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Introduction: Left Intellectuals and the Neoliberal University

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Introduction: Left Intellectuals and the Neoliberal University

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This *American Quarterly* forum builds on a symposium held in 2011 at Wesleyan University on the relationship between academia and activism. Our symposium was inspired by a pair of concerns: that academics too often either romanticize activism as the site where “real” political work happens or else ascribe an abstracted radical politics to quotidian academic work. These concerns emerge especially within interdisciplinary fields—fields like American studies, women’s and gender studies, queer studies, and critical race and ethnic studies—that are grounded in social movements and becoming institutionalized in an increasingly corporatized university.

Gathering together scholars from a range of disciplines, political orientations, and institutional locations (from recent doctorate to center director, from both public and private universities), the symposium examined academia and activism as linked sites, social institutions, and practices. We aimed to move beyond claims that academia and activism are already interconnected (a claim that can bypass a thorough analysis of the specificity of each category) while also resisting the call to “bridge” scholarship and political action (a call that re-creates a presumed distinctness between knowledge or intellectual labor and the larger social world). Instead, we focused on the duality of intellectual and activist or political labor, traced the intersections and gaps between activist and academic work, and historicized dichotomies of theory and practice, “ivory tower” and “real world.”

The essays in this forum are reflections that contributors wrote after the symposium. Each focuses on the challenge of doing meaningful political work both at and from the university. Ranging from analytical to polemical to lyrical, the essays explore the contradictions, possibilities, and challenges of pursuing transformative politics within an institution that threatens to reproduce precisely the oppressions that left intellectuals seek to transform.

At the close of the forum, we include four interviews we conducted with activists (and activist-scholars). Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore and Samhita Mukhopadhyay and Gwendolyn Beetham of Feministing were part of the

Academia and Activism project but unable to attend the symposium. They spoke with us about the intersections of queer and feminist intellectual and political labor. We have included two additional interviews: one with Jasbir Puar on the travels of *homonationalism* as a hybrid activist-academic “buzzword”; and one with Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair, and Karma Chávez on the queer archival and visionary work of the Against Equality collective. The interviews complement and extend the forum’s focus by reflecting on the creation and circulation of radical knowledge outside and on the borders of the contemporary university.

Locating the Political

“*Where* are left intellectuals looking when they look to purportedly real politics?” This question guides Matthew Garrett’s essay, which explores the “peculiarly spatialized political desire” among left intellectuals for a “real politics” sited elsewhere. Examining these spatial politics, cultural geographers have mapped the production of *academia* and *activism* as a binary organized around false inside/outside logics—seeking ways to disarticulate the binary, to find spaces outside it, or to historicize its dual constitution.¹ The essays in this forum, along with the interviews, similarly point to the disjunctive and complex geographies of activism and academia.

Garrett analyzes such spatializations as a “romance” with an out-of-reach “authentic activism” that misrecognizes connections between the grounded location of an academic writer and politics writ large. Aimee Carrillo Rowe joins him in critiquing these inside/outside logics, instead mapping the “vexed convergences” between her political and social communities and the institutions she navigates as a teacher-scholar. And, as Scott Lauria Morgensen and Dylan Rodríguez emphasize, the university constitutes itself through settler colonialism, on native land. Their essays draw attention to the displacement, dispossession, and expropriation intrinsic to the space of the university campus. At the same time, all of the contributors argue that the radical knowledge produced by left intellectuals can forge and sustain our collective political imagination—both inside and outside the academy.

Left Intellectuals/Radical Knowledge

Given the “university’s current mission to reproduce the professional-managerial class and to mirror the institutional arrangements of corporations,” Purnima Bose asks, “What are the prospects for progressive faculty activism”? Doing radical work within the university is a challenge for academics who aim for

social transformation—academics we'll call *left*.² In a 2004 essay that resonates with this forum, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney are pessimistic about the possibilities for faculty to “embark on critical projects within [academia], projects that would turn its competencies to more radical ends.”³ Despite shared skepticism, however, the essays in the forum find both peril and possibility in radical academia.

Rodríguez, writing from a public land-grant university in California, confronts racial apartheid and genocide as a “continual condition” of the academy. Rodríguez builds on legacies of black radicalism, Native American feminism, anticolonialism, and prison abolition to argue that radical intellectuals’ inhabitation of existing institutional sites opposes structures of domination—even if, for most colonized peoples, “the academy is never home.” For Morgensen, writing from Queens University in Canada, the “settler academy” requires Indigenous methodologies that link Indigenous knowledge practices with projects of decolonization. Such projects destabilize the settler academy “by marking, exceeding, obviating, and disrupting the colonial conditions of knowledge production” through decolonial practices aimed at terminating colonial authority. At the same time, Morgensen warns of the reabsorption or incorporation of Indigenous knowledge by liberal, multicultural universities—and the state.

The Corporate University

Such multicultural or liberal pluralism is a hallmark of the revitalized corporate university. Many have termed the intense marketization of today’s university *neoliberal*. *Neoliberalism*, as Jeff Maskovsky writes, focalizes a number of important developments: “consumerist, market-driven learning; the privatization, corporatization, and branding of the university; the decline in public spending on higher education; . . . outcomes assessment and other efficiency-oriented interventions; and the casualization of academic labor.” Although, as Bose points out, the conjoining of commerce and education dates back to at least the nineteenth century, there are “greater imbrications of private industry and academia today, which profoundly impact the production of disciplinary knowledge [and] the working conditions of the professoriate.”⁴

As of 2010, “almost three-quarters of the people employed today to teach undergraduate courses . . . are not full-time permanent professors.”⁵ Bose and Garrett thus urge us to focus on faculty activism on campus, especially around labor conditions.⁶ Drawing on her work with a progressive faculty caucus at Indiana University, Bose reflects on a shift from collective to individual forms of faculty activism over the last decade. Still, she concludes, “faculty contri-

butions to activism are far from inconsequential and can help advance social justice and globalization from below.” Yet both Rodríguez and Maskovsky suggest that neoliberalism is an insufficient framework for understanding the contradictions of today’s university. For Rodríguez, this is because the university’s genocidal logics exceed neoliberalism, subjecting radical intellectuals to “surveillance, discipline, and low-intensity punishment.” For Maskovsky, the term *neoliberalism* occludes related yet distinct social developments, such as neoconservative academic delegitimation, the fragmentation of the public sphere, and what he calls “the crisis of the crisis of the political”—the political horizons curtailed by abstracted theorization.

The Professional Critic

Within the corporatized university we encounter less a gap between academia and activism than a contradictory field where politicized intellectual labor is simultaneously promoted and contained. Corporatization emphasizes the salability of knowledge within an academic job “market” and can lead to what Sycamore calls “trickle-down academia.”⁷ In this situation, left academics are tempted to repackage intellectual work as activism or conflate “the teaching of classes and the publishing of essays on race, class, gender, and sexuality” with “social action.”⁸ Mara Kaufman emphasizes the dynamics of the extraction of knowledge from communities in her discussion of “individualized academic careerism.” She contrasts the collective practices of El Kilombo Intergaláctico—“a community that works toward dignified housing, production of and access to healthy food sources, and cooperative self-employment in Durham, North Carolina”—with the normative self-management of graduate students and scholars in the academy, who learn to cultivate themselves as human capital. Professionalization and individualization can lead to a disengagement from shared knowledge and resources in common among academics and activists both.

The contemporary university, as Janet R. Jakobsen observes, increasingly “makes use of certain forms of ‘real world’ activity,” especially those “focused on governance” and aligned with “imperatives like ‘effectiveness’”—in, for example, projects of “civic engagement and service-learning.” But it can also host vital political work. Jakobsen reflects on recent activist-academic collaborations organized through the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) that combine (scholarly) critique and (political) advocacy in potentially transformative ways. For example, BCRW hosted the first national congress of domestic workers’ organizations, which led to a collaboratively developed report that

was critical in achieving the New York State Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. As the Against Equality collective argues, intellectual labor both inside and outside the university can redistribute and create new forms of knowledge that, in Chávez's words, can "change people's lives." For these writers, left or radical critique means doing political work with and as, rather than for or about, the communities within which we are situated.

Toward a Grounded Critique

Grounded critique entails *specificity* and *connectivity*—an analysis of the "lines of connection" between purportedly separate fields of struggle both within and outside the university, as Garrett puts it. For him, the "contradictory location of the intellectual" in the current situation can lead to abstractions or misrecognitions that block meaningful political interventions. Like Garrett, Carrillo Rowe understands the contradictory location of the left intellectual in terms of romance—this time, with Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual. She advances a queered organic intellectual who strategically situates herself within multiple communities: "Chican@s, indigenous people, queer folks, third world women, antiracist whites—and . . . the small but critical Left in the academy." Both Garrett and Carrillo Rowe show us that grounded critique can be difficult when academia and activism foreground professionalization and individualization, rather than relationality or collectivity.

Similarly, Puar describes conducting a workshop with FIERCE!, a New York City queer youth of color activist group, on *homonationalism*. She resisted unidirectional forms of teaching to instead work in partnership with them—as "their work already is based in a deeply entrenched analytic and critique of homonationalist state practices." The projects Jakobsen describes also combine "deep critique" (of the kind recognized as theory by the academy) with political organizing; both Jakobsen and Puar emphasize collaboration. Academia and activism are collective endeavors, built on creative, cooperative energies. As Kaufman urges, we should be working from a place of "entanglement" rather than isolation.

There are promises as well as risks for an academic activism—and activist academia—in the current moment. The successes and setbacks of recent protests on campuses highlight the precariousness of collective action at the university.⁹ And collaboration between academics and activists can be challenging because of the hierarchical terrain of knowledge production, not only the difficulties "translating" academic arguments or framing what Mukhopadhyay calls "grassroots theory" but also the tendency of academic work to turn

“people’s lived struggles” into a “dead object, museumified and mummified for elite consumption,” in Sycamore’s words. But even as neoliberalism instrumentalizes knowledge, its “limits, limitations, and failures,” to use Maskovsky’s phrase, open possibilities for resistance. In an increasingly corporatized “non-profit industrial complex,”¹⁰ intellectual work is sometimes seen as inefficient or even nonpolitical—“simply analysis” or “too intellectual” as Nair puts it. In this context, as Beetham remarks, academic resources can help sustain political labor (as in the BCRW collaboration “funding the feminist online movement”).

These contradictions lie at the heart of this forum. Despite the challenges, all the contributors recognize that intellectual labor can spark (and has sparked) social change. New knowledge projects can, for Conrad, help us “imagine other possible, more equitable worlds outside the framework of neoliberalism, and to work our way towards them.”¹¹ This work is contingent, tentative, and necessary—as hard as it is hopeful.

NOTE: See “Beyond the Page,” on American Quarterly’s website, for interactive features, links, and supplements that accompany this forum.

Notes

1. See, for example, R. M. Kitchin and P. J. Hubbard, “Research, Action, and ‘Critical’ Geographies,” *Area* 31.1 (1999): 195–98; Larch Jukes Maxey, “Moving Beyond from Within: Reflexive Activism and Critical Geographies,” in *Radical Theory, Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?*, ed. Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchen (Kelowna, B.C.: Praxis (e)Press, 2004): 159–71; Craig Calhoun, foreword to *Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. C. R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xiii–xxvi.
2. The domain of the “left intellectual” is contested; we use *left* (rather than *progressive* or *radical*) to highlight the materialist critique that grounds many of these conversations.
3. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text*, no. 79 (2004): 108.
4. There is much scholarship on the corporate or neoliberal university, beginning with Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918) and including Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). See also Gregory Jay’s review essay, “Hire Ed! Deconstructing the Crises in Academe,” *American Quarterly* 63.1 (2011): 163–78.
5. American Federation of Teachers, 2010 Survey on Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty, www.aft.org. See also Robin Wilson, “Tenure, RIP: What the Vanishing Status Means for the Future of Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 4, 2010; and the Coalition on the Academic Workforce reports, www.academicworkforce.org.

6. On collective bargaining and faculty unionization, see “Forum: The Future of Faculty Unions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 24, 2011; Scott Jaschik, “Has Faculty’s Role Eroded?,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 9, 2012; Cary Nelson, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); and the 1997 special issue (no. 49) of *Social Text* on the Yale University 1995–96 strike, “A Yale Strike Dossier.”
7. For a comparison of the market and merit logics of “academic freedom,” see Evan Watkins, “Academic Freedom/Academic Market,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108.4 (2009): 781–96. See also Randy Martin, introduction to the special issue “Turning Pro: Professional Qualifications and the Global University,” *Social Text*, no. 79 (2004): 1–11.
8. Eric Cheyfitz, “The Corporate University, Academic Freedom, and American Exceptionalism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108.4 (2009): 701. See also Keya Ganguly, “Introduction: After Resignation and Against Conformity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108.2 (2009): 240; and Timothy Brennan, “Intellectual Labor,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108.2 (2009): 395–415.
9. A few recent examples include the months-long student strike in Montreal (see Marc Bousquet, “The Biggest Student Uprising You’ve Never Heard Of,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 23, 2012; and CLASSE, Coalition large de l’Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante, www.stopthehike.c), the hunger strike at the University of Virginia (see Living Wage at UVA, www.livingwageatuva.org), and recent crackdowns on protestors at the University of California, Davis (see Dylan Rodríguez, “Beyond ‘Police Brutality’: Racist State Violence and the University of California” and Sunaina Maira and Julie Sze, “Dispatches from Pepper Spray University: Privatization, Repression, and Revolts,” both in *American Quarterly* 64.2 [2012]: 301–30).
10. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, eds., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 2007).
11. Alternative knowledge projects include the free university movement of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary open access and community education, and radical librarian and archival work like the Alternative Press Centre (www.altpress.org) and the Queer Zine Archive Project (www.qzap.org). Karen Brodtkin discusses the free university movement in a clip from the symposium available on *American Quarterly*’s website.