

Alexandra L. Milsom

MLA 2020 – Session 737: “Here We Are Now: Grunge and the Humanities, 30 Years On” (WSSC-Skagit 2)

January 12, 2019

### “Leave Us the Fuck Alone”: Nirvana for the Humanities

The Urban Outfitters down the street from my apartment in New York has had a Nirvana t-shirt for sale for the past 3 months. It features a grainy, still-photograph from Nirvana’s *MTV Unplugged in New York* show, released after Kurt Cobain’s suicide on November 18, 1994.<sup>1</sup> If you comb through the pile of 30 or so t-shirts, you see that they are all made to look as “worn” as they’d be if you bought them in the mid-90s. There are holes in the shirts and the images are faded as if they’ve followed you through washing machines in high school, college, and adulthood. [Please note that I would definitely be wearing one in person for you for this panel were I here in the flesh, such is my commitment to this semiotic exercise.] All 30 of them are manufactured to resemble treasured, sentimental items, teenage angst paying off well as a comfy signifier that you were cool *back then* too. The oldness also implies a commitment to the band—a band well known to have outspoken, anti-authoritarian, grunge values. That you kept this shirt all those years taps into that spirit of rebellion, even if you’re now bored and old. The obvious irony is that you can buy that apparent commitment to rebellion for a mere \$39. And the models wearing the shirt [on the Urban Outfitters website](#)—which as of December 26, 2019 also sells 13 *other* Nirvana t-shirts—look as though it’s unlikely that they were even alive in the early 90s.



As we convene today for this particular panel to reckon with what grunge might offer the humanities, I am also making a connection to what people are signaling when they wear the fake-worn Urban Outfitters t-shirts. I wonder how these shirts relate ways in which we in the university commodify our own efforts to subvert oppression – and how we might ward against institutional attempts to take our #Bigger6 and #litpoc and #ShakeRace collectives and use them to make it seem like work is being done when we know it simply isn’t. In a similar fashion, our most important voices of rebellion, like those of the grunge era, suddenly get mass produced in a sweatshop and sold cheap, and this is so dangerous because we actually need a rebellion. Like right now. As Professor Roopika Risam wrote in her roundtable response for #LorgiaFest on December 20, 2019, “The university is indefensible.”<sup>2</sup> It helps to return to Nirvana here. *Incesticide* liner notes famously made a very straightforward request of fans: “If any of you in any way hate

---

<sup>1</sup> Available here: <https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/nirvana-unplugged-t-shirt-dress?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=002>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://ethnicrise.github.io/#lorgiafest> – the December 20 event celebrated the work of Dr. Lorgia García-Peña in response to Harvard’s decision to deny her tenure.

homosexuals, people of different color, or women, please do this one favor for us — leave us the fuck alone! Don't come to our shows and don't buy our records." Thinking about these liner notes, and the consistent anti-authoritarian message of the band I loved as a teenager, I am reassured that we have a model for rebellion in Nirvana, in spite of the ways in which the band's been commodified beyond recognition. After all, homophobia, racism, and misogyny fuel our government, our pop culture, and our institutions—even the hallowed academic ones many of us here represent. I wonder what a grunge academia could look like - one which sets protective, aggressive boundaries, one which says "leave us the fuck alone" when institutions that are historically biased, built on occupied lands, and funded through colonial violence try to coopt our collectives, institutionalize them, and render them as cheap as the fake-old t-shirt.

Although I can't be here in person, I really look forward to hearing what we come up with at this critical point in time.