

Preface to Joel Inbody's book on academic mobbing, to be published by the Edwin Mellen Press later in 2024. Click [here](#) for the mainpage of Westhues's website on academic mobbing. Click [here](#) for the specific page of that website that concerns the circumstances of Inbody's death in 2023, with links to sources of information. This preface has been uploaded to the web in June 2024.

By Kenneth Westhues

Since commencing research on mobbing in the early 1990s and beginning to publish it, I have received hundreds, maybe thousands, of inquiries from people in trouble at work. They have searched online for knowledge by which to understand their predicaments, come across my scholarship, and found it helpful.

That is how I got acquainted with Joel Inbody. On June 16, 2019, he sent me an invitation to connect on LinkedIn, along with the following message:

I'm a victim of academic mobbing, and I only realized this too late, after I found resources which linked back to your work. I'm looking for any guidance you can provide as I try to put my life back together.

As is my custom, I sent a perfunctory reply, expressing regret for his troubles but pleasure that he had found my work helpful.

Two days later Inbody emailed me further:

Thank you for replying to my LinkedIn message so quickly. I'm trying to be strong, but it's tough, especially as I try to find work outside the academy. Do you have any resources you might link me to, or stories or personal accounts, about how other victims of academic mobbing got back on their feet? Academic mobbing is more common than I thought. While I'm sad to hear that, it does give me some reassurance I'm not alone.

I replied as follows:

Of course you're not alone! And besides that, you're still young and resilient. I get a lot of satisfaction when somebody who wrote to me years earlier in the depths of despair after having lost job, career, sometimes also health, friends, family, writes to me again to

say he or she has found a new, fun, lucrative work situation and regained the personal equilibrium that was lost. Emails with news like that arrive in my inbox regularly.

An advantage you have is that, on account of your studies in sociology, you have a perspective, theories, concepts and hypotheses by which to make sense of workplace troubles. I've found that the targets of academic mobbing who are most thrown for a loop by the process are those, often in engineering or math, who, despite their expertise in a scientific field, lack conceptual frameworks for understanding social ills.

The best I can do is urge you to use Google for all its worth, searching out whatever articles and books seem to be most promising, for helping you gain insight into your own workplace experiences. You've seen my website, with links to many others. There is no shortage of literature online. It's just a matter of finding those sources most helpful for you to work out a sound, empirically founded theory of what happened to you and why, a theory that will point you in the direction of recovery. Many people who write to me say they've found it enormously therapeutic to write a detailed, factual account of their experiences, even if nobody but the writer himself or herself ever reads it, but all the more if it serves as an instrument of communication with a family member, friend, or even the general public.

Inbody took seriously my suggestion to set down on paper the facts of his own experience of the momentous social process he had been the butt of in the sociology department of a major university. The present book is the result. Recall that in his first message to me he was asking for "stories and accounts" from which he could learn. Here he sets down his own story and account from which others can learn.

There is plenty of sadness in this book, as in any account of a mobbing. This social process amounts to good people doing dirty work, coalescing against a professor, student, any kind of co-worker, ganging up to humiliate and penalize the target toward the long-run objective of eliminating him or her from the workplace. Making someone's life miserable is sad business. When the perpetrators take pleasure in it, get a kick out of it, that is even sadder. When the result is lasting harm to the target's career, health and well-being, that is sadder still.

Yet the saddest thing about this book is what happened to the author after he finished writing it. Border police gunned him down in the desert near Las Cruces, New Mexico on April 2, 2023. Three of them fired 16 shots. Inbody died instantly. He was 32 years old. I have more to say about this undeserved ending of his life, but first is a look back at his education and scholarship.

High achievement early on

The earliest information online about Joel Inbody is a feature story in the weekly newspaper of East Aurora, New York, in 2009. Joel, then in his last year of high school, was the subject of its *Spotlight* column on newsworthy local personalities. What caught the paper's attention was that despite his youth, he had run for a seat on the school board in his nearby hometown of Holland. He garnered just 101 votes, but was gracious in defeat: "Nobody treated me badly. I was an equal. And the guy that won—Steve Marom—I like him and we share a lot of the same views. So I'm glad that he won."

To judge by the "Spotlight" column, Inbody was a boy of exceptional talent, energy, and independence of mind. He and some friends had started a bi-weekly newspaper in Holland. He was an avid student of philosophy, drawn to Ayn Rand's objectivism. "That sums me up pretty well," he said, "rationality and individualism." He professed admiration for capitalism, arguing that "a country's prosperity results from individuals who work hard and strive to achieve." His plan was to major in political science at SUNY Geneseo and then go to law school. He hoped to become a defense attorney. "Time will tell," the *Spotlight* story said, "but if brains, a passion for politics and a possible law career mean anything, things are looking good for 18-year-old Joel Inbody."

In 2013, Inbody graduated *summa cum laude* from Geneseo, but then shifted his interest away from law to sociology. By available evidence, he did not start dabbling in social science as one among many possible ways to spend his life. Rather, he plunged headlong into social research, embracing sociology as a vocation. He remained resolutely rational and secular in his thinking, but trained his sights on mystical and sectarian religion as his object of study. He began graduate work at the University of Buffalo on a Presidential Fellowship in 2014.

Already in 2015, Inbody presented a paper at the annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society entitled, "How Evangelicals Interpret Goose-bumps: Sensing God's Presence, Hearing His Voice." That same year he published his first article in a major scholarly journal: "Sensing God: Bodily Manifestations and Their Interpretation in Pentecostal Rituals and Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 76: 377-355. Inbody completed his MA at Buffalo in 2016, with a thesis entitled, *Platform Brothers and Pioneer Sisters: Gendered Interaction and Emotional Energy Amongst Jehovah's Witnesses*.

At the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Atlanta in 2016, Inbody presented a further paper on evangelical Protestantism in the session on "Spirituality, Mysticism and Wonder." By then he was already enrolled for the PhD in sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Disaster – but never say die

This book chronicles the course of events leading to Inbody's elimination from that PhD program, but it is important to note that his goal was not just to get some more letters after his name, however necessary credentials would be for his intended career and livelihood. He was serious about producing new, social scientific knowledge about the human condition, and he never abandoned that commitment. At Massachusetts, he embarked on a project of historical sociology, the relation between religion and economic inequality in premodern societies, both Christian and non-Christian. His intended doctoral thesis was to be entitled, *Feeding the gods: The Creation of Inequality in Mesopotamia, China, and Egypt*. He kept working on this even after he knew he would never have a chance to defend it at Amherst, and he saw the project through to completion. The Edwin Mellen Press published it in 2022 under the title, *The Praxis of Inequality: A Study of Three Ancient Agricultural Societies*.

In the meanwhile, however, Inbody faced the same practical problem most other mobbing targets face, namely securing some new kind of livelihood. He had to find a new way to make ends meet once support from the university ended. His stay in the doctoral program began in 2016 and lasted three years. He wrote to me in 2019:

Thank you for your kind words and the encouragement I need as I struggle to figure out what's next. I feel despair at times, especially as I think about references and how to talk about my time at UMass Amherst. I worry about what to say in a job interview. I withdrew from the program in the midst of the mobbing with the help of my union. That already doesn't look great, even though it's better than them kicking me out (as they wanted to do). I just know that I can't and won't give up.

I looked at the resources you sent me and found them affirming. It's good just to have a term for describing what I endured. And while it's tough to think about these things much less write about them, I've found writing therapeutic in the past and that's an approach I see myself taking in the near future.

Your empathy comes across, and it goes a long way.

I don't remember how Inbody connected with Herbert Richardson, the maestro behind Mellen Press. I might have suggested he contact Richardson or maybe he took the initiative himself, having noticed that Mellen had published my books on mobbing. In March of 2021, Richardson sent me Inbody's manuscript on mobbing, an early draft of the present book. I sent back a positive appraisal, recommending publication in due course.

Then in March of 2022, Inbody emailed me again:

I hope you're well. I wanted to ask you your opinion on whether I should publish a piece on the mobbing I suffered at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2018-2019.

Prof. Herbert Richardson said that he showed you some months ago a draft of the manuscript I wrote about my experience. He encouraged me not to publish it until I am much older. Prof. Richardson is about to publish a book I wrote on religious feasting rituals in three ancient societies, and I've turned my attention back to the mobbing piece. I want to know if you think I should publish this piece in the near future, and also if you have any advice about where I should try to publish it.

Self-identified mobbing targets write to me often for advice. I am always reluctant to give it, being unaware of all the relevant factors and circumstances. These inquirers all need compassion and kindness, but beyond that it's hard to say. I usually answer cautiously, as in my reply to this bright and industrious young man:

Dear Mr. Inbody,

It's good to hear from you. I'm glad to know you have a book on religious feasting rituals in the works with Mellen Press.

Yes, Professor Richardson showed me your manuscript recounting and analyzing the collective aggression against you in grad school. I told Richardson you have "a superb command of language," that you tell your story well. I also told him that "lots of sociology departments these days are poisonous environments."

My advice – for what it may or may not be worth – is that you follow Richardson's advice and hold off for now on publishing the mobbing manuscript. I don't know why he would have made that recommendation, but in my many years of working with him, I've found that he generally has good instincts. Besides, if he's willing to publish your work in historical sociology, you're probably best off to be content for now with that good news and not risk offending him by declining his advice about the mobbing manuscript. The latter is not going anywhere, it's not time-sensitive. It may be that with greater distance from the events you'll want to change your analysis in one way or another. I can assure you that there is no urgent hunger in the marketplace these days, least of all among sociologists, to read accounts of academic mobbing. I have found that by and large, sociologists are more interested in carrying out the process than in studying it. I have found it fascinating, and not a little discouraging, that my own work on mobbing has been received with more appreciation in STEM disciplines than in my own field.

I hope these comments are a little helpful, but if they're not, please take them just as an expression of my collegial good wishes to you, my regret for the lousy time you had at Amherst, and my delight that you got back on your feet, regained equilibrium, and are building a scholarly career. I've no doubt that getting the story of your being mobbed down on paper in black and white has been an important step toward overcoming that

experience. I'm glad you did that, but the questions of when and where and how to publish it can wait. Kind regards,

Inbody's brief reply on April 4, 2022, was the last I heard of him until news of his death a year later:

I'm glad I took your advice back in 2019 and wrote down what I went through at UMass Amherst. It has helped me process and heal from the mobbing. I think it's unfortunate that there's a lack of interest in the subject among sociologists. Your research suggests that mobbings are a frequent problem in academic departments.

I'm going to take your advice and wait on publishing the mobbing piece. I think Prof. Richardson is concerned that I was rather forthcoming in the mobbing piece about my own struggles with mental health. I've since edited the manuscript to minimize these, or at least not to emphasize them, but the subject does come up rather frequently because of the nature of the lies people told about me. I would still like to see the piece in print one day, but it can wait.

The weight of an organization's opprobrium

The main reason I urged Inbody to take Richardson's advice and delay publication of this book – probably Richardson's own reason – is the devastating power of collective attack on a target, the stigmatizing discredit mobbers inflict. The stigma persists even after the target exposes and dissects the attack in terms of the research literature on mobbing. Readers doubt that the collective could be so wrong. Surely there was some good reason why eminent professors and super-smart doctoral students joined to get rid of the target. His claim that he was mobbed is probably self-serving piffle. Suspicion lingers even if his account rings true. There must be something wrong with him.

Richardson was probably worried that publication of this book would nix Inbody's chances of landing an academic position. Inbody might better demonstrate his promise with publications on ancient and contemporary religion. Then later, once he had proven his scholarly worth and settled into a secure job, he could publish this self-reflective contribution to the research literature on mobbing. This book would then be harder to dismiss.

The question of how much credence to give a mobbing target's first-person account and analysis of the ordeal he or she went through is important. I have myself authored such an account: my 1998 book, *Eliminating Professors*. In subsequent edited books, I have been pleased to include first-person accounts by an engineering professor mobbed in Texas, a laparoscopic surgeon mobbed in Italy, an architect thrown out of Southern Illinois, a social work professor who successfully turned back his mobbers in Newfoundland, an immigrant physician mobbed by

colleagues in Alberta, and several more. Theologian Hugo Meynell wrote a compelling but heartbreaking book about his expulsion from the University of Calgary: *The Detenuring of an Eminent Professor* (Mellen, 2009). Political scientist Tom Flanagan published a trenchant, illuminating account of how a mob formed in cyberspace to bring his distinguished academic career to an ending in disgrace: *Persona Non Grata* (Signal, 2014).

The point is this: whoever dismisses a first-person account of being mobbed on grounds that the author is biased simply follows the crowd, surrenders to the mobbers' collective power, swallows their version of events without giving the matter independent thought. There is bias on all sides of any conflict. Nothing can substitute for independent critical study of an author's argument and evidence. One person telling the truth trumps a hundred people telling lies in an echo chamber.

This is the lesson of the famous case of wrongful conviction of David Milgaard (1952-2022), who was convicted in 1969 for the rape and murder of Gail Miller, a nursing student in Saskatoon. A 17-year-old resident of Alberta, Milgaard had been passing through town with a couple of friends and happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police formed a consensus that he was guilty. They threatened his two friends with being tried as accomplices if they did not testify against him. Milgaard was convicted.

He never stopped claiming he was innocent during more than two decades in prison. He appealed to higher courts and banged out letter after letter on his typewriter. His pleas were routinely dismissed as biased and self-serving. He tried to escape. Police shot him in the back and returned him to jail.

It was not only the convict whose pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears. His mother, Joyce Milgaard (1931-2020), used skills she had picked up working for a newspaper in her teens to search out every possible scrap of evidence relevant to her son's case. She made reasoned, evidence-based appeals to the courts and public, and they were routinely brushed aside. "She's his mother. What do you expect her to say?"

At last in 1992, Milgaard's friends having retracted their testimony, the Supreme Court of Canada set aside his conviction and ordered a new trial. The Saskatchewan government decided to stay the proceedings. Milgaard was released. In 1997, DNA testing conclusively proved his innocence. In 1999, a serial rapist named Larry Earl Fisher was convicted of the rape and murder for which Milgaard had spent 23 years behind bars.

Cases of academic mobbing are always complicated, never so cut and dried as a murder case. There is usually no crime, just some kind of alleged misconduct described with fuzzy words. The punishment is rarely jail, ordinarily just loss of reputation and position, sometimes health and career. Yet the lessons of wrongful conviction apply also to cases of academic mobbing,

including Joel Inbody's. An account and analysis of what happened must not be written off just because the author is the one who was penalized, humiliated, and cast outside circles of respectability. Readers should be aware of Inbody's bias, as he himself was, but look at the evidence and argument in this book without prejudice.

Mental health and illness

Inbody may have been right, that Richardson thought the earlier draft of this book revealed too much about Inbody's "struggles with mental health." Inbody's candor in this regard might lead some readers to doubt the book's worth and to believe that the real reason he was run out of the university is that he was – to put it bluntly – not playing with a full deck.

I am in no position to assess Inbody's mental health. I never met him face to face, knew him only through our email exchanges and his scholarly writing. For sure, he never came across to me as any crazier than dozens of professors I have known who had long, successful careers in academe. That Inbody recognized some mental imbalance in himself during certain periods of his life speaks well of him and puts him ahead of quite a few academics I have worked with.

Mobbing messes with the target's head. He or she, like Inbody, usually has a record of achievement and occupational success. Before being ganged up on, the target ordinarily has a self-image of competence, worthiness, balance. The target feels in control, holds his or her head high, maybe walks with a little swagger. In his first years at Amherst, Inbody embraced his studies with confidence, read voraciously, and travelled to China and Peru. Literally and figuratively, he was going places.

Being mobbed turns the target's world upside down. The collective sends a stern message: you are not worthy to be one of us, you do not have what it takes, you are no longer in control, so hang your head and get out of our sight. This amounts to psychiatric injury. Heinz Leymann, the founder of research on workplace mobbing, called it "psychological terror."

How well a mobbing target gets through the experience and regains mental equilibrium depends on many factors. One crucial factor is a stable, enduring, loving relationship with a domestic partner, a wife or husband, girlfriend or boyfriend. I have learned from Inbody's mother that Joel did not have this anchoring bond when he was mobbed at Amherst. He and his long-term girlfriend went separate ways after their move from western New York to Massachusetts.

Another critical factor, of course, is how successfully the mobbing target finds a satisfying new job and constructive relations with a new set of co-workers. Inbody moved back to the Buffalo area in 2019, found work as a housing specialist for a nonprofit and as a paralegal for a law firm.

These jobs did not promise the kind of future he hoped for. Then, in 2022, came the death of his stepfather, Robert F. Lewis, Jr., with whom he had been close.

All this led to a mental and emotional crisis in the spring of 2023. Inbody got in his car and headed south from Buffalo. He travelled first down the east coast of North America, then turned west toward California. By the time he reached Las Cruces, New Mexico, he had clocked more than 3000 miles.

A real-life parallel to a fictional killing by police

How Joel Inbody died is eerily similar to what happens in the closing scene of Cord Jefferson's 2024 film, *American Fiction*. This cinematic masterpiece, winner of the Oscar for best adapted screenplay, is about a middle-aged English professor named Monk. He comes from a prosperous, professional, African-American family. He is serious and super-talented. He would like to make it as a novelist but his books don't sell.

For a lark and for money, Monk and his publisher concoct a literary ruse. Monk writes a burlesque, a novel he personally abhors but that panders to woke clichés and pieties about black people in America. His publisher releases the novel under a pseudonym, entitles it *Phuck*, and puts out a story that the author is a thug whom police are looking for. Critics and influencers fall for the ruse because it fits what they want to believe. The book is a best seller. Monk gets rich.

At the end of the film, the book's author is to be given an award at a posh event of the publishing industry. Monk decides this is when he will reveal his true identity. Trouble is that FBI agents have also swallowed the cock-and-bull publicity. Ever eager to catch criminals, they have formed a collective fantasy that the book's author is a murderer on the lam. They burst into the awards ceremony, mistake the trophy Monk is holding for a gun, and empty their weapons into him. Riddled with bullets, Monk dies.

How Joel Inbody died

Unlike the movie protagonist, Joel Inbody had not engaged in any kind of trickery before he was killed on April 2, 2023. He had not assumed a false identity. By tracing his license plate, the border patrol agents knew who he was and where he lived. The similarity between Joel's case and Monk's is simply that armed officers of the law shared the mistaken belief that he was a dangerous criminal on whom they could legitimately unleash their killer instincts. It is what they wanted to believe. It was the lens through which they viewed the man. They saw him as prey and acted accordingly.

We know the facts about how Joel Inbody was killed in greater detail than about how Monk was killed at the end of the movie. The border patrol agents were wearing bodycams. Anybody can observe and study the footage on a home computer, thanks to the public investigatory report made by the law enforcement agency.

To understand why and how Inbody lost his life, the key fact is one Inbody was almost certainly unaware of as he travelled along Interstate 10 near Las Cruces NM on the final evening of his life. It is that border patrol officers routinely set up roadblocks or checkpoints on major highways as much as 100 miles north of the US/Mexico border. The purpose is to deter smuggling and illegal immigration. Traffic is diverted by cones or drums onto a sideroad where officers stop each vehicle and question the occupants, making sure they are US citizens or otherwise legally allowed to be in the USA. Several dozen such checkpoints are permanently in place on highways near the border. Additional ones are often set up temporarily.

Inbody encountered such a checkpoint near Las Cruces, about 30 miles north of the border with Mexico. He swerved around the cones and proceeded along Interstate 10.

I can understand from my own experience why Inbody failed to stop, because I still remember being spooked by such a checkpoint when I first encountered one almost 50 years ago, in 1977. My wife and I had rented a car in Albuquerque and were driving to El Paso. Suddenly, many miles north of the border, we came upon cones directing us off the highway. We did not know what they were for. We had never before driven near the southern border of the US. As Canadians, we had driven across the northern border many times into New York or Michigan, but we had never had to stop except at the border itself. Then as now, US border patrol does not usually set up such checkpoints miles away from its northern border.

The only place we had encountered such a checkpoint on a road trip had been a few years earlier in Paraguay, which was at that time a police state in an unending state of siege. Paraguayan friends had warned us that we might encounter a checkpoint on a certain highway, that the police might demand a bribe, and that if we failed to stop they might start shooting at our car. When we came across such a checkpoint, you can be sure we stopped.

Memories of Paraguay flashed across my mind as we approached the checkpoint north of El Paso. I was not terrified, just a little scared. Might these be fake or corrupt police? We had, of course, no need to worry. We stopped, showed our passports, and the officer waved us on with a friendly, "Have a safe trip."

Fast forward to Inbody in 2023. I suspect that like me decades earlier, he had never even heard of these checkpoints inland from the US-Mexican border. They were outside his experience. Probably, however, he had read or seen on TV the recurrent news about how drug cartels in northern Mexico sometimes set up fake police roadblocks, then rob, kidnap and even murder

motorists, news also of how crime and violence surrounding drugs and illegal immigration had spilled over into the US. Inbody, moreover, was alone and in a state of mental and emotional distress. Why he failed to stop is not hard to understand.

Inbody did not lead the border police in a high-speed chase. He proceeded along the Interstate and took an exit to a sideroad, creeping along at 40 miles per hour. When the agents blocked his car with theirs, ordered him to get out, and tried to smash his windows, he took off again, driving slowly.

The agents followed behind on desolate desert roads for almost one full hour. Eventually they immobilized Inbody's car with a spike strip and he was forced to stop. He got out and started walking off into the darkness – *walking*, not running.

One agent called to him, "We're not trying to hurt you."

Inbody replied, "You obviously are," and kept on walking.

In September 2023, WIVB-TV in Buffalo aired a three-part series on the killing of Joel Inbody, done by Luke Moretti, a first-rate journalist. The series stayed close to the audio-visual evidence of the agents' bodycams. Moretti had shown the footage to Jerry Rodriguez, a 26-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department and an expert on police use of force. Rodriguez said this: "I saw an individual who wanted to walk away. And what was the crime? What was the crime that caused him to lose his life? I think all of that sets bad in our stomach."

The TV series also quoted Tom Casey, the lawyer for Joel Inbody's mother, Kimberly Lewis: "There were six border patrol agents out there. One Joel. Why didn't they just bum rush the guy? Distract him and have a couple of guys come in from behind."

What actually happened is that one agent tackled Inbody, then fell backwards as Inbody fought him off with a short billy club, what is called a tire knocker, sold on amazon for \$10-\$20 and used by truckers to check tire pressure. At that point three other agents opened fire.

Inbody died almost instantly. As the agents huddled around his body moments afterward, they heard a sound coming from it. "He's just gurgling," one agent said.

Joel Inbody was mobbed twice

This book is about the mobbing Inbody underwent in 2018-2019 at the University of Massachusetts. It is the only mobbing he lived to write about. It harmed him occupationally, financially, socially and psychologically, but he lived to tell the tale.

The mobbing in Amherst was genteel, woke, postmodern, nonviolent, slow and steady. It was carried out by highly educated faculty and students in a university.

That academic mobbing helped set the stage for the second one, the one in the New Mexico desert. Here, too, individuals surrendered their individuality, formed themselves into a cohesive group, and acted collectively to get rid of Joel Inbody. Unlike the first mobbing, this one was crude, quick, extreme, violent, and lethal. It was carried out by ill-trained, trigger-happy border agents.

In my opinion, the three agents who shot Inbody, and possibly one or two of the others in that awful group, should never again be allowed to carry a gun.

I am honored to help introduce this book. I hope it results in greater public awareness of how it happens that otherwise good people get caught up in untruthful, fanatic campaigns to demonize and destroy a fellow human.