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This interview was conducted by Emily O'Dell and Jeanne Jégouso at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana following a lecture Professor Leichman gave as part of the Academic Publishing Series sponsored by the Department of Comparative Literature at LSU.

Part 2

GSC: *You mentioned the fact that there are few jobs in the foreign languages. Can you talk about your experience with job searching?*

JL: I have been very successful and very unsuccessful on the job market. Since getting my PhD, I have been employed as an Assistant Professor. I was a Visiting Assistant Professor for three years at Sarah Lawrence College (they call these positions "Guest Professor" at SLC) and a Visiting Assistant Professor for one year at UC Irvine before getting a tenure-track job at Louisiana State University. This, however, is not at all the trajectory that I thought I would follow in it was not at all an easy thing to sort of fall into those jobs. I did kind of fall into, particularly, my first job. I had a number of MLA interviews during my final year of graduate school and I was an on-campus finalist for a really great job, but I didn't get it. So, mid-July, I had moved to New York City and was sort of thinking, "Well, I'm going to have to get a job in the fall and I don't know what I'm going to do". Strangely, out of the blue I got a call from Sarah Lawrence College--and there was an exceptionally convoluted story behind this.

I had initially applied for an opening there and had not gotten the job. After it seemed like all of my options had run out, a professor at Yale, where I did my graduate work, had recommended that I get in touch with somebody at Barnard with whom he had done his graduate work. I got in touch with this person, and while he was a little mystified, he said he'd let me know if he heard about something. Then I got this random call from Sarah Lawrence College and they were looking for a Guest Assistant Professor because they had somebody who was going to be on sabbatical and a couple of guest positions open in the French Department. They had gotten my name because they had contacted the professor at Barnard and he had said, "I'm not looking for work but there is this guy..." and they already had my file so they looked at it and they called me. So, in a very roundabout way, taking the advice from my former professor at Yale was the best thing I ever did because I would possibly not be an academic, I probably would have actually gone and done something else and given up on the whole academia thing. I did sort of stumble into that job, which turned out to be great, and one of the things I'm very happy about in how my career has unfolded thus far is that I started out at a small liberal arts college which is exceptionally teaching oriented.

Sarah Lawrence is more teaching oriented than most because they have a seminar and tutorial system where the classes are all capped, I think the biggest class is seventeen, and you meet with all of your students individually and you basically do an independent study with all of them

– you meet with them every other week to work on a project that is not necessarily related to the work you’re doing in the class. The courses are almost all taught on a yearlong basis so it’s a two-semester class. They gave me an enormous amount of freedom--this is the level you’re teaching and you may teach whatever you like--and so that was fantastic. A yearlong class is a strange beast, I’ve never again had the opportunity to do that but it allows you to try out all kinds of ideas, not to mention all of the individual student contact. I learned a ton about teaching there. Again, I taught there three years so I taught a number of levels, beginning through advanced. It is a very faculty oriented college as well, they’re very much into faculty governance, and it’s a small campus so everybody knows everybody. I think was a serendipitous place to land after having been at a big research university (and frankly, everybody who does a PhD starts out at a big research university because those are the places that have PhD programs). For me, the reaffirmation of the importance of teaching was wonderful and from there I went to UC Irvine, which is a large public research university with a department that has a long reputation in terms of theory, which is not particularly my approach, but it was a wonderful experience for me and I found the students to be great. One of the things that I think was really great was taking a very student-centered teaching approach, which was very much the small liberal arts college approach, to a large university. In foreign languages we have the real privilege of having small classes and it’s turned out to be something of a liability because this means that administrators are less likely to pay for ladder faculty to teach small numbers of students. In terms of getting bang for their buck they want professors standing in front of groups of one hundred or more kids, but we have this great opportunity in the foreign languages to have really small classes; in turn, it is incumbent on us to try to make what we offer something that is attractive to students. I think that students are, particularly right now, really hungry for meaning, and that we have a unique opportunity to provide avenues for expressing that desire. One of the things I was really grateful for, having been at Sarah Lawrence, was the opportunity to practice communicating with students, getting them to articulate the things that they’re interested in and trying to lead them towards meaningful engagement. That’s something that I have found students at public universities also have an enormous appetite for it, and they don’t always feel that they are getting in their classes. That, I think, is one of the great advantages of this field, and we need to continue to make the case to the administration that we provide this vital function. Just like organic chemistry with 700 students, French class with 11 students where the professor is really listening, and asking you to express yourself as accurately and completely as possible, is an extremely important part of what we do, even at a huge university.

So, in terms of my career it’s been an unusual trajectory and I think that more and more graduate students are coming out, particularly in the foreign languages and the humanities across the board, into a very competitive job market where there’s an enormous amount of temporary work. The French word *précarité* has been Anglicized, and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s recent presidential column the MLA newsletter talks about the “academic precariat”. This is really the new condition, particularly for young scholars coming out into the world. One-year contracts, sometimes two-year contracts, with no real institutional commitment; that was very much my experience and it makes a lot of suppositions about your life. You have to be able to move around the country, you have to be able to go anywhere, and this can be very difficult. I

started graduate school late so I was a grown up when I finished and I was involved with somebody whose life was not nearly as mobile as mine was. So there are a lot of sacrifices that it does impose on you if you don't get a permanent job right away and I think more and more people are starting in jobs where there is no promise or expectation that they're going to be there for more than one or two years, three at the outside. At Sarah Lawrence they were very clear that three years is the longest guest faculty could stay, they didn't want to keep people longer than that because they don't want to create the expectation of a permanent job. And this is at a progressive, faculty-oriented college; this is now the reality of academia.

In some respects mine was a very typical job experience, since the whole time that I was at Sarah Lawrence and at UC Irvine I was also on the job market. I continued to have interviews every year so I continued to have to fly to the MLA and, when you're a lecturer or visiting professor, you have no research fund so that's all on your own dime. This is really one of the few fields where you're expected to pay \$2,000 for the privilege of sitting in someone's hotel room for twenty minutes; it's an interesting phenomenon. There's no guarantee or obligation on their part to do anything, you just have to pay the money and hope that it goes well. I had on campus visits at many fine universities in both French departments and Theatre departments that ultimately went with other candidates. Yet I don't think that anybody ever made the wrong choice, and this is something I try to tell graduate students: if they didn't take you then you didn't want to work there, even if you thought it was just perfect. It's always the right choice if they didn't take you because you never want to go somewhere where they're not excited to have you there. That's the worst possible position to be in, particularly if you're somebody who is just starting out in your career. So, at the same time, rejection can be a large part of the early part of your career. It really isn't that fun, and it's terrible to say that you have to get used to it because no one should get used to feeling rejected. It's hard not to take personally but it's very important not to take it personally as well, because it's always more about their department or college than about you.

GSC: *So the job market as well as publishing, the advice is don't take it personally and keep going?*

JL: Yeah, it's tricky. Don't take it personally but it's extremely personal because everything that you do as a scholar is personal; your scholarship is a reflection of your personal interests, and it is deeply personal and when you go on an interview, it's all about you. So while you can't take it personally, you do need to stay engaged on a personal level and that's what makes it hard. You have to develop a thick skin at a certain point, but you can't always wear that thick skin because if you do you'll never establish real contact, which is important both for teaching and, honestly, for your scholarship and certainly for the kind of interview situations that lead to jobs. It's tricky and trying.

GSC: *Are there any things that you wish you had done, or that you did do, during graduate school that you think could have helped or did help you prepare for the job market and your eventual tenure track position at LSU?*

JL: I think it's really important to take classes outside of your field to try and see what other people at the university are doing. The idea of the universal is baked into universities, there are a lot of really smart people doing a lot of different things and you should try to take advantage of that because it gets much harder when you're not a student to have that kind of meaningful contact with people outside of your field. It's not that I don't meet faculty members from other departments but I often don't have the chance to really engage with them intellectually, I engage with them administratively for the most part. However, as a graduate student you have the opportunity to sit in a class with a great scholar in a different field; that can be extremely valuable and really open your eyes. I think that's really important. I think that it's also a good time to be aware of the resources that universities offer. I staged a couple of plays when I was a graduate student and I had to hustle a lot to get spaces and to get funding but it was something that was important to me so I think that's important. If there's something important to you, try to find the resources to do it, because universities are good for that. They have resources to help you do the projects that are important to you that may seem outside your scholarship but which are integral to how you frame your work as a scholar and teacher. For me, thinking with theatre involves doing it, so it was really important for me to actually be working with actors. I mounted modern plays, and a Molière play as well, but none of the plays were from my dissertation corpus. I think that goes to the point of taking classes outside of your field too, you need to stay as engaged as possible in all of your faculties because as graduate students you're specializing, you're becoming an expert in your one thing and I think it's really important to remember that we all have to be generalists as well and have to keep ourselves alive to other kinds of influences and possibilities.

If I had a regret it might be not having engaged more seriously with some of the technological resources that, when I was a graduate student, were available but were far less emphasized in the humanities, whereas digital humanities has really come into its own in the last ten years. I'm participating in the big digital humanities conference in May (the *Comédie française* registers project) and I was invited to participate and say how can we use this to fuel humanities research and I'm feeling a little bit behind -- I'm computer competent but I'm certainly not an expert. Those resources are much more prevalent, much more emphasized right now, and it's something that's very important to stay abreast of. It's tricky when you work with books and literature, the one thing that I don't think students necessarily need more of are screens to look at, yet at the same time it's a habit they have--I don't think they're necessarily skilled at analyzing images, but they are used to looking at screens. I think that it's foolish to not pay attention to that, it's something that needs to be dealt with, whether or not it becomes central to what you do. If we want literature to thrive in the 21st century, everyone has to be aware of how we can evolve and stay relevant, and as a graduate student there are real opportunities to stake out leadership positions for the future of your field.