A second reason, which doesn't contradict but, I think, goes along is what if you read this as a text about the human condition? That maybe every person, in order to achieve moral agency, has to go through stages that would be similar to what Douglass-- now hopefully not in the dire circumstances that Douglass does. But that there is something about an intellectual liberation of seeing what your opinions are and seeing what their alternatives are and really owning them. And then there's also a moral physical liberation, where you have to stand up and accept the sacrifices that go along with moral activity in the world. That may be a picture of what human excellence is.

[00:51:23.63] SARAH MARSH: I think that's right. And, I think, especially important in this moment is the recognition that those two modes of reading that you suggested, Tom, are not separate from one another. They coexist in Douglass' text, and he integrates them as the great thinker that he is. He sees them as caught up in one another.

[00:51:50.76] And I think, as Americans, that is also part of our heritage, the brutalities of racial slavery, and the ongoing problem of White supremacy is part of that legacy. And so is this response to it by Frederick Douglass. And I think that one of the things that you pointed out to me before we started talking, Tom, on the podcast is that Douglass frames this as an apostrophe. And an apostrophe is--

[00:52:27.26] TOM MERRILL: That's because I didn't know what the word apostrophe meant.

[00:52:29.12] SARAH MARSH: Well, It's an address to a person.

[00:52:31.07] TOM MERRILL: I mean, I know what it means.

[00:52:31.88] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, it's a person or some kind of personified object. And the critical thing about the apostrophe is that the thing is not there. And we might ask ourselves-- "with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships--" and so what is it about the ships that is there and not there for Douglass? And to the degree he identifies himself with the ships, to what degree is Douglass there and not there?

[00:52:58.88] Because he's very much grounded in his material condition of an enslaved man in a racist society. And at the same time, he is thinking himself out of that racist society. He is thinking himself into Pennsylvania, where slavery had been abolished since the 1780s. And so that way of being of two minds or being of many minds about oneself is part of Douglass' insight here. And it's part of what makes us capable of achieving our own freedom, whether that is a mental kind of freedom or a physical kind of freedom. And for Douglass, it's both.

[00:53:47.21] TOM MERRILL: For Douglass, it's both, right. I think that's really true. And I mean, I think it's important when he's addressing the ships. I mean, they're the physical ships, but they also represent something imaginatively to him, that they're ghosts. And that he is thinking about what do they mean, right? And that's the thing that I think is so hard when you're dealing with freshmen. I mean, I love freshmen, and almost all of my teaching is with freshmen. But to get people to read things imaginatively to see that an image may be actually an image. It's not just the thing that it claims to be, but it also bespeaks some larger meaning.

[00:54:27.02] SARAH MARSH: I think that's right.

[00:54:28.61] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, it's just hard to-- because you can't somehow tell someone how to do it. They have to somehow get it. I also wanted to mention one thing, that-- and not to lose track of it-- that at the core of the speech is the foundational question of, is there a God? And now Douglass, in his later life, is a very political person, and has to be very political, and has to think about what he says in public.

[00:54:57.20] But at this moment, this is a moment of maximum, as it were, vulnerability. And it's not entirely clear to me what Douglass' answer to the question is. And for good reason. So if you read-- and this is one of the things that I love when I teach this text. But if you go to the end of the book, at the end of the book, there's this appendix, which I'm sure that you have studied intensively, Sarah.

[00:55:22.07] And but the point of the appendix is that he has to he has to reassure his readers that I'm not actually not calling into question the existence of the Christian God. I only meant the false god of those evil slaveholders. But he obviously got pushback on this precise issue. And you can see why, right? That intellectuals, that one of the things that you do when you start thinking about things is you start questioning big things about your society and not just small things.

[00:55:51.80] SARAH MARSH: That's right. That's how you know you're getting the work done. When the big questions start to come in. This moment, usually--

[00:55:59.63] TOM MERRILL: When the Athenians try to kill you? Is that when you--

[00:56:02.78] SARAH MARSH: In the first or second week of class, whenever I teach a first-year seminar on the history of medicine, and we talk about the history of different narratives about illness and epidemics-- I'm teaching it again this year. It's particularly relevant in light of COVID-19. But there's always this moment about a week or two in where someone puts their hand up and says, but what if everything we know is wrong? [LAUGHS] And it's like, wonderful. Now we can get to work.

[00:56:39.62] TOM MERRILL: That's right. That's right. Now, the class has begun.

[00:56:41.69] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:56:43.49] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. That's a feature, not a bug of your college experience.

[00:56:46.16] SARAH MARSH: That's right. And I think that what is so nourishing about that dimension of the university classroom is that it is a real respite, maybe especially now from the binarizing voices of public discourse, where you're either with me or you're against me. And really, there's this whole other mode that we can think in, that we could potentially live in, and that I think Douglass is encouraging us in here as he's thinking about these very big questions about the nature of the universe, whether or not we're alone in our condition of suffering. And so he goes back and forth between that as well. And the big question about is there a God is at the center of that larger litany of questions.

[00:57:49.82] TOM MERRILL: Well, on that note, I hope you're not going to ask me to answer that question.

[00:57:55.01] SARAH MARSH: That will be-- that's next time, Tom.

[00:57:57.14] TOM MERRILL: That's next time.

[00:57:58.01] SARAH MARSH: Tune in, everyone.

[00:57:59.15] TOM MERRILL: I hate to tell you, but we have a whole other guest, a whole other topic for next time.

[00:58:05.54] SARAH MARSH: That's right.

[00:58:08.09] TOM MERRILL: So everyone, you should-- I want to thank Sarah for this conversation. It's been really fantastic.

[00:58:14.01] SARAH MARSH: Likewise, Tom. Thank you very much.

[00:58:16.40] TOM MERRILL: You make the case for these things better than I can, which is, I think, part of the reason why I'm trying to get you to do this. But for those of you who have been interested and have comments, have disagreed with something that we said, well, first of all, you're wrong. [LAUGHTER] Is that the right message?

[00:58:35.24] No-- first of all, we want to hear why we were wrong. That's the thing that we want. You can leave comments, I believe, on the web page of the podcast. You can also email us at [politicsandthehumanities-- no spaces, but it's all spelled the normal way-- politicsandthehumanities@gmail.com](mailto:politicsandthehumanities@gmail.com). We would love to hear from you and hear your responses.

[00:59:02.70] We are going to have another episode, Sarah, which I think we're hoping to tape in just a few weeks here. So come back and check that out. Make sure to subscribe. I think that's the thing you're supposed to stay on a podcast.

[00:59:13.64] SARAH MARSH: I think so. We're slowly moving into the 21st century.

[00:59:16.81] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, that's right. Pretty soon, we'll figure out how to do the Zoom thing.

[00:59:20.82] SARAH MARSH: Right-- a couple of weeks.

[00:59:22.84] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, exactly. Our whole life will be on Zoom. Well, Sarah, I think we're going to call it quits here. But thank you so much for this time. It's been great.

[00:59:30.63] SARAH MARSH: Likewise, Tom. Thank you. And thank you all for tuning in.