The Perils of the Present, Theory, and the University

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Abstract

Vincent Leitch identifies the close connection between theory and the university when he suggests that claims of theory’s demise are also signs of anxiety about what is to come: the so-called passing of theory equally reflects wider fears about the role of critical thinking within an increasingly corporatized university. Drawing on Theodor W. Adorno’s notion of the “ripeness of decay,” this essay argues for the value of facing the domino effect of “deaths”—of theory, of the humanities and the university, of ideology and Marxism, of society and culture—head on, as ripe for thinking about the university of the future, which, as this string of deaths attests, necessarily entails thinking beyond the university. Two recent critiques of the university are particularly instructive for this project: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s work on the undercommons, and the attempts underway in Canada, in response to the calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to Indigenize the university. Putting these critiques and their emphasis on race and Indigeneity in conversation with the dialectical insights of Adorno’s Marxism and Horkheimer’s view of critical theory, the essay contends that a Marxism replete with a renewed commitment to critique is in order, given the unavoidable need to theorize the very conditions of possibility for critical thinking in the face of the assaults on the humanities and the university. Rather than a backward-looking, nostalgic view, in which the loss of the humanities is bemoaned, such an approach begins with the premise that we have yet to see humanistic study realized, precisely because it has historically obfuscated its own conditions of possibility—namely, settler colonialism, slavery, and the ongoing legacies of dispossession and economic and racial injustice.

Introduction

Despite knowing better, it is hard not to be nostalgic for the late 1980s and the moment within Marxism which produced Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, fondly known to my graduate cohort as the Big Red Book. Here is how Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg characterize that moment in their foreword to the volume:
The rather broad title of this book [...] signals our belief in an emerging change in the discursive formations of contemporary intellectual life, a change that cuts across the humanities and the social sciences. It suggests that the proper horizon for interpretive activity, whatever its object and whatever its disciplinary base, is the entire field of cultural practices, all of which give meaning, texture, and structure to human life. Moreover, the title situates Marxism at the center of such developments and thus suggests the need to transgress the line that has traditionally separated culture from social, economic, and political relations. (i)

Looking back on the previous twenty years prior to the publication of the Big Red Book, Nelson and Grossberg note both a set of critical practices that limited the interpretive power of Marxism—foremost among them the relegation of culture to a position of secondary importance—and a reductiveness that was characteristic of the critique of the base-superstructure model of culture. These latter, reductive critiques, they suggest, not only undervalued the constitutive role that reflection theories played in producing alternative interpretive frameworks, but also misread their significance in relation to “all historically or politically grounded interpretation” (3). The volume aims, then, to recognize the indebtedness of contemporary Marxist thought to its past and, simultaneously, to negotiate the very boundaries of Marxism.¹ Nelson and Grossberg characterize this myriad of relations—of past to present concerns, of traditional to alternative Marxist theories, and of culture to economics and politics—in a number of suggestive ways. In one formulation, they assert that “Vulgar Marxism, that overdetermined and mythically hypostatized category, remains the anxiously regarded double of contemporary Marxist writing” (3); and later in the essay, they comment: “The problem for Marxism is thus twofold: on the one hand, to deterritorialize its own discourse in response to changing historical realities; and on the other hand, to reterritorialize itself in order to constitute that very response” (11).

So wherein exactly lies the temptation toward nostalgia in looking back some 30 years to 1988? To stay with the language of territory and space, I want to suggest that what has been lost that was then very much alive is the sense that theory, and Marxist theory in particular, is part of the struggle. The general paradigm within which Marxists and non-Marxists alike theorized held that ideology was a terrain of struggle—not the only terrain (at least for Marxists), but a crucial one nonetheless. I was particularly struck by this sense of loss when I recently reread Stuart Hall’s essay on “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”—delivered in 1990 at a conference on “Cultural Studies Now and in the Future.” Reflecting on the nature of theoretical work, Hall tellingly chooses what he calls “the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with the angels”; as he asserts, “the only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency” (265-66). This kind of theoretical struggle—registered in the language of “staking” out one’s claims (266)—not only defines what it is to do theory, but also justifies its pursuit.² For, in the end, the struggle is...
never only academic: theoretical work is always in tension with political work; they are intimately related to one another, but are never the same thing. Theory, Hall explains, is “a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect. […] I do think,” he concludes, “there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics” (275).3

To borrow (loosely) from Perry Anderson’s analysis of modernity and revolution, what existed in 1988 that no longer exists today is the “imaginative proximity” (325) of a cultural politics grounded in a belief in the effectiveness of teaching. While Fredric Jameson in “Cognitive Mapping” identifies the difficulty of furthering a socialist politics at this very time, I am talking here less about a proximity to social revolution, in the sense Anderson identifies with modernity, and more about the nitty-gritty of institutional practices and politics and the specific loss of the spaces of theoretical-political work caused by the lack of teaching jobs in the 1990s and the consolidation of the managerial university—both of which have meant that today we must fight over the university itself.4

So what does this mean? On the one hand, I would join the chorus of others who have pointed out how truly dire the situation is. Marc Bousquet convincingly and depressingly shows just how ill-equipped and resistant faculty are to joining the rest of the world and seeing themselves as workers, beleaguered or otherwise. Within the university itself—let alone beyond it—the widening gap between tenured and contingent workers has led not to solidarity amongst all faculty but rather the increasing identification of tenured faculty with the university administration: “insofar as there is now, and will likely remain, a large gap between the work experience of the flexible and the tenured, we might be pressed to conclude,” Bousquet argues, “that what remains of ‘artisanal’ faculty practice since 1970, at least in part, has been preserved by the compliance of the tenured with management’s development of a second tier of labor” (82). At my home institution, Simon Fraser University (SFU), our president threatened that he would begin to treat the faculty like workers if they pursued unionization. Likewise, and again using SFU as an example, our administration’s recent push to institute a Learning Outcomes and Assessments (LOA) framework in order to gain accreditation was met largely with an increasingly common resignation: LOAs are coming anyway, so we might as well just go along with them. In such a state of affairs, faculty governance, while certainly something to protect and preserve, offers no real assurances. And we all have stories like this; we are all confronted to varying degrees with a dramatic shift in the very language of the university. In place of the visions of social justice underlying the Open University, we have profit-mongering MOOCs; in place of political activism on campuses, we have “community-engagement,” which, along with everything else, has 3 As Hall underscores, the reciprocal relations between social movements and theoretical moments mean that “movements provoke theoretical moments. And historical conjunctures insist on theories: they are real moments in the evolution of theory” (270).

4 Jameson comments about the possibility of socialism at that time, “since the sixties, everybody knows that there is a socialist discourse. In the TV serials there’s always a radical; that has become a social type, or, more accurately, a stereotype. So while people know that a socialist discourse exists, it is not a legitimate discourse in this society. Thus no one takes seriously the idea that socialism, and the social reorganization it proposes, is the answer to our problems” (358). Given this, Jameson concludes, “our task […] has to do with the legitimation of the discourses of socialism in such a way that they do become realistic and serious alternatives for people. It is in the context of that general project that my more limited aesthetic project finds its place” (359).

5 The acronym MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Courses. These online courses were initially developed in 2006 and became popular in 2011 as universities such as Stanford and MIT designed courses following this model. They were touted as a revolution in higher education with their promise of free access and unlimited enrollment.
become quantifiable (my university boasts that it is “one of Canada’s most community-engaged research universities” [Simon Fraser University], however one might measure that).

But in some ways, this is all old news. In the wake of a spate of enlightening books about the neoliberal university, a kind of ritualistic masochism has set in, in which fateful facts about the death of the university are rehearsed and repeated. There is even a particular affect to the ritual that leaves one awash in a mix of self-loathing and resentment toward one’s students, the parents of one’s students, the university, and one’s colleagues; in short, toward “the bad new days,” as Brecht would say. There is, however, an “escalator” effect to all this, to borrow Raymond Williams’s term: trying to go back and find the “good old days” tends to be an exercise in infinite regress. Just as we settle nostalgically on 1988, we learn that in the period from 1976-1989 the number of non-faculty university professionals rose 123%, while in the same period the number of faculty only rose 30% (Nelson and Watt 40). Go back another ten years or so and Clark Kerr, then Chancellor of UC Berkeley, identified among the pathologies of the new “multiversity” the development of a new class of faculty entrepreneurs, the elevation of the sciences above the humanities, the increasing influence of the federal government in education, and the face of the new administrator who, above all, must be a good moneymaker for the university. With each retrospective period, new bad days emerge. And, just as in Williams’s reading of the receding vision of merry Old England, which keeps getting farther and farther away the more you try and locate it in a particular moment or place, this change results not from historical error but from historical perspective (Country and the City 10). This is not to say that things today are not bad, but rather that there is no going back to find the future. As with Mark Twain’s famous declaration, perhaps reports of the university’s death have been greatly exaggerated?

This conclusion is in some sense Vincent Leitch’s. In his essay “Theory Ends,” he addresses our current situation and suggests that the fates of theory and the university are intimately connected: fears about the death of theory, he suggests, are also fears about the death of the university and, more generally, about the role of critical thinking in a market-driven, corporatized, neoliberal world. In short, as I have argued elsewhere, the status of theory is inseparable from the status or future of the university—a connection that would not seem to bode well for either theory or the university (see Lesjak). For Leitch, however, the passing of theory is, paradoxically, a sign of its success. As he notes in an interview in Theory Matters, “[t]heory has triumphed: the discourse of literary and cultural studies is permeated with it. Perhaps the posttheory phase of dissemination makes it look as though theory has somehow diminished. But it has not diminished at all. Quite the contrary” (70). Just as the necessity for feminism, for instance, would disappear in the wake of a successful feminist revolution, Leitch suggests that the disappearance of Theory with a
capital “T” in the wake of the current proliferation of theories and fields registers its pervasive and continuing vitality; the fact that it has spread across the entire field of English Studies means that it no longer needs separate dispensation. From Affect and Animal Studies to Whiteness, Fashion, and Disability Studies: all are markers of the success of theory. Moreover, even as Leitch recognizes that theory is of its time, he is confident that in some form or other it is here to stay. “The shifts from high theory to posttheory to vernacular theory,” he concludes, “show theory not as moribund but, on the contrary, in a new viral form responsive to its time and place, materially engaged, socially symptomatic, critical, opportunistic, a changeling” (127). But how are we to square this supposed success with the desperate state of the university today, with the fact that, absent some kind of “major collective effort, higher education as we know it will be over within a decade or two” (Nelson and Watt 12)? Or, to come at this question from a slightly different angle, might there not be some value in facing the domino effect of “deaths”—of theory, of the humanities and the university, of ideology and Marxism, of society and culture—head on, as ripe for thinking about the university of the future, which, as this string of deaths attests, necessarily entails thinking beyond the university? Such an effort is by necessity a Marxist project, precisely because we are now in a situation where the boundaries of the university have become fully porous: to borrow from Jacques Derrida’s language, it is impossible to distinguish the “inside” of the university from its “outside.” Or, as David Harvey frames this relationship, within the neoliberal project universities were singled out as “an opportunity as well as an issue, for these were indeed centres of anti-corporate and anti-state sentiment (the students at Santa Barbara had burned down the Bank of America building there and ceremonially buried a car in the sands)” (44). Harvey notes that Lewis Powell, who led the charge in the Nixon administration to change anti-corporate attitudes, recognized that “many students were (and still are) affluent and privileged, or at least middle class, and in the US the values of individual freedom have long been celebrated […] as primary. Neoliberal themes could here find fertile ground for propagation” (44). In the period since Leitch offered his sanguine view of the future of theory, the question of the tandem futures of theory and the university has become more pressing than ever. Theory, or just plain thinking and reading (more on this below), in the age of Trump faces ever-more daunting challenges, as the defunding of higher education continues apace and the humanities come increasingly under attack as either obsolete or extravagant in a neoliberal regime dictated by market values alone. Given the unavoidable need to theorize the very conditions of possibility for critical thinking in the face of assaults on the humanities and the university—and hence contra recent turns away from critique toward various kinds of formalism—a Marxism replete with a renewed commitment to critique, or to what Max Horkheimer called “critical” as opposed to “traditional” theory, is in order.
Approaching Death and Decay

In his dedication to *Minima Moralia*, Adorno introduces his “reflections on a damaged life” (the subtitle to *Minima Moralia*) by considering what it would mean to “truly carry through,” in a way Hegel fails to, the dialectic between “bourgeois society and its fundamental category, the individual” (17). For Adorno, Hegel’s failure is the failure of liberalistic thinking: “the individual as such Hegel for the most part considers, naively, as an irreducible datum—just what in his theory of knowledge he decomposes” (17). Adorno, writing during World War II and just afterwards, deems philosophy to be perfectly poised to once more return to the matter of individual experience precisely because the individual is in a period of decay. The very nullity of individual experience makes it ripe for social analysis:

The dialectical relationship between individual differentiation and social enfeeblement engenders, in Adorno’s particular historical moment, an ability to see the individual in a truly dialectical way, such that “part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere. If theory lingers there,” he concludes, “it is not only with a bad conscience” (18).

What I want to take from Adorno’s aphoristic meditations on decay is a methodological approach, namely the necessity of thinking the university today dialectically, which, in part, entails recognizing the immiseration and nullity of the university, its “being-ill [mal-être]”, to use Derrida’s term (87). One shorthand version of this nullity is captured in the celebratory sloganeering by universities and their administrations around the idea of excellence. As Bill Readings argues in *The University in Ruins*, the “empty idea of excellence” has replaced that of a national culture, the propagation of which formed the mission of the “modern” university as envisioned by Kant and Humboldt (160; passim). In the move from culture to excellence, any overarching ideological purpose for the university has been lost. As a result, the content of the knowledge taught or produced within the university is less and less important. For Readings, this shift helps to explain the heyday of leftist theory in the 1970s and 80s: such criticism, as long as it was done excellently, in no way impeded the smooth functioning of institutions dedicated to (nothing more than) excellence (13). This might be one way to qualify Leitch’s sanguine view of theory as a “changeling” (127). Does not the vision of theory as multi-tasking and mutating, at once engaged and opportunis-
tic, symptomatic and critical, empty it of any determinate content? Is not going viral, after all, fully in keeping with market logic and its emphasis on dissemination at the expense of any kind of value or content? Readings’s own solution is equally problematic, however. Like Leitch, he essentially does away with any content for the idea of the university when he proposes to replace the empty idea of excellence with what he refers to as “the empty idea of Thought” (Readings 160). In both cases, form trumps content, which is, I would suggest, a sign of the times.

Neither of these “solutions” constitutes, properly speaking, a dialectical approach to “ends,” as either the end of an idea—be it the idea of theory or of the university—or as the end toward which theory or the university aims. As Adorno’s approach to individual experience suggests, renewed attention to the individual is not meant to fortify the boundaries between the individual and the social (thereby resurrecting liberalistic thinking), but rather to see in newly critical ways how profoundly social all individual experience is and hence to sublate the very category of the individual—not in the name of the general but rather of the concrete and particular. For example, in his aphorism “Do Not Knock,” Adorno writes that one effect of modern technology is that “the ability is lost […] to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly. Those of cars and refrigerators have to be slammed, others have the tendency to snap shut by themselves, imposing on those entering the bad manners of not looking behind them, not shielding the interior of the house which receives them” (Minima Moralia 40). From seemingly insignificant and innocuous movements, gestures, attitudes (cheerfulness or sociability, for example), and types (“the regular guy,” “the popular girl” [58]) to the structure of thinking itself, Adorno attempts, as David Held phrases it, “to create conditions through which the social world could once more become visible” (“Adorno”). Writing on the “morality of thinking,” Adorno underscores that “knowledge can only widen horizons by abiding so insistently with the particular that its isolation is dispelled. […] Dialectical mediation is not a recourse to the more abstract, but a process of resolution of the concrete in itself” (Minima Moralia 74).

Likewise, in the case of the university today, a dialectical approach needs, at all costs, to undermine and unsettle the idea of the university as an autonomous space protected from the larger social world. On the one hand, the conditions of academic labor increasingly mirror those of flex-labor markets, structured as they are to maximize flexibility on the part of administrators, benefit from the pressures of a reserve army of labor armed, in this case, with PhDs, and reward and capitalize on economic competitiveness and scarcity in the form of market differentials, retention awards, superstar salaries, a shrinking supply of jobs, and the exploitation of adjunct faculty. Rising tuition costs, budget cuts, and the privatization of public education limit access to universities and contribute to the widening gap between an elite class and everyone else. On the other hand, changes in university culture have kept pace with these eco-
economic transformations: not only is there an increasing divide between administrative and faculty cultures, but most aspects of university life are now assessed through what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge refer to as “the needle’s eye of exchange value” (33; my translation)—whether in the form of “learning outcomes,” quantitative assessments of research, or a course’s relevance to acquiring a job. Accountability, as Readings pithily notes, is identified, de facto, with accounting (119). And the list of the ways in which capitalist culture and its logic and practices pervade the university goes on, from the subcontracting of cafeteria, grounds, and cleaning services to building projects, institutes, and endowments financed by private corporations, which threaten academic freedom and make public education beholden to corporate interests. In short, the university as enclave no longer exists, if it ever did.9

In his essay “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties,” Derrida helpfully historicizes the desire to delimit the boundaries of the university, unpacking Kant’s The Conflict of the Faculties to show how Kant aims to “[define] the unity of the university system, in other words the border between its inside and its outside” (93). As Derrida demonstrates, however, even Kant had difficulty maintaining this distinction; an “invasive margin” that Kant attempted to define as external to the university—one example, interestingly, being non-academic institutes—continually threatened its “inside.” While one of Derrida’s interests is to trace how impossible Kant’s project is today, his larger point is to read in this untranslatability “the university’s inability to comprehend itself in the purity of its inside, to translate and transmit its proper meaning. Since its origin, perhaps” (93). Derrida, nonetheless, begins with his belief in the discourse of responsibility around which Kant fashions his entire discussion of the university. In short, he believes in what he calls “the task of another discourse on responsibility” (92), which would, potentially, radically transform the university precisely by letting go of the idea that the university itself, from within, is up to this task (92). And, crucially, Derrida adds to the language of the “task” that of debt: “It is not certain,” he writes, “that the university is equal to this task or this debt; and this is the problem, that of the breach in the university’s system, in the internal coherence of its concept. For there may be no inside possible for the university, and no internal coherence for its concept” (92). Once the university’s lack of coherence is recognized, Derrida asks how we might newly position ourselves in relation to the university. Ultimately, then, the nature of responsibility to or for the university for Derrida rests on the question of orientation, on the need to determine the best lever with which to pry open the current discourse on responsibility. Hence the mochlos of his title, which in Greek refers to something like a wedge or beam on which to lean in order to displace a boat or open a door. Not surprisingly, the possibility of such an opening is left indeterminate, shifting between the necessity of renewal and remaking, of “risking everything,” as Derrida says, and of maintaining connections between
such a future and what has come before. The task of a new foundation, in other words, “remains for us given—to, to what I do not know, to doing or thinking, one might have once said.” Although he means to move us beyond the present, to think a discourse “measuring up to the novelty, tomorrow, of this problem” (92; emphasis in original), perhaps Derrida’s inability to imagine the university in terms of some future content saps the university of much of its revolutionary energy, as with Leitch and Readings. Derrida himself speaks of his pathos, despair, and distress, which may in the end too easily become ours as well.

Woe Speaks: “Go”

Adorno was no stranger to pathos and distress (although he did see despair as the final ideology). Yet his commitment to form—to a negative dialectics—was equally a commitment to a kind of content, even if at the most general level, and was expressed in his claim “[w]oe spricht vergeh” (Negative Dialektik 203), a rough translation of which would be that suffering commands its own elimination, the need to pass into the past, captured in English as “[w]oe speaks: ‘Go’” (Negative Dialectics 203). While hardly prescriptive in any sense, this claim nonetheless grounds Adorno’s project of philosophy in a commitment to what Marx calls a “ruthless criticism of everything existing,” which, in turn, necessarily entails a notion of praxis, of thinking and doing, of the impossibility of one without the other (12). As Adorno writes about thought in the final aphorism of Minima Moralia, “[t]he more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world” (247). Since the advent of capitalism, to state the obvious, capitalist exploitation has been the condition of thought. But what has changed today, I am suggesting, is that that conditionality makes itself more and more felt in the university at all levels. Attempts to preserve the university’s “inside,” as a result, appear increasingly obscene: Fish’s “always academicize” (e.g., 80), a counter to Jameson’s “always historicize” (Political Unconscious 9), reveals its own gross conditionality when Fish moves from this call to his assertion that universities need not, as a matter of principle, provide a living wage or decent healthcare but should simply follow industry practices, as Nelson points out (181). Likewise, attempts to open the university onto the world are equally obscene. For example, the idea of “community-engagement,” one of the celebrated principles at my home institution—in the midst of deep budget cuts and the increasing class and educational divisions that accompany them—largely translates into collaboration with corporations and industry partners and an increasing reliance on private largesse at the expense of public funding. Structural inequalities remain in place, privilege is preserved, and real social engagement is replaced by feel-good charity and gestures of good-will, such that the very notion of “engagement” loses all meaning.

10 Fish describes this “choice” as follows: “Universities can pay wages with two intentions: (1) to secure workers, whether faculty or staff, who do the job that is required and do it well and (2) to improve the lot of the laboring class. The first intention has nothing to do with politics and everything to do with the size of the labor pool, the law of supply and demand, current practices in the industry, etc. The second intention has everything to do with politics—the university is saying, ‘here we declare our position on one of the great issues of the day’—and it is not an intention appropriate to an educational institution” (32). Writings in 1976, with a sense then that “America was on the way to disintegration without radical social change,” Richard Ohmann provides an important counter-argument to Fish’s approach: “I don’t see how teachers and departments and university faculties can make intelligent professional choices without consciously making them political choices. Much of what’s wrong in the profession reflects the needs of advanced capitalism and is remediable only through deep social change” (304-05).
In his essay “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Max Horkheimer directly links this kind of thinking to traditional theory. Traditional theory for Horkheimer—epitomized today by the various “new” isms, from New Historicism to New Formalism and New Darwinism, all of which share a fundamentally empirical approach to the world—“[presupposes] the present economy” (206) and treats the theoretician as separate from the social. In short, it is a capitulation to the given.

The seeming self-sufficiency enjoyed by work processes whose course is supposedly determined by the very nature of the object corresponds to the seeming freedom of the economic subject in bourgeois society. The latter believe they are acting according to personal determinations, whereas in fact even in their most complicated calculations they but exemplify the working of an incalculable social mechanism. (197)

In contrast, “critical theory” for Horkheimer is an “activity” that has as its object society as a whole and which is, “in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgment” against the “tensions” produced by capitalist society (227). This does not mean that critical theory does not change and evolve in the face of new permutations within capitalism, but it does mean that thought must be driven continually by the necessity of “reducing” these tensions if it is to function as anything other than bad faith. These are, to be sure, basic Marxist tenets. But, in the context of thinking about the university, Horkheimer’s insistence on the aim of critical theory, its substantive content—namely the elimination of injustice—gains new purchase today, given the unavoidable need to theorize the conditions of possibility for critical thinking produced by the current neoliberal regime’s assault on the very idea of the university. The seeming impossibility of such a project, which, as Horkheimer recognized, would require “a radical reconsideration, not of the scientist alone, but of the knowing individual as such” (199), may be the best marker of its transformative value, of its “distance,” as Adorno would say, “from the continuity of the familiar” (Minima Moralia 80).

Although it may now seem like another lifetime, the global Occupy Wall Street movements in 2011 showed that we were in a position to entertain the impossible in a way that had seemed impossible only a short time before the protests began. After all, who would have predicted Occupy Wall Street even two years before it happened? The Occupy movement and its offshoot, the Occupy Student Debt campaign, seem, to my mind, a powerful lever, in Derrida’s sense, with which to orient our thinking about the university and beyond precisely because they highlight the socially shared experience of indebtedness, whether in the realm of global finance or student debt loading. To speak of debt peonage is also, as the Occupy sites demonstrated, to imagine alternative forms of indebtedness and of the public good, in which current structures of debt would be inconceivable. As Richard Dienst’s The Bonds of Debt suggests, the valences of indebtedness are multiple and cut many ways: they are forms of indenture, sociality, division, and solidarity,
the privilege of the 1% and the potential of the 99%. As Dienst writes, “[i]t is only in the experience of the insistence of indebtedness that one can keep faith with the need to be rid of it, and the desire to construct different bonds in common” (136).

Likewise, to speak of a new kind of theory, as Horkheimer does, in which the critic’s “profession is the struggle of which his own thinking is a part and not something self-sufficient and separable from the struggle” (216) is to imagine a future university in which current structures of thought would be unrecognizable, a future in which the university itself would have no future. Two recent approaches to and critiques of the university are instructive here: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s work on the undercommons, and the attempts underway in Canada, in response to the calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to Indigenize the university. In The Undercommons, Harney and Moten characterize the university in the United States as synonymous with professionalization and the project of enlightenment: professionalization, as they describe it, drawing on the history of colonization and the enclosure of the commons, is best thought of as “a circling, an encircling of war wagons around the last camp of indigenous women and children” (34). Precluded in this “encircling act” is any ability or desire to question the foundation of the university or to confront “antifoundation out of faith in the unconfrontable foundation” (34). No wonder, they write, that pragmatism and critical realism rule the day: “These loyalties banish dialectics with its inconvenient interest in pushing the material and abstract, the table and its brain, as far as it can, unprofessional behavior at its most obvious” (34). In the face of the university’s refusals and limits, the only stance possible, as Harney and Moten put it, is a “criminal one” (26) in which subversive intellectuals work at once within and against the university to undermine its mission, steal its resources, and join with those who have been excluded—the shipped, the Maroons, the poor, the queers—to destroy it. Against calls for either the restoration or the reform of the university—the former epitomized by Fish’s mantra to “always academicize,” the latter by Readings’s approach, among others—Harney and Moten want instead to sabotage the university, to leave it behind, and to reclaim in its wake its so-called waste, those who are excluded, whose labor escapes the enlightenment dictates of the university. For, at its broadest, the university’s dictates privatize the social individual and, on the ground, they destroy any meaningful form of critical thinking. In this sense, the university has always been “in ruins,” or, more accurately, an agent of ruin: professionalization is not only a “matter of administering the world, but of administering away the world (and with it prophecy [their term for a form of organization that is defined by acting in the world])” (36).

As their notion of prophetic organization as opposed to institutional administration indicates, Harney and Moten’s project is not only a negative one: coupled with the necessity of working within and against the

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12 As Harney and Moten’s references to the shipped and to maroons suggest, the history of slavery and of the Black radical tradition more broadly provide many of the central terms and figures for their vision of the undercommons; these figures also embody the kinds of dialectical reversals that characterize their thought. The “shipped” from the middle passage, for example, are also “smugglers” (The Undercommons 139), the Maroon community a collective force warring against the university.
university is the need to work with and for an alternative, dissonant form of thinking that would no longer go by the name of theory.13 Along with critique and refusal, then, Harney and Moten shift our attention away from the university toward what they call “study,” a form of intellectual activity which is continually taking place outside or beyond the constraints of the university—or, as their use of the term undercommons is meant to highlight, in a space that surrounds or forms the under-side of the university. “Study” is everything from being in a workshop to sitting on a porch to working in a factory together; it is the “incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities,” the recognition of which “allows [us] to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought” (“Studying through the Undercommons”). Against the institutional structures of the university, the undercommons and the practice of study are constituted by the kinds of common bonds to which Dienst refers. Equally, the undercommons and the conceptual terms and tools that animate Harney and Moten’s vision of struggle and resistance are indebted to the Black radical tradition and specifically, as they note, to Black radical women.14 “To enter this space,” Harney and Moten explain, “is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back where the commons gives refuge, where the refuge gives commons” (Undercommons 28). Crucially, this space not only contains and enacts an “alternative history of thought” but also an alternative form of subjectivity, which is “about not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it is about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood” (28). The title of Moten’s recent trilogy, “consent not to be a single being,” succinctly captures the nature of this sense of dispossessed subjectivity. In The Undercommons, Harney and Moten liken this form of subjectivity to the way hobos would “ride the blinds” or hide between cars when they hopped trains in order to remain undetected. For them, “riding the blinds” embodies “a kind of radical, non-locatability,” or “the impossibility of being located” (139), a kind of homelessness that is not solely about deprivation, but instead a recognition of the genocidal damage done by the embrace of home: “Homelessness,” Moten acknowledges, is undoubtedly “hard.” But, he goes on,

13 As Harney explains in The Undercommons, as well as elsewhere, the formulation of [working] within and against the institution is something they take from Mario Tronti, who used this formulation in relation to the state. And “working with and for,” as Harney elaborates, means “studying with people rather than teaching them” and “studying with people in the service of a project, which in this case I think we could just say is more study. So, that with and for, the reason we move into more autonomous situations is that it grows, and we spend less time in the antagonism of within and against” (147-48).

14 As Jack Halberstam describes Harney’s notion of capitalist debt, it “presumes a kind of individualized relation to a naturalized economy that is predicated upon exploitation. Can we have, [Harney] asks, another sense of what is owed that does not presume a nexus of activities like recognition and acknowledgment, payment and gratitude. Can debt become a principle of elaboration?” (5). In contrast, Harney and Moten characterize their debt to Black radical women in terms of the theorizing and planning of what we have called the undercommons as the place where you can no longer just be yourself and never were. Their planning is our queer debt, our black debt, our trans debt, which is of course not ours (“From Cooperation”).
civil society, with all its transformative hostility, was mobilized in the service of extinction, of disappearance. The shit is genocidal. Fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one. (140)15

As the many figures of the undercommons attest, no reform or transformation of the university, however far-reaching, could in any way house the maroon or the “cosmic hobo,” since their very being and mode of study embodies something that cannot be institutionalized, encircled, or enforced, that refuses the university as a “ministry of information,” that imagines knowledge and the world otherwise.

The calls to action to Indigenize the curriculum and the university in Canada are illustrative for thinking through these issues on the ground. This mandate not only highlights the disjunct between the university and alternative ways of being and knowing, but also raises demanding questions about what it would mean to take seriously—and to its full extent—a politics of decolonization. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made public its report, which dealt with a wide range of issues involving the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, from the system of residential schools that operated from the 1870s to the 1990s to past and current conditions for Indigenous peoples in child welfare, health care, the justice system, language and culture, and the education system.16 The calls to action that addressed education specifically called on all levels of education, from K-12 to post-secondary institutions, to work towards Indigenizing the curriculum by including Indigenous content in courses and teaching Indigenous history, including the history and legacy of residential schools, of treaties and the dispossession of lands, and of past and recent contributions to Canada by Indigenous peoples. At the local level, individual schools and universities were to devise programming, provide teaching training, and develop a broad-based strategy for implementing these changes.

At my home institution, the SFU-Aboriginal Reconciliation Council (SFU-ARC) was formed, and out of this council and other units on campus various initiatives were introduced, including a Decolonizing Teaching workshop for faculty across the curriculum, which I participated in. So far so good, one might think. But—and here Harney and Moten come back into play—what happens when everything you are learning about the history of Indigenous peoples and their current status within Canadian culture makes it more and more evident that the very notion of decolonization in the context of the university and its approach to Indigenization can never be anything more than a metaphor? In a trenchant analysis of what a genuine politics of decolonization would look like, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang note “the ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decenter settler perspectives” (2). Treated as a politics easily merged with other existing campaigns for social justice, the specificity of decoloniza-

15 Writing in the midst of the Jim Crow era, Zora Neale Hurston uses the language of haunting and of ghosts to describe the place of the White settler: “The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting” (153).

16 The last residential school in Canada, run by the Canadian government and located in Saskatchewan, did not close until 1996. In total, upwards of 150,000 Indigenous peoples were taken from their communities and forced into residential schools. For comprehensive analyses of the residential school system based on extensive archival research of government documents about the system, see Milloy; Miller.
Occupy offers a concrete example of the incommensurability of the aims of current social justice movements and the politics of decolonization: for movements like Occupy “to truly aspire to decolonization, non-metaphorically, they would impoverish, not enrich, the 99% settler population of the United States.” Tuck and Yang underscore the hard realities and “unwritten possibilities” of such an ethic of incommensurability when they state that “[d]ecolonization eliminates settler property rights and settler sovereignty. It requires the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people” (26).

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks [...]. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn’t have a synonym. (3)

Within the university, in particular, decolonization or Indigenization is made synonymous with the inclusion of Indigenous content in courses or talking about Indigenous ways of knowing without letting this work disrupt or unsettle business as usual. Nothing about the current structure of knowledge, or what Tuck and Yang refer to as “settler colonial structuring” (3), is in any way fundamentally challenged; nor does the need arise to do things differently or to radically change the way we go about thinking about thinking. Certainly the existence of a “settler future” is never questioned. As a result, the violence of settler colonialism is neutralized, turned into a past event rather than an ongoing structure grounded in the dispossession of Indigenous land and Indigenous relations to the land: “In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage” (5). In order, then, for decolonization in a literal rather than a metaphorical sense to occur, land, power, and settler privilege have to be given up (21); drawing on Frantz Fanon’s notion that “decolonization will require a change in the order of the world” (qtd. in Tuck and Yang 2), Tuck and Yang stress that it must involve “repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations” (31) and is thus incommensurable with, although nonetheless connected to, other struggles against imperialism and colonialism. In contrast to “reconciliation,” which entails “rescuing settler normalcy [… and] rescuing a settler future,” decolonization is “accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (35). As Tuck and Yang conclude, “the Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone—these are the unwritten possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability.” Seen from this perspective, “decolonization is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere” (36)—an elsewhere that, to return to Horkheimer’s language, would necessarily threaten rather than “presuppose the
current economy” (206), and require a radical rethinking of “the knowing individual as such” (199).

As the radical nature of both Harney and Moten’s politics and the politics of decolonization attest, these emancipatory projects deepen and extend rather than jettison critique in the sense that Horkheimer invokes when he speaks of the inseparability of thinking and struggle, or that Harney and Moten ascribe to dialectics, “with its inconvenient interest in pushing the material and abstract, the table and its brain, as far as it can” (The Undercommons 34). Critique in its simplest formulation is the double-edged exercise of self-consciously reflecting on one’s own position in relation to any object of study and connecting that object to the mode of production within which it is produced and functions, a process perhaps most succinctly rendered in Jameson’s appeal to “always historicize.” The idea of postcritique thus makes no sense, unless the aim is to uncouple theory, or thinking more generally, from the world in order to preserve its innocence, an innocence akin to the settler innocence of which Tuck and Yang speak. This innocence is perhaps best captured in what Jeffrey Williams has referred to as the “new modesty” in criticism and its abjuring of a politics altogether. Should we wish to forego such a fantasy, new forms of critique and new forms of struggle—within and beyond the university—must be the order of the day. In short, contra Stanley Fish, saving the world and saving the university (or the humanities, or reading) are not, and never were, discrete projects, a point that the deeply imbricated histories of settler colonialism and the education system powerfully bring to the fore. The choice is simply between a theoretical complacency and complicity with neoliberal politics, as the turn to various forms of postcritique encourage, or a renewed commitment to a critical theory that would render the world as we know it and the structures and institutions within which we currently think obsolete. Rather than a backward looking, nostalgic view, in which the changed nature of the university is bemoaned, such a commitment suggests that we have yet to see humanistic study realized, precisely because it has historically obfuscated its own conditions of possibility. Instead of further divorcing the work of the university from external justifications, as Readings advocates, or trying desperately to protect its illusory “inside,” as Fish suggests, or succumbing to its increasingly soul-deadening, instrumentalizing protocols, such an approach directly engages the content of the social in which critical thinking is embedded, and in the process dialectically sublates its own death by radically transforming the structure and content of humanist study.

Works Cited


18 Linking the “new modesty” to the defunding of the public university and the reduced expectations that go hand and hand with neoliberalism, Bruce Robbins speculates that “[p]ostcritique, were it ever to be widely embraced, seems likely to produce a criticism that is closer to fandom. In lieu of critically examining literature or the culture it is part of, postcritique encourages a rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer.”


