

The Chair and the collapse of the humanities

Who, exactly, should preside over meaning-making?

by [Claire Miller Colombo](#) in the [February 23, 2022](#) issue



SHAKING HIERARCHIES: (from left) Professors Plum (Ken Bolden), Kim (Sandra Oh), and Pollack (Mark Philip Stevenson) in Netflix's *The Chair*. (Photo © Eliza Morse / Netflix)

In the opening sequence of the Netflix comedy series *The Chair*, Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh), the first woman of color to head the English department at a struggling liberal arts college called Pembroke University, makes her way across campus amid shots of ivy-carpeted walls and idyllic quads to the exultant strains of Vivaldi's *Gloria in D Major*: "Gloria . . . Gloria . . . in excelsis Deo." Glory to God in the highest. Gaining

her office at last, the new department deity takes a seat in the chair behind her massive desk as the *glorias* reach their climax—and then pitches sideways to the floor. The chair has collapsed. It is broken.

The broken-chair metaphor stands—or falls—for the many varieties of dysfunction and disequilibrium that plague the contemporary liberal arts landscape: the culture wars, the tenuous fate of the humanities, the commodification of higher education, gender and race inequities.

But Kim's broken chair is also a broken throne: it is the slapstick embodiment of the collapse in postmodernity of the Great Chain of Being, that hierarchical metaphysic of medieval cosmological origins that situated God (pronouns *he, him*) at the top of the pyramid and all lesser beings—angels, humans, animals, plants, and minerals—in diminishing order below. This hierarchy gave humans a way to understand reality, a way to make meaning. All things pointed ultimately to God; capital *T* truth existed and could be possessed and communicated; the universe was governed and made sense.

Of course, it is this blueprint upon which the hierarchies of Western academia are built; it lurks in its deep history. As Willie James Jennings reminds us in *After Whiteness*, “even educational institutions that imagine themselves far removed from these contemplative roots . . . are yet on the terrain of a theologically drenched vision.” At the center of this vision, he argues, sits the “white self-sufficient man”—the keeper and communicator of the truth, the arbiter of ultimate meanings—who presides at the pinnacle of the human sub-hierarchy whose central concern is to protect and reproduce that very type of man.

In an age of globalization and democratization, however, this metaphysic has become untenable: not only does it alienate and oppress people from cultures other than the dominant White Western one (not to mention the many disenfranchised people within it), but worse, it assimilates them. The only pathway to power for a non-White, non-Western individual has been to look and sound a lot like one. When in the mid-20th century atrocities were committed against nonnormative people in the name of cultural and genotypical purity, the hierarchy—including its totalitarian tendencies and the supposedly loving God at its apex—became even more suspect than it already was. People paying attention to the promise of democracy mobilized and vocalized. The foundations shook. On April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine declared that God was dead.

Standing dazed and disoriented in the crater of a collapsed paradigm, the academic humanities—the secular remnants of the Great Chain of Being—have struggled to maintain integrity. Without a metanarrative, what can disjointed human narratives possibly mean? Who, exactly, should preside over the meaning making? And what new rituals might be required?

Christian roots lie not in medieval hierarchy but in the early Jesus followers.

In the Pembroke English department, *The Chair* creators Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman give us an apt microcosm of the chaos. In episode 1, with the help of modernism professor Bill Dobson (Jay Duplass), they also give us a key with which to read the chaos. In a lecture on existentialism, Dobson explains to a crowded lecture hall that humans, deprived of a transcendent source, either lapse into a nihilistic state of despair (“There is no meaning”) or look to powerful human egos to fill the void left by God (“All meaning is ascribed to the state”). In other words, without a shared god, they fall into a state of either absurdism or fascism—terms he chalks in all caps on the board.

Having handed us these keywords, the series goes on to dramatize them to comic perfection, offering up a gaggle of dying gods, a cultural lapse into meaninglessness, and a perverse, fascist response.

Figuring the dying gods are the aging, tenured, male faculty members—the “white, self-sufficient men”—who find their term of power expiring. The oldest of these, John McHale (Ron Crawford), spends his time snoozing and passing gas in outsized velvet armchairs, a king wasting away on his throne. Dobson, the modernism professor, once revered as “a household god,” falls from grace in a messy, self-entitled way. And the most troublesome of all the department deities, Elliot Rentz (Bob Balaban)—whose classes are mostly empty and who works to block the tenure of Yaz McKay (Nana Mensah), a young, brilliant, popular Black professor—laments to his wife his growing irrelevance.

“I used to bestride the narrow world like a colossus,” he grumbles when she hands him a package of disposable underwear at bedtime.

“Well, now you’re going to bestride it in Tranquility Briefs,” she replies.

As the old gatekeepers of meaning grow incompetent (and incontinent), the work of interpretation—of texts, of events, of history, of people’s lives—lapses into a social

media-driven parody of itself. When, during a lecture, Dobson mock-salutes Hitler to illustrate fascism, a student snaps a photo and outrage ensues. The more stridently Dobson defends himself, the more culpable he is perceived to be. “This isn’t about whether you are a Nazi,” Kim scolds him when he makes light of the crisis, “this is about whether you are one of those men who thinks he can dust himself off and walk away.”

Totalitarian powers flourish in absurdist contexts; they rush in to fill the meaning void with their own spin and to compel universal assent to a big lie in which nobody actually believes. And so into the absurdist context of the campus scandal rush the college administrators—in this case, the dean (David Morse) and the communications director (Cliff Chamberlain), or “crisis manager,” as he himself jokes. As the new department chair, Kim is pressured to join forces with them. When she protests that her responsibility is to her faculty, the dean bluntly corrects her: “You have a responsibility to this institution to prevent issues like this from spinning out of control.”

The work of theological education includes clearing out some rubble.

It’s an impossible job. The situation unravels as Kim’s allegiances to self, family, faculty, and administration—none of whom she can please—are drawn and quartered. Herein lies the true absurdity of the campus crisis and of Kim’s tenure as chair: her career has been carefully orchestrated within the parameters of her immigrant parents’ expectations, of the academic tenure game, and of the gender codes that govern domestic life. Yet she becomes, to return to Jennings’s language, “trapped in the same institutional practice that she resisted.” She has “assimilated the institutional desire to assimilate—to turn people into tools.”

One scene, in particular, underscores Kim’s assimilation and reminds us what lies at the root of the trouble. At a low point, Kim finds herself raking through Dobson’s desktop, looking for lecture notes. On a side wall in the background hangs a poster of Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*. The camera angle and lighting create a glare and perspective that obscures most of the type, leaving just this legible fragment:

Waiting

God

This is the overlooked heart of the show: Pembroke is waiting for a god to save it from its own pointlessness, just as Vladimir and Estragon do in Beckett's world.

Estragon: I can't go on like this. . . .

Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause.) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We'll be saved.

The salvation that Pembroke waits for, miserably but with energy, is a new way to make meaning, one that is neither hierarchical, absurdist, nor totalitarian but rather grounded, relational, and true. One that is hopeful. One that is open to what theologian John Caputo calls "the inbreaking of something, [we] know not what." And what makes *The Chair* a comedy rather than a tragedy, ultimately, is not that it is funny or has a happy ending but that it is open to just such a way of making meaning. It offers not only a narrative of collapse, absurdism, and fascism; it offers, in the end, a vision of hope.

When the show finally delivers its turn toward hope, we recognize it has been thrumming like a bass line from the beginning. In occasional glimpses of Kim's and Yaz McKay's classrooms, we have seen communal meaning making in action, a syncopated and irregular creative process that trades the exalted telos of mastery for the spoken-word tempos of love: love of a given text, of the particular life that made it, and of the particular minds that come together in a space of possibility to grapple with its resonances. Unlike Rentz, who presides over the lecture hall from an ornate ambo of a podium, McKay and Kim teach from the floor, McKay threading herself through the aisles, Kim settling into a student desk, both of them encouraging reasoned and intuitive connection with texts and one another. This pedagogical model rejects the hierarchical, the absurdist, and the totalitarian understandings of meaning—in which meaning is fixed, arbitrary, or spun—and insists instead that meaning can literally be made, can be generated and shaped out of the stuff of human experience through an act of communal wondering and exertion.

In a classroom where the instructor transcends by joining and leads by listening, what emerges is a ritual of communion, of shared testimony and shared truth, of thinking together. "And in [such] thinking together," writes Jennings, "we begin to

see what we had not seen before: we belong to each other, we belong together. Belonging,” he argues, “must be the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial, and . . . the educational.”

Ultimately, while *The Chair*, like Jennings’s book, is about pedagogy, it is also about so much more. It uses the decentered classroom not to endorse a particular teaching style but rather to figure the cultivation of radical belonging that is the most significant work of our time. Jennings claims this work is the proper domain of theological education; the true roots of Christianity lie not in the medieval hierarchical metaphysic, after all, but in the crowd, in the earliest groups of Jesus followers who found, in Jennings’s words, an embodied communion that “joins to the bone.” If theological education can remember this, he argues, it might yet abolish the model of White self-sufficient masculinity and “mark a new path for Western education.”

As a theological educator with English department origins, I admit that when I first tuned in to *The Chair*—having recently read *After Whiteness*—I felt pity not only for the hapless Pembroke pack but for secular humanities departments everywhere. What a mess! And how inevitable that mess in the absence of a metaphysic! How fortunate, I reflected, that theological schools continue to deal in real and ultimate presences, and how crucial that we lead the way, per Jennings, into a new era of belonging-based education.

As I continued to watch Kim grapple with her own brokenness, that of her department, and that of the Western metaphysic, however, I began to wonder whether theological schools might also take a cue or two from secular humanities departments. After all, they are already engaged in the work of clearing the rubble of the metaphysical hierarchy and wondering what comes next; they have to be. Theological education, on the other hand, often remains comfortably yoked to that hierarchy; church structure remains bound up in it; and worse, our creeds often equate transcendence with it. But we must remember that the hierarchy, the chair, is only a metaphor for transcendence; it reaches into what we don’t know through an image of what we do. Other metaphors are available. As the secular humanities experiment with new rituals and metaphors for meaning making in beloved community—partly because they have to—theological educators should pay attention. We may want to forge partnerships with our humanities siblings in which together we bring our own particular resources to bear on new models of education and formation.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "In the rubble of the humanities."