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## The Civic University, Creative Placemaking and the Discipline of Literature A Critical Review of

Brink, Chris. 2018. *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough*. Bristol: Bristol UP. xix + 385 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5292-0034-8.

Lavalette, Shane. 2019. *LOST, Syracuse*. New York: Kris Graves Projects. 48 pp. No ISBN.

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The city holds a privileged position in Anglo-American literature. From Charles Dickens's labyrinthine London and Henry James's multitudinous New York City skyline to George Sterling and Francis Bruguière's collaborative photo-poetry of San Francisco and contemporary Latinx authors' engagements with Los Angeles, literature and allied arts have long sought to capture metropolises in all their complexity and contradictoriness. The city also figures prominently in much recent work by American and British education reformers seeking to reconceptualise the contemporary urban university as civically engaged and responsive to societal problems. For decades, figures of speech such as *town and gown* and *ivory tower* have been used to evoke the relationship between a university and the wider community of which it is a part. The former trope suggests a division between the residents of a given area and the academic community of the university. The latter phrase evokes remote and privileged isolation. In recent years, new terminology has emerged as a response to persistent questions by legislators, the media and the public about the purposes of higher education, including the *entrepreneurial university* and the university as *anchor institution*—that is to say, an institution that embraces its rootedness in the local community through various forms of engagement. Yet the role of literature and photography—two entwined modes of representation whose relationship is often

central to English studies curricula—in large-scale projects of educational reform and urban redevelopment is rarely broached.

Two recent books, which at first glance have little in common, may be profitably read together. Chris Brink's *The Soul of a University* (2018) is concerned with the role of higher education institutions in responding to social challenges and effecting change. Reflecting his disciplinary training in mathematics, Brink pursues his thesis—that a good university should be defined by academic excellence as well as social purpose—in a linear, logical and analytical way. *LOST, Syracuse* (2019) is a limited-edition literary and photographic monograph in which, in thirty-one plates, photographer Shane Lavalette documents the industrial city in upstate New York where he currently resides. A poem by Carrie Mae Weems and creative nonfiction prose by Arthur Flowers complement Lavalette's photography. Manifesting the artistic backgrounds of its contributors, the book is ruminative, evocative and intermedial. Whereas Brink makes the case for civic engagement as a "core function of the university" (286), Lavalette, Weems and Flowers dwell on the pressing racial and economic issues of a specific city, problems reinforced by deleterious urban planning and design decisions, and raise the question of what civic roles the institution of higher education situated there should assume. While Brink challenges the current ranking of universities as a "ladder of esteem" (288), Lavalette allows readers to imagine alternative measures of excellence such as local engagement and scholarship. Finally, Brink has relatively little to say about the role of the arts and humanities in promoting and achieving social change. In contrast, through poetry, creative nonfiction and photography, Lavalette, Weems and Flowers provide a model for how practitioners of literature and the arts may lead the way.

Brink's book consists of prologue, introduction, eight chapters, epilogue, endnotes and index. At more than 370 pages of highly readable and occasionally quite humorous prose, it should be widely studied and debated by all of those who inhabit a university setting. It may also find a broader readership among policymakers and members of the public. That the book does not situate itself among much recent work on the state of Anglo-American higher education is a significantly missed opportunity. For it comes on the heels of a number of foundational studies, such as Bill Readings's (1996)—which offers a critique of the way in which the neoliberal university divides learning from culture—Christopher Newfield's (2008)—with its trenchant account of the rise of corporate higher education institutions—and Andrew McGettigan's (2013)—which focuses on how processes of marketisation, privatisation and financialisation have impacted universities.

Engaging with such accounts would have enriched Brink's critique of "the Standard Model University," from which, he suggests, the caricature of the higher-education institution as an ivory tower stems (7). Based on the twin principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the standard model organises detached and objective researchers, who remain aloof from society, into discrete disciplines, where they pursue knowledge for its own sake (43). Not only is research privileged over teaching in such a

setting, but “pure research”—that is, knowledge produced with no specific end in view and driven only by a “desire to know” (11)—is accorded far greater weight than applied research. “[O]nce pure research has generated knowledge—out of nothing, so to speak, and with no motive other than curiosity—applied research will go out and connect that knowledge to the real world” (39). It is an add-on, supplement or accessory.

In Brink’s view, this model provides a useful explanation of what institutions of higher education are good at—they create and disseminate new knowledge. However, it fails to render a compelling explanation of what universities are good for. By the 1990s, he explains, without adequately grounding his overview in the relevant literature, educators and administrators on both sides of the Atlantic increasingly perceived the standard model as inadequate to the needs of society. Yet at the very moment when questions were being raised about its efficacy, a new, and soon to be quite popular, phenomenon emerged to reinforce it: university rankings. Ostensibly offering objective measurements of institutional quality, Brink asserts, rankings have impacted our perception of what universities are for and what constitutes a “good” university. Parents hope their children will get into a “good” university. Academics at lower-ranked institutions aspire to “trade up from their current place of employment” to a university where “pure research” is valued (29). Thus, rankings have had a profound impact on how societies perceive universities and, indeed, how universities view themselves.

In chapters two and three, Brink focuses on the question of quality and the ways in which it is measured. His second chapter contributes to the scholarship that critiques university rankings, showing how “the selection of what to measure, and the weights assigned to what is measured, can be varied at will by those who do the rankings” (60). Although the dubious practice of rankings is well-trodden ground, his ultimate aim is to uncover “the social context within which rankings flourish,” which he calls *linearism* (100). Before he elaborates on this point more fully, he considers in chapter three various definitions of a “good university”: a term commonly used to denote “good as in excellent,” according to the criteria of ranking systems, rather than “good as in virtuous” or the socially engaged institution (xvii). He asserts that “excellence and virtue” have come to be perceived as “separate notions” (2). Excellence is the basis of the standard model and is subject to quality assurance regimes such as the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), which attempts to assess the quality and impact of research. Contending that “issues of quality in higher education are related to our conception of the role of higher education in society, which cannot be disengaged from issues of equality, fairness and social justice,” (141)) Brink proposes that universities also need to embrace virtue.

In chapters four and five, he offers personal reflections on how he came to this conclusion. As an academic administrator in postapartheid South Africa, Brink participated in efforts to achieve inclusive postsecondary education. When he assumed the positions of rector and vicechancellor of Stellenbosch University—a former bastion of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid ideology—in 2002, he took on the

challenge of navigating the institution through a period of diversifying its faculty ranks and student population. He recounts in chapter four many of the concerns expressed at the time “about widening participation and fair access,” including fears about a decline in standards and reputation (75-76). In providing counterpoints to these arguments and examples of their unfoundedness from a specific institutional context, Brink defends a wider principle: “*quality needs diversity*” (188; italics in the original). His subsequent chapter focuses on merit as an obstacle to diversity—for example, in utilising school-leaving grades for university admission without regard to socioeconomic circumstances, which privilege some and disadvantage others. Combing through various data, Brink argues that education has often been one cause of rather than a solution to growing societal inequality.

In chapter six, Brink focuses on linearism—“a lazy preference for the apparent certainty of one dimension rather than the multidimensional complexities of the truth” (xvii)—as an underlying commonality to rankings, meritocracy and perceptions of quality. Meritocratic thinking places people in a rank order of worth. Quality is seen “as a positional good” (227). Drawing on a mathematical concept, Brink proposes that academic excellence and societal purpose, or virtue, should not be thought of as “on the same axis, but on *orthogonal axes*” (269; italics in the original)—that is, they are at right angles to each other. This is, he notes, how we “visualise different dimensions. So, for example, east-west is orthogonal to north-south, left-right is orthogonal to up-down” (271). For too long, however, the true—knowledge pursued for its own sake—and the good—knowledge pursued as a means to solve a societal challenge—have been conceived in dichotomous, binaristic or oppositional terms rather than considered orthogonally (317-18).

In Brink’s definition of a university’s soul, on which he elaborates in chapter seven, both are necessary. *Vertical research* is “curiosity-driven,” produced for its own sake and undertaken, often solitarily, in freedom (276). *Lateral research* arises from a societal problem to which the investigation responds. It is, therefore, challenge led. Brink distinguishes lateral research from *applied research*—whereas the latter is “a solution looking for a problem,” the former is purposeful and undertaken with a sense of social responsibility (xvi). Brink notes that “in lateral research the need for knowledge, or the problem to be addressed, comes from outside the researcher, as a challenge facing society, and the response to that challenge is a matter of public good” (277). It is also, often, collaborative and participatory, drawing together “cross-faculty and cross-disciplinary groupings” (317).

The final chapter explores different ideas of the *civic university*. Brink does not align himself with any one form in which this concept has taken shape, preferring the ambiguity of the term (288). The civic university “can refer to your interaction with your city or region, but it can also refer to your responsibility to civil society—local, national or global” (xviii). He argues that just as excellence in knowledge generation is the response to the question of what universities are good at, universities that are

responsive to societal challenges should be seen as answering the question of what universities are good for. Ultimately, the “good” university, however, should be defined by both excellence and purpose (331)—it attempts “to be a ‘world-class’ university on the axis of excellence” and “a ‘civic’ university on the axis of societal purpose” (xviii).

Brink’s book represents a significant contribution to the critical scholarship on higher education. He writes clearly, fluidly and persuasively. The argument itself is compelling, and its elaboration is made livelier by the anticipation of and response to potential counterarguments. He uses personal anecdotes effectively to illustrate general principles and achieve breadth of implication. Nevertheless, there are several drawbacks. In addition to eschewing dialogue with extant critiques of higher education today, Brink’s analysis of the organisation of disciplines under the standard model university, with its privileging of objectivity and detachment, avoids references to feminist scholarship long concerned with this issue, such as the foundational accounts by Donna Haraway (1991) and Bonnie B. Spanier (1995). Most concerning to some will be that, except for an extended discussion of Raphael’s *The School of Athens* (1509-1511), which could have been greatly enhanced by including the painting as an illustration, the humanities and the arts seem peripheral. When Brink gives examples of the collaborations that lateral research facilitates, he draws from the social and natural sciences: “tackling climate change, or clean energy, or antimicrobial resistance, or obesity, or inequality, or extremism, or any other grand challenge facing global society” (xix). The same is true when he illustrates with questions the distinctions between discipline-based university divisions—“Does your university have a physics department?”—and its orthogonal counterpart—“Does your university deal with climate change?” Similarly, while he is reluctant to define the civic university, he does provide a sense of what kinds of questions should animate it—“What are we going to do about climate change? Can we find a drug to ameliorate HIV/AIDS, or a vaccine against ebola?” (278). While Brink may not intentionally exclude the arts and humanities, by making statements or formulating questions narrowly, he effectively does so. Finding a drug to combat HIV/AIDS is one thing. Attempting to understand the narratives of panic, including fear and fascination, around a sexually transmitted disease is another. A vaccine against ebola will be of limited utility if a significant proportion of the population subscribes to pharmaceutical conspiracy theories. Yet as important work over the years has demonstrated, English studies practitioners possess the skills to understand how societal narratives are shaped, the language in which they are formulated and their changes over time.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect, Lavelette’s book may be read as providing a kind of counterpoint to Brink’s. Although it is neither a work of narrative analysis or a cultural history, it does enable the reader to experience visually and literarily a single US city—with a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the edited collection by Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirer (1993) on shifting representations of AIDS or the more recent analysis of contagion panics by Priscilla Wald (2008).

university as its anchor—caught in the grip of a number of social problems. Lavalette, Weems and Flowers all reside in the postindustrial city of Syracuse, New York. They are associated with Syracuse University, which sought between 2004 and 2013 to fashion itself as a mission-driven, locally engaged institution. Lavalette and Weems are based at Light Work, a nonprofit photography center on campus, while Flowers is a member of the creative writing faculty, which is housed in the iconic Hall of Languages. The first building to be constructed on campus, as seen in figure 1, the hall is at the center of campus as well as at the heart of this book.

FIGURE 1. Syracuse University Hall of Languages (erected 1871-73), courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse, New York



Originating as a web-based installation for First Look Media's *Topic*, a storytelling and media platform, the collaborative words and pictures initiative was subsequently published as a monograph by Kris Graves Projects. Lavalette's is not a work of history and it may have limited resonance for those who possess only a modicum of knowledge about US urban history. Yet Syracuse is like many other US metropolises where industrial decline is strikingly evident. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century steel production facilities have long been shuttered. The declining spiral of private-sector manufacturing jobs throughout the northeast and midwest that began in the 1960s impacted the city acutely. Relatively high-earning positions were replaced with lower-earning employment opportunities in the service sector. By the early 2000s, Syracuse was beset by staggering economic inequality and remains one of the most challenged cities in the US.

The contributors focus on the effects of one significant urban design decision. In the mid-twentieth century, highways were constructed across the US as a symbol of progress and a key component of the nation's urban infrastructure program. At the same time, Syracuse took advantage of funds made available by the 1956 Federal Highway Act to establish an interstate system by launching an urban renewal plan (DiMento and Ellis 2013, 178). It constructed a 1.4-mile interstate highway viaduct, as seen in figure 2, that bisects the downtown business district and university hill. To enable the construction of Interstate 81 (I-81), the city razed the ethnically diverse fifteenth ward. In this decision, Syracuse was not alone—portions of the interstate highway system were purposely built through African American communities across the country.

FIGURE 2. The construction of I-81 (1966-67), courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse, New York



For much of its existence, Syracuse's fifteenth ward was a site of immigration and growing prosperity. Between the late 1840s and the early 1920s, large numbers of Jews fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe settled there, established residences and opened businesses (Davis and Rabin 2011, 8). In the early twentieth century, the fifteenth ward became home to Native Americans, whites, Poles, Lebanese, Italians, as well as a high concentration of African Americans who fled severe discrimination in the south by migrating north, where they would experience comparatively better, although still discriminatory, conditions. Because African Americans had great difficulty finding

landlords or house owners willing to rent or sell to them in most areas of Syracuse, the more prosperous tended to reside in the fifteenth ward. Those who were poorer lived in the nearby ninth ward, which was subject to a slum clearance scheme in 1935 (Hamilton and Cogswell 1997, 121). As a result, African American residents there had no choice but to relocate to the fifteenth ward, where they might find housing. The influx of the poor prompted some immigrant groups to leave for separate enclaves (Stamps and Stamps 2008, 40).

By the mid-1960s, the fifteenth ward remained the most diverse area of Syracuse. Ninety percent of the city's African American population resided there (Cazenave 2011, 48). While not an affluent community, it was largely self-sustaining, viewed as vibrant by its residents (DiMento and Ellis 2013, 175), but increasingly perceived as a slum by outsiders (figure 3).

FIGURE 3. The fifteenth ward, courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse, New York



The completion of I-81 and the demolition of the fifteenth ward accelerated changes in residential living patterns. It played a crucial role in facilitating white flight from the city to the suburbs, and in reshaping the wider county of which it is a part into segregated zones. African Americans relocated to the city's south and southwest neighbourhoods. By 2013, sixty-five percent of the city's black population lived in low-income areas (Ackley 2018, 253). Hispanics and Latinxs, who began arriving in the late 1960s, settled in the near west side. Among the one hundred largest metropolitan areas



in the US, Syracuse now has the highest level of concentrated poverty among black and brown people (Jargowsky 2015, 8). By the early 2000s, largely owing to urban design decisions undertaken in earlier decades to physically disconnect portions of the city, Syracuse was also riven by poverty, drugs and blight.

All these changes had significant implications for Syracuse University. From its founding in 1870 as a private, coeducational institution, the university cultivated particularly close ties with the city and its residents. Unlike public universities in the US whose core function is to serve their communities, private universities are under no such taxpayer-funded obligation. Nevertheless, in the early twentieth century, Syracuse university began offering affordable summer and adult education evening classes. Faculty and staff were, for decades, deeply involved in the social, political and economic life of the city. When the bulldozers moved in to raze the fifteenth ward, more than one hundred faculty members and students protested the displacement of thousands of the area's residents and the planned consolidation of those who remained into public housing projects (Greene 2000, 39).

A change in leadership in 2004 led the university to embrace a new role for itself as an anchor institution. Seeking to connect itself to and define its identity as inextricably linked with its host city, an anchor institution is—in Brink's terms—one form the civic university might take. Proponents of this concept believe in mutual interdependence and share the sense that what institutions try to accomplish is necessarily shaped, at least in part, by the specificities of their locations. Under Nancy Cantor, chancellor from 2004 to 2013, Syracuse university redefined itself as a public good by participating in a joint effort with the city and local businesses to undertake projects of urban revitalisation. The city of Syracuse would serve as something of a test case for reinvigorating the US's older industrial metropolises.

Beginning in 2006, the university permanently relocated some of its programs to downtown's historic Armory Square, a gateway to the near west side. This area had been undergoing extensive revitalisation for more than a decade when the university purchased a dilapidated furniture warehouse for its own use. The university and the city also established the Connective Corridor, a two-mile bus route and illuminated pedestrian and bicycle-friendly path that rejoined the university and the downtown residential district and businesses. Often referred to as a *cultural pathway*, the route includes stops for more than thirty arts and heritage venues. One of the more prominent is the Community Folk Art Center, established in 1972 by professors and community residents to preserve the legacy of the long-eviscerated fifteenth ward.

But, for all these efforts, I-81—and all that it has symbolised—remains. Lavalette's direct, sensitive portraits of residents combined with bleak studies of the crumbling viaduct and surrounding urban landscape direct the reader's attention to the city's economic disparities and racial divisions. In a striking succession of images, a peopled scene that foregrounds celebratory graduates in regalia against the background of the university's Hall of Languages, the first building to be constructed on campus, is

juxtaposed with, on the one hand, a snapshot of chain-link metal fencing, and, on the other, a grim photograph of the highway's crumbling ballast column.

Words frame Lavalette's photographs. The monograph opens with Weems's poem, while Flowers's prose brings it to a close. Although Weems's stanzas here stand alone, they are extracted from a larger work that explores social injustice and cultural violence (Weems 2019). Probing different ways of calculating value, she repeatedly asks: "How do you measure a life?" Flowers's meditative prose, which brings the volume to a close, asks how Syracuse might be reimagined as a city that nurtures its inhabitants and facilitates community rather than division. Speaking of the viaduct in a moving refrain that captures the physical separation of town and gown, he intones: "It has to go." Thus, the interrogatory "how do you measure a life," which precedes photographs documenting the implications of a single urban design decision—which deemed some lives more worthy than others—is followed by the declarative "it has to go" in reference to that structural impediment to equality.

Yet even as residents and city officials debate the future of I-81, it remains to be seen whether the vision of a more inclusive city with the university at its center will be achieved. In his book, Brink warns that while engagement should be a core element of higher education institutions, it cannot become a displacement activity for other principal functions (287). At Syracuse University, engagement was pursued with mixed success. While neither the south side nor the near west side are in close proximity to the campus, the university aided these inner-city neighbourhoods. On the city's south side, faculty and students initiated a number of projects—setting up zones of wireless technology; building an innovation center to help women and minorities establish business start-ups; launching a local newspaper in partnership with residents; forming a food cooperative (Cantor 2010, 36). In the view of some vocal critics, engagement became a third strand, with academics stepping aside from research and teaching. A decline in its position in national rankings seemed to confirm these views. Before it could be pushed out, the university withdrew from the prestigious Association of American Universities, a consortium of the nation's leading research institutions (Wilson 2011).

When Kent Syverud assumed the university chancellorship from his predecessor in 2014, he made retrenchment and balanced budgets a priority. He has also focused on improving the university's rankings, which can influence various stakeholders, particularly donors (Kim 2018, 116). Because rankings privilege vertical research, a key component of the standard model university, many of the institution's lateral initiatives centered on community investment and involvement have been curtailed. If the pendulum swung toward civic engagement under Cantor, it has decidedly swung back toward the university's traditional functions under Syverud. But some local involvement—particularly at the staff and faculty level—remains. Lavalette's is an example of the ways in which the arts and literature can inspire creative place making as a practice of urban regeneration.

By placing Brink's and Lavalette's works in conversation, one can consider how studies of higher education might be accessed from the perspective of literature, and how literature might be accessed from the standpoint of higher education studies. Indeed, what remains considerably underexplored in the scholarship of higher education is the role contemporary and historical literature can play in reimagining the university as civically engaged. By contributing to the long-standing literary and visual experience of the city, Lavalette, Weems and Flowers offer a possible approach. Further reflective work by those who write or teach literature in the form of critical autoethnographic narratives could yield new insights into the ways in which literature may contribute to a university's social purpose. In her poem, Weems asks whether city lives are measured by "dreams imagined" or "hopes dashed" (n.p.). Lavalette's book is an imaginative, hopeful work that enables readers to contemplate how postindustrial cities, with universities at their center, might be redesigned for the betterment of all.

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