Dear Dr. Esteemed Academic,

I am writing to apply for the Assistant Professor of English position at the University of X. I will receive my Ph.D. this May from the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania, where I am currently completing my dissertation under the direction of Jean-Michel Rabaté, James English and Heather Love.

My dissertation, *The Low and the Lost: Ethics, Expertise, and Drug-Use Memoirs*, brings together my background as a literary scholar trained in race and gender theory and my ethnographic research in Philadelphia drug-using communities. My project extends the harm reduction paradigm to literary analysis, reading a range of genres, including memoir, ethnography, addiction narratives, and trauma theory. Harm reduction deploys pragmatic strategies to reduce the harm associated with behaviors that increase the risk of HIV transmission, such as drug use. It also reflects a philosophical stance of non-judgment and shifting expertise, which inspires my approach to the literature I consider. Literary analysis has not adequately attended to the contingent, evolving theory of addiction, nor has it addressed the methods drug-using authors deploy to enter into and interrogate scholarly discourses on addiction. These conversations are more commonly dominated by legal and medical experts, who rely, paradoxically, on a simultaneous engagement with and distance from the object of study. As I elaborate in my case studies of Thomas De Quincey and Lee Stringer – one author writing before the term “addiction” even emerged in public discourse and the other writing in the wake of an overdetermined crack epidemic – attending to the particularities of users’ descriptions of drug use and dependence highlights the ways that individual experiences challenge what might otherwise appear to be commonsense theories of addiction. Suspending assumptions about addiction allows me to highlight the connections between individual experiences and historical events such as the gendered racial tensions in the post-Reconstruction South I explore in my opening chapter on the genealogy of addiction. My chapter on the ethics of ethnography and trauma theory illustrates the way rigid distinctions between victim and victimizer, helpless and powerful, innocent and guilty often dissolve when confronted with literary representations of the lived experiences of drug user and dealers. This intervention positions me to challenge some troubling tendencies in contemporary trauma theory, particularly its reliance on oversimplified dichotomies for the sake of moral clarity.

I have extensive teaching experience at the college level, and have taught a range of courses at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Massachusetts and Bryn Mawr. My commitment to teaching has been recognized institutionally with a number of teaching awards, including the Dean’s Award for distinguished teaching and the Penn Prize for excellence in teaching. I have been trained in a variety of pedagogical methodologies. While completing my MA in English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, I taught composition under the direction of Peter Elbow and Anne Herrington. At the University of Pennsylvania, I completed Jim English’s course on pedagogy as well as Valerie Ross’s later revised training sessions for the Critical Writing Program. I tutored for the Writing Center and Writing Across the University, and later, was invited to mentor first-time college writing teachers. Prior to beginning my current graduate work, I completed a MSEd in Secondary Education and taught in a drop-out prevention program at West Philadelphia High School. During that time, I joined the Philadelphia Writing Project, where we developed and implemented writing-based pedagogy across the curriculum. I have also conducted
ethnographic research with drug users in North Philadelphia and facilitated interventions intended to teach active drug users how to be peer mentors in their communities, a project that has influenced the way I think about the practicalities of teaching and learning. My ethnographic research enabled me to expand my field of study to include the social sciences and I have presented and published work in that field as well as in the humanities.

My goal as a teacher is to help my students think about themselves as scholars and citizens of the world. I also push my students to grapple with texts as rarified and challenging as Hegel’s theory of lordship and bondage in order to encourage them to think more attentively about textual production and analysis. When I realized that my students were so intimidated by philosophy that they could not engage properly with the text, I encouraged them to turn Hegel’s primordial myth of encounter into a game show, fairy tale, film noir, and talk show. We then edited, revised and published our revisions as a “study guide.” As an addendum to the guide, we used the Lanham “Paramedic Method” to revise Hegel’s convoluted sentences into more direct prose. Of course, one student then wrote an impassioned paper in defense of complexity, but her prose was clear and direct. By the end of the class, the students felt a sense of ownership over what had initially appeared impenetrable and referred often to that lesson when intimidated by ensuing assignments.

My intellectual interests are inspired by my work as a scholar, educator, and ethnographer and I have tried to remain attentive to the lessons I’ve learned in each of these communities as well as my obligation to make my scholarship accessible across the disciplines. In 2004, I co-wrote and published two Pennsylvania public health conference proceedings. The editors of the provisionally titled anthology Lacan and Addictions have requested that I contribute an article on addiction and trauma. My review of a recent cultural history of drugs in America was published in The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs. I have also been able to present my research at a variety of conferences, including a psychoanalytic conference on addiction, a conference on feminist epistemology, and the 17th International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm in addition to more conventionally literary venues. While at Penn, I presented my work at the Graduate Humanities Forum and a department colloquium on interdisciplinarity, among other venues. The American Association of University Women awarded me a dissertation fellowship for 2005-2006 in recognition of my scholarship, commitment to women’s participation in education, and social justice activities. I have recently been invited to present my research to the organization.

Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Alexine Fleck

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