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FCJ-228 University, *Universitas*

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Abstract: To contend with the contemporary university is to engage on two fronts: to consider how to address the deep inequities for thought and economic survival brought about by the corporatization of the university, and to consider how the foundational exclusionary model of the university is prolonged and exacerbated by its neoliberal turn. What forms of resistance does the corporate university quell? What modes of thought does it silence? How to shift from the enlightenment model without giving in to the market-driven one? How to steal from the university the quality of what moves across it without being consumed by it? If the university leads resistance, it is not because of its enlightenment values or its entrepreneurial posture of innovation: resistance forms in what Moten and Harney call the university's 'undercommons' (2013). Undercommons are the interstices where thought bubbles into orientations as yet uncharted. Thought thrives in the interstices. There is great power here, where the university cannot steal from us, where there remains confidence in our knowing otherwise. When study happens, when an undercommons of thought reveals itself, it is not because the university has fostered it. It's because an enclave has grown in resistance to all the university devalues.
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> *It cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightment. (Moten and Harney, 2009: 145)*
>
> *Nothing About Us Without Us! (Charlton, 2000)*

Universities have a long history. The mantra of the *universitas* – 'the whole, the universe, the world' – has moved thinkers across the centuries: the university of al-Qarawiyyin, in Fez, Morocco, was founded in 859 followed by Al-Azhar University, in Cairo, Egypt, in 972. The first in Europe, the University of Bologna (the oldest university still in existence), opened its doors in 1088. In 1636, Harvard University became the first university in the United States.

In *The History of American Higher Education*, Roger Geiger (2014) demonstrates how in the context of the United States, universities have evolved over ten or eleven generations from the religious college with a classical curriculum in the seventeenth century to the contemporary research university. These changes were motivated in large part by Thomas Jefferson's vision of education as an instrument of democracy, 'a vision that gained momentum with the

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profusion of state universities in the nineteenth century, spurred by policies like the Morrill Land-Grant acts, and that reached its peak in the postwar era thanks to substantial federal and state support' (Williams, 2016).

In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings wonders whether universities have outlived their purpose as the safeguard of national culture whose promise it is to create tradition, to found mythologies, to form a Subject of knowledge. Is the university in the twilight of its social function? he asks (1997: 5).

The Subject of knowledge at the heart of the university's social function has historically been a privileged, male subject. From the earlier religious universities to the secular ones of our contemporary times, knowledge has been mediated by that all-seeing universalizing gaze. Centuries of university education took place before women were consistently admitted to the university: in the United States, it took more than 200 years until the first woman graduated in 1849, a period in which African Americans were still generally denied higher education. Indeed, prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most colleges and universities in the Southern United States prohibited African Americans from attending.

Though Gallaudet, a US college for the Deaf, was founded in 1864, successful accommodations for disabled scholars remain few and far between in the university (Garberoglio, Cawthon and Sales, 2017). The situation for the DeafBlind is even more dire: an astonishing number of DeafBlind students leave the university before completing their degree. Poet John Lee Clark, who took 19 years to finish his BA, writes:

> *DeafBlind people are capable of gaining knowledge, thinking critically, and synthesizing and applying information and thought. Yet only a handful of DeafBlind people have graduated from college […] Almost all the curricula and syllabi are streamlined around the assumption that students are hearing and sighted and can read at a certain speed. Schools are navigable for most students. But for DeafBlind students, they are nearly impossible. (Clark, 2014, loc 1736)*

The burden of exclusion also falls on classical autistics: DJ Savarese is the first non-speaking autistic to graduate from Oberlin College, one of only a handful so far in the United States: 'No one believed that a nonspeaking [autistic] could really get into, let alone go to, college', he

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writes (2017). Not only are the accommodations lacking in these cases, the neurotypical logic at the heart of the university's universalizing mandate actively excludes other ways of knowing. In Stephen Kuusisto's words, '[u]niversity faculty and administrators are not skilled when it comes to thinking about diverse learning styles or needs. In historical terms the university is built on a model of exclusion, a narrow model, one which suggests quite openly that only certain bodies and minds need apply' (2019).

The exclusive promise of excellence of the *universitas* has morphed under the corporate university.

> *'Innovation' is the new mantra of American higher education. It is invoked as an indubitable good by college presidents and government officials, business advisors and philanthropists alike. It typically refers to developments in technology aimed at delivering 'educational content' and transforming the way that universities themselves work, as well as developing products for businesses outside. (Williams, 2016).*

The corporatization of the university under neoliberal capitalism exacerbates its exclusionary framework by integrating the university more firmly into the economy, one of whose basic operations is to produce scarcity through inequality. 'Innovation' feeds right into the schism between overproduction and uneven resources: 'At its core, the innovation agenda represents the interests of the business elite over those of educators or students. At its worst, it is a property grab of a formerly public service' (Williams, 2016).

'At the present time, [...] the system of graduate education is no longer understood as being "like" a market; [...] graduate education is a market' (Bousquet, 2008: 206). In this model, what is innovated is capitalism itself. Ironically, the turn toward "useful" knowledge in the market-driven university – the complaint that the Humanities, for instance, produces little of marketable value – moves counter to capitalism's insatiable appetite for change. Flexibility should indeed be the new corporate mantra. Cathy Davidson, arguing for alternative pedagogies for the contemporary university, makes a similar claim, though not in the service of the neoliberalisation of thought (2017).

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With the decline of national and state funding for universities and the bolstering of the corporate university, tuition costs have increased, and with them student debt. As Williams writes:

> *Now the paradigm for university funding is no longer a public entitlement primarily offset by the state but a privatized service: citizens have to pay a substantial portion of their own way. I call this the 'post–welfare state university', because it carries out the policies and ethos of the neoconservative dismantling of the welfare state, from the 'Reagan Revolution' through the Clinton 'reform' up to the present draining of social services. (2006)*

The same period has seen a rapid increase in underpaid adjunct faculty and a decrease in tenure-track faculty positions. Bousquet argues that this trend is not due to a lack of jobs: 'We are not "overproducing PHDs": we are underproducing jobs' (2008: 40). The overproduction of contingency has become a new motor of exclusion: the casualization of labour 'is an issue of racial, gendered, and class justice' (Bousquet, 2008: 43).

The imbrication of late capitalism and the university goes both ways. Tenure-track faculty continue to accept the 'market bonus' while their adjunct colleagues teach twice or three times their workload for a third or less income. Very little resistance is waged by those who are increasingly positioned 'as a docile channel between performance systems as sender, and students as destination, or the researcher as channel for the interests of stakeholders' (Murphie, 2008).

The arts have not been spared from the trend toward the neoliberalization of research: as art-based doctorates increasingly become part of the university curriculum we see evidence of:

> *… hybrid forms of activity promising to capture for research the creative energies of artists working within the academic institution, [encouraging] a structure of standardized quality control and an accounting of quantitative results of the kind the arts have historically resisted. […] As in other sectors of the university, the emphasis on making artwork accountable has the consequence, whether explicitly intended or not, of formatting artistic activity for more directly economic forms of delivery to stakeholders' (Manning and Massumi, 2014: 85).*

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Art-based research is, in a sense, the canary in the coal mine: it makes starkly visible the way the 'creative economy' has infiltrated the university, 'prototyping [...] new forms of collaborative activity expanding and diversifying the pool of immaterial labor' (Manning and Massumi, 2014: 85).

Any discussion of the 'realities of the job market' by tenure-track faculty rings hollow: 'official disciplinary "solutions" all proceed out of the primary ventriloquism of the Clinton era, "I feel your pain" [...], but which vigorously reinstalls the market logic that produced that pain in the first place' (Bousquet, 2008: 45). Bousquet argues for fair wages: 'What if, instead of constantly adjusting ourselves (and our compensation) to "meet the needs of the market," we started to adjust or regulate the "market;" to meet *our* needs?' (2008: 208). While this would certainly be a good first step, the exclusions on which the university is founded will not simply disappear with market equalization: value can't be reduced to the market. As the exclusion at the heart of the *universitas* has demonstrated over centuries, you have to discount to count: the valuation of what is included depends on systemic exclusion. As adjunct faculty Joe Berry underlines, it is not uncommon for a tenure-track faculty member to use the term 'faculty' to refer only to the full time tenure-track faculty (in Bousquet, 2008: 14).

The current tiered system, while of a different economic make-up, is not so far from the historically exclusive so-called 'universal' university. Indeed, the Jeffersonian vision of education as an instrument for democracy was always classist, gendered, ableist and racist, despite any claim he might have made regarding his abolitionist views (Wiencek, 2012; Magnis, 1999). 'All men are equal' must read: all white propertied men are equal.

To contend with the contemporary university is to engage on two fronts: to consider how to address the deep inequities for thought and economic survival brought about by the corporatization of the university, and to consider how the foundational exclusionary model of the university is prolonged and exacerbated by its neoliberal turn. What forms of resistance does the corporate university quell? What modes of thought does it silence?

When Moten and Harney say that 'the only possible relationship to the university is a criminal one', they are charting the impasse: the debt that comes of studying is unpayable by most (2009: 145). 'Nearly 40% of all students who started their post-secondary education in 2004 will

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default on their student loans by 2023' (Ausick, 2019). Of this 40%, 20% will represent black college graduates compared to 4% of white graduates (Ausick, 2019). 'In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university' (Moten and Harney, 2009: 145).

How to shift from the enlightenment model without giving in to the market-driven one? How to steal from the university the quality of what moves across it without being consumed by it?

The university is renowned for creating sites of resistance. Protests against the Vietnam war began in universities – the Berkeley protests of the 1960s a prime example of university-based mobilizing. May 68, a movement that started as a student revolt against the Americanization of the university, growing into a general contestation of capitalism and colonialism on the part of workers as well, was also initiated by student occupations. Similarly, the Maple Spring of Montreal in 2012 began as a protest against rising tuition but quickly mobilized other sectors critical of neoliberal austerity measures and eventually brought down the government.

If the university leads resistance, it is not because of its enlightenment values or its entrepreneurial posture of innovation: resistance forms in what Moten and Harney call the university's 'undercommons' (2013). Undercommons are the interstices where thought bubbles into orientations as yet uncharted. Thought thrives in the interstices. There is great power here, where the university cannot steal from us, where there remains confidence in our knowing otherwise. When study happens, when an undercommons of thought reveals itself, it is not because the university has fostered it. It's because an enclave has grown in resistance to all the university devalues.

The corporate university won't be brought down with corporate logic. Nor will it be dismantled by a return to enlightenment values. Any future for the university relies on abolishing what it stands for. This includes its colonial past. How many universities were built from the plunder of slavery? (Smith and Ellis, 2017). 'The story of the American college is largely the story of the rise of the slave economy in the Atlantic world' (Wilder, 2013).

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All universities in North America are built on stolen Indigenous land. Universities remain active participants in the settler colonial project which includes the colonization of thought: '[indigenous] intelligence has been violently under attack since the beginning days of colonialism through processes that remove Indigenous peoples from our homelands' (Simpson, 2014: 13). Decolonial work in the university *as it is* is an oxymoron (Battiste, 2013). This is why the indigenous resistance movement *Idle No More* facilitates teach-ins in the community instead of in the university. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, 'my experience of education was one of continually being measured against a set of principles that required surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda' (2014: 6).

Robin D. G Kelley calls for taking a suspicious stance with respect to any reform of the university. Refusing to situate the university as an 'engine of transformation', he asks why we would commit to the reform of what is fundamentally exclusive. Integration is not the answer for Kelley. 'The fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by "simply" adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions' (2016). Inclusion, after all – whether in the name of race, or gender, or disability – assumes a normative center. As Clark emphasizes, accommodations remain tethered to existing systems of value (2014). Deschooling is necessary at every level (Illich, 1970).

Deschooling is never a call to stop learning. Quite the opposite: to deschool is to decouple thought from the market of knowledge. The first tenet of deschooling is a refusal of the universal. This requires a 'deinstitutionalization of value' (Illich, 1970: 80).

To recreate the university is not to rebuild it. It is to multiply what already moves across it. In the amplification of undercommon resistance, what is proposed is not a return. For what resists has never stopped resisting.

A redefining of the university could begin here, in the interstices where the studying has already begun.

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Biographical Note

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