Introduction to the Academy and What Can Be Done?

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The academy and what can be done? This is more than a merely rhetorical question or an abstract concern. It has material weight and texture and depth. I write to you from Charlottesville, Virginia, just a couple of weeks after white supremacists—a new-old thing reemerging in our times, times that have never quite gone away though they may have quieted in flow and become more pronounced in ebb—marched on the campus of the University of Virginia. I joined the faculty here in July of 2017 and was not prepared to see the campus encroached upon from the outside. What has now made Charlottesville resonate on an international stage—I was in London and Exeter and was questioned if I lived in that Charlottesville; yes, I do, I’d say—is the relation of inside and outside the university. There have been white supremacist rallies of the spectacular sort in May, July, August, and October of 2017. But only the one in August, dubbed A11–12, had the outsiders march on the interior of the campus.

OUTSIDE

Such a word, “outside,” we know by now, is a misnomer and an imprecision of stunning proportion and measure. Outside the university would presume the categorical distinction of—and possibility for pure practice, pure space, pure thought for—something called an inside. Yet we who are committed to Black studies, Indigenous studies, Asian American studies, Latinx studies, women and gender studies, Critical Ethnic Studies have witnessed and extended a thought tradition that have each in their own ways demonstrated with an acuity and precision that the very concepts of inside and outside, private and public, are creations, creations in the service of the project of white supremacism and its epistemological limits. The capacity for the
distinction—inside/outside, private/public—would come to be racialized by those that could, according to Western thought traditions, be self-possessed and, thus, possess things. The distinction would obtain for those that have the capacity to own things. Epistemological delimitation, the capacity for purity and thus an inside and outside, is a modern construction of thought, a modern construction of a way to think resistance to relation, a modern construction for a way to think asociality.

Yet it would not be going too far or be inaccurate to say that primarily cis-gender white male-identified persons walked past my apartment building not minutes from the university campus with the intentional and expressed purpose of ongoing colonizing, antiblack racist, antiqueer practices of fearmongering and terrorizing. What I mean to say, in other words, is that there is no presumed inside and outside the academy, even if there is an inside and outside of my apartment. The university and white supremacists that seek to keep ongoing white racialist violence and terror know this, know this delimitation of thought no longer works in the service of a thought project and tradition of pernicious, rapacious, and stunningly old but never inconsequential violence. White supremacists have always been inside the university. That they walked the corners of my university makes very real the urgency of this issue if it had not been previous.

**DISORIENTATION**

Scenes and sights and sounds that recede into the normative and quotidian, that recede into memory, recede because of current moments of unfamiliarity. But they are unfamiliar only insofar as they mark what we have allowed to recede, what we have allowed to go unnoticed. It is easy to think of white supremacist rallies on campuses—in Charlottesville, or protests in Berkeley, or the racial terrorizing in Boston, campuses all—as spectacular because they are unfamiliar.

Yet, the unfamiliar is the spectacular such that the division between—the categorical distinction of—the spectacle and the mundane are disoriented, undone. Disoriented and undone like the (non)distinction between the inside and the outside. The counterintuitive is intuitive for someone else. Disorientation, in other words, names orientation for others, orientation otherwise. The distinction between the two is not categorical, not constant, certainly not about being, not about existence. But disorientation does, at the moment of feeling, mark connection to pasts, connections to that which could be otherwise.
This themed issue of *Critical Ethnic Studies* slips between the presumption of safety that the supposed distinction between outside and inside is thought to provide, that the distinction between the spectacular and mundane is supposed to hold. We seek, in this themed special issue, to interrogate knowledge production in academia, to consider the ways disorientation is what is necessary, disorientation as a kind of making of the mundane spectacle, allowing the quotidian and ordinary to flash before us, in haptic force, as a perpetual moment of crisis.

Disorienting first, then slipping between the space, diving in the break, the essays consider what is possible, which alternative structures and logics can be practiced and performed, what otherwise modality of thought, enfolded, collective, improvisational action can emerge from the space of the neoliberal university. To extend conversations about the efficacy of Black studies, Indigenous studies, Asian American studies, Latinx studies, women and gender studies, critical ethnic studies, to extend and enlarge the conversations to a material practice of thinking and breathing and performing the plural possibility of alternative logics is urgent in these times. Such plural possibility would be boldly irreducible. Such plural possibility would be the *grounds* of operation. The neoliberal university is a choice that vivifies the political economy, a choice that the political economy thus in reciprocity vivifies for the university. But as a choice, it is but one of an infinite range of choices that could be made.

The university is a site of struggle and contestation. And what the university attempts is against the flourishing of survivance and abundance. The line and root of the word “abundant” marks relation to an overflowing quantity, a large number, marks an exorbitance of sufficiency, an exorbitance of plenty. The university thrives in the antithesis to abundance, thrives in producing knowledge as a limited resource and good, a limited supply and store. The university is as much a place of inhabitation and dwelling for neoliberal logics of privatization and financialization as it is an idea, a concept, a way to think antisociality as the grounds for relation.

The university is a gathering of resources but in our neoliberal world, such gathering is at the expense of the intensification of displacement and degradation through settler colonial logics of land acquisition, privatization of knowledge production and the adjunctification of faculties, the making students into customers, and the financialization and profitability of research projects. In its normative function and form, then, the university exists to make some knowledges major and others minor, and then to short-circuit and extinguish minor knowledges, minor epistemologies, because
they constitute an ongoing, thoroughgoing, and unceasing variation around a theme: the performative force of the critique of Western civilization. The university, in its normative function and form, is against the flourishing of abundance. Of course, in music at least, major and minor scales mark a relation to normative Western knowledge regimes, such that the very concept of the major and minor would be interrogated by otherwise music epistemologies. The minor knowledges the university attempts to extinguish, in other words, are only minor insofar as they mark relation to otherwise modalities of thought and practice.

So we turn to what minor knowledges do to the university, what such epistemological displacements produce as a disruption within and without the university, minor knowledges as a meditative practice of collective improvisation as a knowledge project of the commons. So we write and think and imagine otherwise possibility, the as if of Derrida. The as if that Derrida describes imagines that what the university is and what it could be is a space of distinction.

Riffing on Derrida, the university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth. No doubt the status of and the changes to the value of truth can be discussed ad infinitum . . . But these are discussed, precisely, in the university and in departments that belong to the humanities. These immense questions of truth and of light, of the Enlightenment . . . have always been linked to the question of man, to a concept of that which is proper to man, on which concept were founded both humanism and the historical idea of the humanities.1

We are always struggling, in other words, over the conceptual object that allows to cohere the thought related to such an object. To think about the academy and what can be done is to interrogate what—no, really, who—is supposed to occupy the space of the university, who is its pedagogies and plans created to satiate, who is its imagined audience, who is its imagined thinker that would come to learn, and in the service of what kind of world is such learning, such audience, such pedagogy, created? We are precisely always at the concerns that critical ethnic studies elaborates as an interdisciplinary field, as a way of thought, a way of life. We must now interrogate and make disoriented the very man that is considered to occupy the space of thought and action from within the university. But we must now also interrogate and make disoriented the man who produces the conceptual possibility of a hermetically sealed place of thought as well.

Turns out, it’s the same concept, the same subject, dancing around and producing itself, thinking itself into being. Derrida wants to treat the university
as if it is what it says it is, as if it is a space of flourishing thought, as if it is a place of critical inquiry. And this against its modernization, its corporatization, its militarization. How to work within, think within, practice poetics of peace and equity from within the space while also remaining critically aware of how the space would attempt to exploit the very projects against the university in the service of the flourishing of the neoliberal logics of the university? This is the challenge. It is also the opportunity. It is a gap to which we must be mindful, a space and break of possibility.

It is in that space that the flourishing of radical thought and mood and movement can occur. I follow Cedric J. Robinson’s line and root, his theorizing of the Black Radical Tradition as the thinking that charges my imagination for imagining what can be done with the university. Robinson, in *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, offers that though myths exist that order the normative world, because they are mythical, they can be changed. What he offers, in other words, is a way to consider otherwise possibilities for thought, that the myths that order the normative world are but a choice made. And there is hope insofar as we can choose differently, choose alternatives.2

In this way, the essays collected are not just about what the university has excluded, what it has produced in terms of pain and suffering—though the university as concept and as a space of operation certainly has produced pain and suffering—but they are also about what can be done, how we can think, what we can be by utilizing the university as a site of inquiry and object of knowledge. We attempt ways to reimagine, to recast, to think myth differently of the university. This is a practice and process of imagination.

And we can do this imagining as practice and process because the university that emerges from within Western knowledge regimes, epistemologies, and mythologies lacks the capacity to make impossible, to make a connection. We can reimagine and create otherwise mythology because connection as possible remains with us, is that which we seek and desire and outpour and extend. It is this failure, the failure to produce severance, a failure that produces the occasion for flowering in which we find joy, pleasure, knowledge as a collective project and practice. And, following the theorizing and thought Robinson made available for my own thinking, the essays collected here are not to exhaust the possibilities of discussing the problems or potentials of the modern university, but simply to suggest that therein is a potential for otherwise, for alternatives, to what is known and conceded as normative. We are not exhausting the conversation but suggesting that otherwise possibility has already been realized, is already there.3
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THE UNIVERSITY . . .

The logics of the modern university have always been mired in the project of racial thought, categorical distinction, and the exploitation of labor. This exploitation is dual pronged through the colonization of land that necessitated the removal of Indigenous people through genocide, thus veiling the labor produced to make the land available for use—a colonization process that is still with us, that remains, that echoes and reverberates and has material consequence in our times—as well as the importation of Africans as free labor to continue to work the purportedly "available" land for the project of racial purity.

Such a project is of concern to the university because it is at once a thought project, a way to think the world and refuse relationality, a way to think the world and the possibility of discovering a modern liberal subject, unencumbered by crises it throws into place. Sylvia Wynter would call this the "coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom," would say that this is the problem of modern Man, that such an entity is created by thinking one's genre of the human as the only and the perfectability of the human, a genre that would be a gift of white, landed gentry.4

The university in its modern constitution was constructed for this entity, for modern Man as first a theocentric, then political, then biogenic thing. We might even begin to think of disciplinarity and the way it is utilized in the university to sequester knowledge, to make it categorically distinct and, thus, pure knowledge. We might then say, after Wynter, that the problem of the modern university is disciplinarity and its overrepresentation. The overrepresentation of disciplinarity occurs by a genre-specific thinking that relation of knowledge and enclosure, the relation of knowledge and borders, are natural, axiomatic, universal. This discrete form of knowledge production is genre-specific, produced by modern Man, and produced as the only way to produce knowledge and, thus, overrepresents itself. We must disorient relations to knowledge production, we must make the quotidian and mundane aspects of thought projects available for analysis, we must think the relation between the quotidian and spectacular eruptions of the logics of white supremacist thought.

With the current order of neoliberal administration for universities, diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism are each used with varied intensities to leave the racialist logics in play and place, to leave the logics of racial hierarchies and the ordering of knowledge production along the streams of divisibility and purity. Such a university during flashpoints of spectacular crises—
think lawn fire torches being marched on public or private campuses while marchers proclaim “blood and soil”—call upon the diversity, inclusion, and multicultural forces of the university for public relations that faces outward, that does the work of marketing and calls upon sequestered knowledges that are purported to be specifically “about race” or “about gender” or “about sexuality” to manage such crises.

Such knowledge is not considered to be more than a response to spectacular crisis. This because the modern university does not consider its very existence as an instantiation of a long crisis, as old as Lisbon 1442 before 1492 and Cristoforo Colombo’s oceanic traverses on the blue. And current institutional arrangements make apparent the fact that the various thought projects that fit under the name and heading of critical ethnic studies—in their variousness and plurality—are both needed as exploitable resources to prove a kind of diversity and multiculturalism but also are knowledges sequestered to the margins. We seek not simply a centering of marginal voices and knowledge productions but an obliteration of the very choreographies of marginality and violence that emerge from geographies of normativity.

This means struggling against settler colonialism and new world enslavement as not just a problem that arrives on campus but one in which campuses participated. For example, Craig Steven Wilder in *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* states, “Colleges arrived in the Americas in response to European nations’ attempts to seize territories and hold off rivals. European powers deployed colleges to help defend and regulate their colonial possessions and they turned to African slavery and the African slave trade to fund these efforts” and that we should think expansively beyond the campus itself because, “The American college trained the personal and cultivated the ideas that accelerated and legitimated the dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans.” That is, thought practices on college campuses included colonizing anti-Indigenous and antiblack racist logics and logistics as the formation for knowledge production for the making of the normative, liberal scholar-subject. Learning about and being trained in colonizing and antiblack racialist logics would be a means to producing a learned subject, one that was prepared for the world that would include the proliferation of such logics, the making normativized and quotidian the practices of violence, violation, dispossession, displacement, and exclusion. Knowledge, in other words, was produced in the university in order to justify and make entrenched the logics of coloniality and its racialist hierarchies of exclusion.
To ask what can be done with and about the academy, the university, is to become an antagonism for its current survival. It is to ask how knowledge production can be reorganized to account for the history of racial capitalist violence and exclusion, it is to ask to give an accounting that cannot be easily folded into the logics of inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism. To ask what can be done with and about the academy is to reach back and consider epistemological foundations for the space and place of the university as a modality through which knowledge was presumed to be produced. To ask what can be done with and about the academy, the university, however, is not to ask if knowledge will end. Rather, we move toward the end of a knowledge production that produces as it is produced by modern Man, the genre-specific man and its overrepresentation. Sylvia Wynter says the problem of the current epistemological ordering is “the overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human,” and the knowledge produced by such overrepresentation is what we seek to unsettle. What will knowledge be once it is released from its being enclosed by the logics of the very possibility of universality, abstraction, stilling. We are after a poetics, a practice, that unsettles, disorients, imagines otherwise possibility.

To ask what can be done with the academy is to ask what can be interrogated, and in Sylvia Wynter’s terms—unsettled—about and within the academy as a space and place of thought. Honing in on the presence of Black studies, and black people, on college campuses, Wynter offers, “Blacks would be allowed on the campus as a group, admitted to have even a culture, as long as this ‘culture’ and its related enclave studies could be made to function as the extra-cultural space, in relation, no longer to a Wasp, but now more inclusively to a White American, normatively Euro-American intra-cultural space; as the mode of Chaos imperative to the latter’s new self-ordering.” Here then too is the idea that the presence of minoritarian difference is harnessed by the academy, not to unsettle, but to produce anew the occasion for white self-ordering, the very possibility for white thought, something perhaps like—after Toni Morrison’s Africanist presence in American literature—a minoritized presence of the academy. We might go as far as to say that self-ordering itself is the project of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the project of Western thought-theological, Western thought-philosophical, Western thought-historical, Western thought-ethical. Self-ordering is “the ‘ground’ of our present order of knowledge in which [the biocentric, Western superstition] belief system is narratively articulated
on the basis of the premise that the human is a natural organism or a purely genetic being.”

Self-ordering is consistent with, and extends, what Sara Ahmed would come to offer regarding the models of diversity and inclusion, keywords of the modern neoliberal university. “I suggest that diversity can be offered as a narrative of repair, as what allows us to ‘recover’ from racism by recovering the very signs of injury . . . my aim is not to suggest that we should stop doing diversity, but that we need to keep asking what we are doing with diversity.” What this means is, like Wynter’s self-ordering, diversity too is a conceptual frame and tool for the ongoing settlement, the ongoing colonizing logic, of the academy to be what it has always been. Diversity as narrative repair seeks to enclose difference in the service of the management of crisis difference it is considered to carry. What to do when our presence is crisis, when we carry crisis in the flesh, and also how to produce a crisis against the crisis of neoliberalism and its current iteration in the university? That is, how can we be in the university as a fundamental antagonism that is not immediately captured in the logics of its enclosure, the logics of diversification and disciplinarity?

Again, the challenge but also the possibility.

The academy has never been a benign space but was and continues to be a staging ground, a site of struggle and contestation, over the meaning of knowledge production. Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira underscore the imperialist logics—always deeply connected to settler logics—of the academy:

We argue that the state of permanent war that is core to U.S. imperialism and racial statecraft has three fronts: military, cultural, and academic. Our conceptualization of the imperial university links these fronts of war, for the academic battleground is part of the culture wars that emerge in a militarized nation, one that is always presumably under threat, externally or internally. Debates about national identity and national culture shape the battles over academic freedom and the role of the university in defining the racial boundaries of the nation and its “proper” subjects and “proper” politics. Furthermore, pedagogies of nationhood, race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture within the imperial nation are fundamentally intertwined with the interests of neoliberal capital and the possibilities of economic dominance.

The imperialist impulse, the colonizing logic, of the academy is in need of interrogation that moves beyond the rhetorical flourish because such a
flourish is easily and quite often incorporable into the project of the neoliberal university, such interrogation is often the mark, the trace, the evidence of diversity, inclusion, “freedom of speech,” “free thought,” and the like. But Wynter warns, again, “our present order of knowledge can give us no knowledge” of the possibility for unsettling, of what can be done, with the academy. Such knowledge would be the practice of freedom, would be a kind of knowing, following Denise Ferreira da Silva, *at the limits of justice.* It would be a knowledge that is not cognized according to the perspective, the vantage, the space-time of the normative epistemology for Western knowledge production.

The university is a site of contestation and struggle because what is being argued over, and argued against, is epistemology itself, the method of knowing and the path to such knowability. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge, a theory for thinking itself, and is a way to investigate how knowledge is produced in particular ways to think the world. To separate the world out through racial, classed, and gendered distinction is European in its line and root. The epistemology of dividing the world into types, types that receive benefits, is a product of European thought. This issue of *Critical Ethnic Studies* stages possible interventions into the university without a kind of naïveté that believes thought is neutral, that attempting to critique the university from inside the academy cannot be easily folded into the project of neoliberalism.

Yet, we do not give up. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that the university is “one of the last places for legitimated inquiry,” but that, by calling on the university, “we are invoking a community of practice that is focused upon the propagation and promulgation of (settler colonial) knowledge.” To produce knowledge as a practice of resistance, to produce knowledge behaviors that can unsettle the university, to produce, following Tuck and Yang, “knowledge that the academy does not deserve,” is to engage in a dance and play and sonification—which is another way to say, a poetics practice—of otherwise possibility.

**OTHERWISE POSSIBILITIES IN THIS ISSUE**

How to practice a way of life against the “fraught relationality to the persistence of settler colonialism, which always threatens to reappropriate, assimilate, subsume/consume, and repress Indigenous voicings and visuality, their forms and aesthetics, within its hegemonic logic of domination.” We recognize the constraints only insofar as we seek to overcome them; we recognize constraint in order to creatively inhabit, unsettle, and dispense with them.
This is what Jigna Desai and Kevin P. Murphy call for in “Subjunctively Inhabiting the University”; they call us to an attention to failure. For those of us who are concerned with ethnic, gender, women, sexuality, feminist, and queer studies, according to Desai and Murphy, “unlike other arts and humanities, [these disciplines] are seen as constitutively failed in that they cannot account for themselves intellectually and ontologically as disciplines.” Moreover, they argue, “The logics of quantifiable metrics and the positivist calculus of diversity are always indexed to the supposed indebtedness, lack, and failure of ethnic and GWSFQ studies.” But what can be made from purported failure, what does failure produce, what is the generativity of failure? We might be in the terrain of folks like Jack Halberstam, who writes convincingly of failure as a queer art, failure as the practice of queer imaginings, queer longings, queer potentialities. Attending to failure does not mean that we are at the end in general but perhaps the end of a knowledge project that assumes the genre-specific overrepresentation of Man. That failure, then, would be a gift.

Perhaps collectivity is a way otherwise. We have included in this issue a statement by Paola Bacchetta, Fatima El-Tayeb, Jin Haritaworn, Jillian Hernandez, SA Smythe, Vanessa Thompson, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard—a collective—titled “Queer of Color Space-Making in and beyond the Academic Industrial Complex.” What are the possibilities for writing in a collective voice, and how can such writing produce a failure of the neoliberal project of the university, a failure to produce modern Man and his singular, individual, enclosed thought? The writing that the form takes is just as much of the argument as the content in this statement about making space against the settler logic of taking and claiming and owning space through displacement. While taking critical aim at a universalist “We,” they still utilize the nomenclature for such writing, marking the tension between the world as it is and the world as it is imagined otherwise. To critique the “We” while utilizing it is to redeploy it, is to think as if it were not enmeshed and entrenched in a settler logic of knowledge production and its genre-specific humanism. Their collective writing a gift, they state:

The strategies we invent divest from the competitive values of the colonial neoliberal university, and from its racially skewed logics of merit, respectability, and gender and racial exceptionalism, and instead invest in polyglot, heterotopic community. Our strategies affirm the lives of queer and trans people of color, and of all others treated as raw material for theory production, rather than fostered as present and future knowledge reproducers.
They have to invent a way to exist in the university because they attend to
the knowledge that it was not created with them in mind. They inhabit as if
the university were without condition in order to produce thought while
at the same time writing against the university as it is full of contradiction,
as it is with condition. Such condition is the grounds for the emergence of
the intellectual, the thinker, the subject, the genre-specific Man. The voice of
the collective is included to interrogate the university as it is.

How does one think relation in and against the university, in and against
the academy? Lisa Kahaleole Hall takes this up in “More than ‘Two Worlds’:
Black Feminist Theories of Difference in Relation.” It is a meditation that
considers the relation between Black feminist theory and Indigenous studies
as a feminist practice and way of life. Kahaleole Hall writes about the uni-
versity as a space of relationality. And in this, we might begin to detect that
one problem with the overrepresentation of the genre-specific human Man
and its knowledge production is precisely because this genre-specific human
is against sociality, against relationality. And this, being against, is in the ser-
vice of the realization of an enclosed self. If the university is a site in which
relation happens, this would be true against the very constitution of the uni-
versity. Violence attends the practice of renouncing what it fundamentally
must do and be and is, produce and practice and have relation. Kahaleole
Hall takes us on a journey of the personal, bespeaking how relation with
Black feminist thinker Barbara Christian opened up worlds for her. And if
for her, then worlds for us all.

Courtney Moffett-Bateau’s essay, “American University Consensus and
the Imaginative Power of Fiction,” cautions against the idea that the existence
of the university is fundamentally to produce, promote, and help pro-
liferate social justice. We know this to be true through various studies. What
is unique in Moffett-Bateau’s essay is the way she takes of the literary in order
to produce the occasion for thought. We’re not abandoning literature or even
literary criticism when we call for an unsettlement of, a disorientation with,
the university. We are, rather, asking how we can redeploy and repurpose in
the service of a practice that would produce something like a non-empty,
nonsimplistic but full of complexity and texture, justice. Literature can pro-
duce a tear or rip or break in the way it can incite imagination. I know, for me
at least, when I read literature, I have to imagine sensual experiences: how will
this feel on my skin—skin that is brown; how would such a thing taste; how
does that thing described smell; is that odor heavy or light, sweet or bitter?

Moffett-Bateau uses Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Mat Johnson’s Pym,
staging a conversation across texts in order to intervene into a pernicious
violence in which “pain experienced within the Political is justifiable because of its promise of inclusion.” Inclusion can come in the form of tenure, and the essay considers what happens when one is granted, or denied, tenure. The main character of Pym, Chris Jaynes, is denied tenure, and his “hope in the political project of the university dies,” Moffett-Bateau says. The death of the political project of the university, a failure. A failure, then an opportunity. We keep running into this, into this pernicious idea, this idea that failure is not the end but an end. It is also an occasion. What worlds can be imagined from failure, failure of a particular political economic project? It is to this that Moffett-Bateau, and the other authors in this issue, attend.

I hear a sound. The sound I hear is made possible by what I’ve backgrounded, what I believe is not there. Silence is a quality but not a reality, at least not in space-time wherein humans must breathe. Silence only exists in vacuums, so when we speak of silence, we speak of a certain inattention to a certain ceaseless pulse and noise. To attend to silence and its being backgrounded, to attend to sound that foregrounds itself, Joshua Myers offers a meditation on the music, the sound, the collective practice of black thought in “The Order of Disciplinarity, the Terms of Silence.” Meyers’s essay excites because he stages an intervention against the conventional wisdom, the sort of anecdotal narrativity, of black studies. He offers that it is “reductionist and misleading to conceive of the whole of Black intellectual history as a corrective to the silences that make Western knowledges.” So if black studies, if black intellectual history itself, is not simply a corrective, is not simply attempting to fill silence that makes Western knowledge, what is such a history and tradition? In another register, then, Myers is asking the question, is wrestling with the concern, that each of the authors are in their own ways thinking with and through and against: how to take the occasion of failure, constraint, or here, silence, and make something otherwise? These authors do not assume the finality and totality of such “bad” things but think their occasion as absolute—though not pure—possibility.

In mathematics, absolute values are considered to be the value's distance from zero. It is about relation, about space-time possibility then, about the way value and distance codetermine each other. These essays in this issue of Critical Ethnic Studies are each about absolution and the absolute; they each are in the direction of finding a ceremony, a ritual and performance, a collective improvisational intellectual practice and mode of life that is produced by life in the flesh, by the resistance of the object, life otherwise, life produced in and as minoritized knowledges. Sharon Stein cuts to the heart of the chase in her essay, “Higher Education and the Im/possibility of
Transformative Justice.” Can we do anything from within this space? What is the purpose of even this issue if it is only a filler for curricula vitae and not for thinking about how we might inhabit worlds otherwise? Are these just rhetorical exercises?

Stein’s essay is concerned with these questions. She notes the “colonial elisions in accounts of the neoliberal present that rest on nostalgia for a prior commitment to higher education as a state-sponsored means of educating enlightened citizens and ensuring social mobility” and cautions that the modern university is constructed with a genre-specific student in mind: “they are different versions of the same base modern subject, who is educated to rationally pursue affluence, maximize utility, and enact seamless progress and development through the supposedly universal governing architectures of the nation-state and global capital.” The work we contend against, in other words, is varied, textured, difficult. If we are about the unsettling of the university, the becoming disoriented within the academy, it would have to be by way of a force that works on the university as it works on us, a force that works on the university as if it works on us.

Who is this “us”? Who would nominate oneself for such a status and position and station? And in the service of what, exactly, would such a nomination occur? This brings me, finally, to the conversation between Robin D. G. Kelley and Fred Moten, moderated by Afua Cooper and Rinaldo Walcott. They begin their conversation by responding to a question about a meditation on Black studies and Black politics, what they are and what they might be. When we begin to think about what something might be, we are in the terrain of the as if, we are in the hopes for the failure of the what is, we are desiring and imagining and sensing otherwise possibility. Moten thinks of Black studies as “not so much as an academic discipline or confluence of disciplines but as the atmosphere in which I grew up. And I love that atmosphere. I love the way that it felt, and I love the way that it smelled, and I love the flavors, and I love the sounds, and I love the movements.” And Kelley comes on down the line, offering, “social movements have always been the catalyst for Black studies. When Fred was talking about Black studies as kind of a way of life, as an atmosphere in which he grew up and which I grew up and many of us grew up, that’s so true. I never thought of it that way, but that is so true. In fact, if anything, Black studies is not a multidiscipline but a project, a project for liberation, whatever that means, and liberation is an ongoing project.”

Can you hear it as you read? Have you sensed the sound from which my thinking emerges? Can you tell that I think with Fred Moten and Robin D. G. Kelley? Can you get a sense for the fact that what is offered in the pages to
come has already worked on me, has already helped me practice life and the way I live it otherwise? Moten and Kelley key in on the sensuality of Black studies, which is to say the sensual experience the university seeks to harness only insofar as it transforms it into a knowledge object for its own existence, not a way to sense worlds, not a way to practice justice and equity and love. What these authors in their complexity, each of them, offer is the fact that we have to have a sense for this thing, a sense for otherwise possibility, have to make ourselves open and vulnerable to otherwise possibility while also protecting from harm the violence that attends being open and vulnerable.

Can we fail to live up to the university while showing up for each other? How can we go about an intentioned failure to produce the politics of the neoliberal academy while concurrently practicing a poetics of relationality, sociality, fundamental connection, and disorientation and unsettlement? It’s felt in the music, in the poetics, in the forms minor life takes. To ask, in other words, what can be done with the academy is to question if we might currently be, what we might have been, what we might otherwise be. We displace linear time and space for a different relation to temporality. This difference would reconceptualize relation and sociality such that the genre of human’s thoughts are allowed to flourish and, then, the knowledge production of otherwise genre-specific humanism would be taken as a way to practice, to perform, the joy and pleasure and liberation of thought otherwise.

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