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Stefano Harney: in Conversation with the co-author of The Undercommons' with Michael Schapira and Jesse Montgomery

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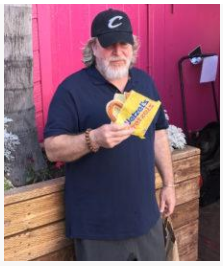
Stefano Harney (part 1)

by Michael Schapira & Jesse Montgomery



What follows is an excerpt from an ongoing conversation between **Stefano Harney** and *Full Stop* editors Michael Schapira and Jesse Montgomery. Stefano, as will become evident below, is a real maverick — a free traveller on a host of righteous intellectual and affective registers. He is perhaps best known for ***The Undercommons***, an absolutely essential work on the contemporary university (and much, much more) co-written with **Fred Moten**. But an Internet search will show interests pushing in all kinds of exciting directions — from study to infrastructure, from cultures of finance to leisure, from public administration to the metroversity. Part of this ongoing conversation appeared in the May 2017 ***Full Stop Quarterly: No Place***. The second installment **can be found here**, with further installments to follow in the future.

Jesse Montgomery: It seems fair to say that with the election of Donald Trump much of what we took to be a familiar, if not totally stable, political landscape is vanishing pretty quickly. The amount of unthinkable stuff that has happened in the last week [Editors note: this question was posed during the first week of the Trump administration, but chances are it still applies if you are reading this during any point in the Trump administration] is shocking and the pace at which it's happening seems to preclude any sort of appropriate emotional response aside from a big amorphous dread in which it's difficult to find your bearings. One of the many developments people in the University here are worried about is the proposed elimination of the NEA and the NEH, and while I am depressed at the prospect of halted research and grants disappearing, it's

even more unsettling to think that big, relatively uncontroversial supports like that can disappear so easily: that the very arena in which politically important struggles about what types of work and research should be recognized or funded could just be taken off the table. It really makes you aware of how much of the stable, established, even conservative structures of academia exist based on the goodwill of those with power. The undercommons doesn't look like the NEA or the NEH, of course, but I wonder how its relationship to the University might change or alter as we enter this period of what's likely to be more intense funding cuts and marginalization of "non-productive" thought and so forth. Any thoughts on the undercommons in an era where the stable structures it is defined against might be entering a period of upheaval?

Stefano Harney: I guess I hold to the old-fashioned idea of our contemporary, Frederick Douglass, that power never conceded anything without a fight. We won the NEA and NEH. Now we're losing them, and much else too, in this fight. But then I was thinking, thanks to your question, Jesse, that given their pale qualities maybe the question for us is: did we really win them by fighting for them, or did we get them, as consolation prizes, for fighting some other battle, maybe fighting another battle to a stalemate? In other words, if we fight for what were just concessions, are we distracted from our own battle plan? There is as little point in demanding something of this president as of the last. Not only because we will not get it, but because it is probably not what we want. We get sucked into policy. But the university, the NEA and the NEH, these institutions are just the enervating compromise, the residue of a past battle. Preserving them has the perverse effect of weakening us. These are just settlements we have to reject in our ongoing war against democratic despotism, which is of course the ongoing war against us.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about democratic despotism in 'The African Roots of War,' published in 1915. The current US regime could be said to be the realization of this trajectory of democratic despotism. Du Bois was very specific about democratic despotism. He observed capitalists in the United States and Europe offering a compact with their white working classes, offering a share, however meager, in the nation's wealth. This share would be extracted from black and brown peoples living

in the nation, but excluded from this pact, and through imperialism, shares would be extracted from what Du Bois called the black, brown, and yellow peoples throughout the globe. Democratic despotism was a cross-class alliance based on the color line. Through this agreement, governments could function as ‘democracies.’ Indeed participation in a white democracy was part of what being offered as part of the stabilization package. The modern university is a phenomenon of this agreement sealed along the color line. Thus I would say the undercommons remains the moving violation of that agreement.

I have a friend called Jonathan Pincus. He’s a very smart Marxist development economist, and recently he turned his attention to the development and future of universities around the world. He points out that the deal between the capitalist classes and the nation-state is fraying. One effect of this is that the capitalist classes do not want to pay for universities that serve a national purpose anymore, whether that purpose is producing research, training labour, or preserving national culture and identity. They only want to pay for universities to educate their children — that is, teach them the etiquette of the capitalist classes — and their children go to Princeton or Oxford, or wherever. But their children certainly do not go to Rutgers-Newark nor UC-Riverside, never mind state colleges, small private colleges, and numerous other regional universities. As Jonathan notes universities like Princeton already cater to a global, not national, capitalist class. They are flourishing. The question this raises for me is not whether the vast number of colleges and universities outside the attention of the global capitalist classes will continue to be funded. They won’t, except where vestiges of the white middle class can effectively threaten legislatures to give their kids and not Latino, Black, Asian, and Indigenous kids, the remaining bits of this system. But what can we do, together with the rest of these kids, with these abandoned factories of knowledge? That’s what interests me. How can we occupy them once they are discarded?

If Jonathan is right that most universities in the United States — to say nothing of many national universities in the Global South — are going to collapse or become private training facilities for corporations, then this is no doubt symptomatic of the endgame in democratic despotism, also evident in the current US regime, which is

both its apogee and its epitaph. Democratic despotism worked on the premise that the self-owning subject — that is to say the white subject — by demonstrating self-ownership — that is to say racism, patriarchy, trans and homophobia — would be entitled to property ownership, to a settlement, the same as the capitalist class, only on a pathetic scale of participation. Not only is this deal increasingly not delivered, despite the persistence of self-owning pathologies amongst much of the white populations of the North, but indebtedness has thrown self-ownership into a parody of itself. And more than a just parody of its own impossible position, this indebtedness raises the spectre of a link to a possible way of living that features an ongoing and total critique of property and ownership, and an embrace of debt, blackness.

Michael Schapira: I had several students last semester who were majoring in "Supply Chain Management." While I'm thrilled that they are taking a philosophy course I'm also a bit distressed about what this says about the modern university. (Christopher Newfield has recently argued that the "limited learning" of Arum and Roksa's *Academically Adrift* is more about the colonization of good humanities and social science pedagogy by these "professionally oriented" majors then by some sort of dereliction of duty by professors and students.) The future supply chain managers made me think of the chapter on "Shipping and Logistics" in *The Undercommons*, and the fact that you work at a Management University. You and Fred Moten write, "Logistics is no longer content with diagrams or with flows, with calculations or with predictions. It wants to live in the concrete itself in space at once, time at once, form at once." Privatization, financialization, and the proliferation of mechanisms to trap people in debt are all very apparent in the university and the world of work, but shipping is a far more expansive frame to look at current processes — its about motion and the countervailing logistical dream of concretizing and freezing motion, its about what is in and what is happening in the hold or the containers, it draws in islands and seedy ports and special economic zones. In addition to your writing you've also curated an art exhibition on, amongst other things, shipping. I'm curious where this concept came from for you, or what caused you (and Fred) to fix upon it as a theme?

As students of the black radical tradition, Fred and I were ‘taught’ the cardinal importance of what I might call the nautical event, living and learning it through music, literature, history, and intimately from family. This nautical event is the ongoing event, but also the event that stopped time and made a new kind of time. This nautical event bent topography and curved geography. It was an event of the elements, creating what Hortense Spillers called the oceanic. The nautical event was a quantum event. It was like a meteor shower rained down on the Bight of Benin, and it just kept raining, until the waves reached over all the earth and its peoples, and those particle waves changed things, and changed what things could be, and all of this would gather under the name of blackness. Fred and I work under the influence of Denise Ferreira Da Silva here, as elsewhere. She speaks about difference without separability and about entanglement in a way that becomes most available through this nautical event, through blackness. She adds that without separability, our ideas and practices of determinacy and sequentiality, which I’ve reduced to time and space here, also get called into question. Her work is rich and deep and I am still finding my way through this entangled world with her help. Shipping and the Shipped, the show at the Bergen triennial, owes much to her thought.

Fred and I were also thinking of Frank Wilderson’s work, and our title, ‘Fantasy in the Hold’ comes from his writings. His work is inescapable for me. And I was also reading Omise’eke Tinsley on the queer Atlantic. And Fred was reading M. NourbeSe Phillip. In other words, there was this confluence of what we were long taught, what we live with, and what we find in a moment, like brilliant sheet lightning, in the black radical tradition. Most recently I would direct you, if you are not already there, to Cristina Sharpe’s new work. I like the way she thinks about the oceanic, rendered by the nautical event, and how she thinks about this ongoing event as a kind of change in the very weather of life, first and foremost for black people, but even out of the storm, one is still in the weather. But I use the term nautical event in part to emphasize the satanic birth of the modern logistical, and of modern science put to work (others).

And so, to shift registers slightly from our thing to theirs, if you think about recent political battles coming out of the United States and its imperial decline, they could all be seen as logistical. So, I agree with you Michael that logistics can be a capacious category for understanding what they are doing, as well as what we are trying to do. The Black Snake winding through Dakota lands, the wall along the current border with Mexico, the ban directed at the seven Islamic countries the US has strategised to destroy and dominate, these are all about the movement of energy, goods, and labour, about ensuring control of the flows. So too the South China Sea 'stand-off' is a reaction to China's 'belt and road' strategy — the Silk Road Belt and the Maritime Silk Road — China's plan for connectivity, shipping, logistics across vast territory. The Maritime Silk Road is to run from Papua New Guinea to East Africa and the Silk Road Belt from the ports of Southern Italy and Greece through Turkey to Siberia. China is building this infrastructure as we write, all along these routes, in massive undertakings. Infrastructure is however only one aspect of logistics, or one dimension might be a better way to put it.

Another dimension of logistics is its unconscious. The dream of logistics, and you can find this in the academic journals, is the elimination of human time, the elimination of the slowness and error of human decision-making, actions, and indeed mere bodily presence. Now you might think this means replacing truck drivers with self-driving trucks running automated routes where algorithms recalculate constantly and link to fuel prices and inventory signals, all without people having to intervene, and you would be right. But interestingly the jobs that have already been replaced by the most important machine in logistics — the algorithm — are management jobs. It is just that most managers don't know it yet, or can't admit it. The algorithm begins by deskilling managers, reducing them to managing the algorithm's implementation in the workplace. Once implemented, the algorithm replaces the manager as authority and decision-maker. Algorithms run the human resource department, the production department, finance department, inventory, marketing. The numbers are no longer set by individual managers. The targets are now set by the algorithms, algorithms that are in conversation with algorithms all over the planet, and especially with algorithms in the banking sector and in the markets. This is why I say that most managers have already been replaced by machines. They are just too dumb to know

it. In this sense algorithms also represent an existential threat to ‘leadership.’ This is one reason we have so much contempt today for the leaders of our own organisations, whether museums, universities, government departments, or businesses. We know they work not only within the parameters of an algorithm but with its predictions and prescriptions. They are there only to implement and call it leadership.

But given that leadership is a kind of extreme demonstration of self-ownership proving itself entitled to extreme property ownership, logistics is so dangerous to leadership because it wants to do away with the very idea of command and control, with human time and decision-making, that is, with self-ownership at the systemic level. But logistics is not dangerous to us. Yes, of course, this logistics is killing us, but the idea of doing away with command and control, with self-ownership, is already in play in what Fred and I call logisticality, the disinheritance of the nautical event, the emergentcy capacity of the noughtical event. Dis abused by the very idea of property and ownership, of command of others and control of self, control of others and command of self, blackness moves by way of certain logisticality that seeks out a way of being together in difference without separability, without the possibility in other words, of command and control, decision-making, and leadership. Logisticality is the capacity to seek out what Nate Mackey calls the vibration society. This is the illegacy of those meteor waves.

Finally, one might object that logistics does not have much to say about something like police brutality, or as my friend Dylan Rodriguez would correct me, police, since police brutality is, as he says, redundant. But what Fred and I tried to suggest in our piece ‘Leave Our Mikes Alone’ is that the demand for access — intensified by logistical capitalism — also identifies the inaccessible as sabotage. Anyone who does not immediately open oneself fully to the police upon demand for access is a saboteur. But anti-black racism means it is impossible for black people to comply with this order for access since black people are by definition opaque to the police and to white supremacist society. Access kills, but not indiscriminately.

Jesse: Echoing the first part of Mike’s first question, most of my students study thinks like business, econ, and “Human and Organizational

Development." Like Mike, I enjoy teaching students who aren't necessarily going to go on to study the humanities. It presents a certain set of challenges but also affords some real freedom because you're less beholden to working within the parameters of your own discipline. You teach Strategic Management Education at Singapore Management University. Could you say a little about what your teaching looks like there and how your philosophical and theoretical commitments, which on the face might seem out of place at a school of Management, are present in the classroom?

So, what does this mean for the student who gets to a university and starts studying business, hoping to be accessed by today's logistical capitalism? This is where both of your comments about teaching business majors and my own strange career in a business school come into focus. I could talk for hours about this, because it's my job, and people can talk about their jobs for hours, though usually they are considered to know nothing about their own jobs. The first thing I feel like saying is: Michael, Jesse, it's good to have you as colleagues and to be doing this together with you. I'd like to figure out how we could be more together in how we teach these students.

I think students who study business are in a sense very logistical. Whereas a student studying music or history must say how can I fit what I like to do into this economy, a business student says how can I fit the economy into me. The business student is immediately ready for interoperability, for being accessed, plugged in, traversed by flows, modulated, wherever necessary. These students are unmediated by an interest, such as anthropology, that has to be converted into the economic in an extra step of logistical effort. Now, the curious other side to this is that the business student is also often 'the last Fordist.' Even when Fordism 'never was' for that particular student or her family. By this I mean because it is impossible to be interested, really, in Human Organisation and Development (the way it is inevitably taught as an extension of logistical capitalism), students place their interests elsewhere, in a non-work sphere. Now this is not true for those upper middle class business students who are convinced business can deliver meaning for them (including through green business, social entrepreneurship and all the rest of the

more sophisticated delusions). But amongst the average student taking business courses, I have found little illusion about why they are doing it, or what it is going to be like, even if they have hopes. I say all this to say the student taking philosophy in your class is probably there to take philosophy, as if in an old-fashioned division between work and leisure. I am personally happy to make my classes into places of leisure under these circumstances (or any). The real question I want to ask with you both is this: outside of the places Jonathan is talking about — the global universities responding to a global capitalist class — students are struggling. They are over-worked, over-taught, piled with requirements and internships, plagued by debt and psychological distress, and they are often the new welfare state for grandparents, kids, and disabled relatives. In other words, leisure is being made impossible for them and I think this means it is hard to ask them to take our classes with a kind of leisure. How can we organize with the students for leisure as a first step toward study?

Michael: Jesse and I owe you a response to this question, but we are currently on the level with these students and are having trouble, at least during this part of the semester, carving out a space of leisure. But I wanted to ask an unrelated, slightly inarticulate question. I mentioned at one point in our initial email conversation that I'm genuinely curious about the co-author phenomenon (Adorno & Horkheimer, Mouffe & Laclau, Hardt & Negri, etc.). I'm still curious about this, like the phenomenology of it versus any crude craft or process question, but I'm not quite sure how to ask it.

Actually, Michael, I also like to ask the question of how people write together. I always ask it when I find people writing together. In our case, we hung out together for fifteen years before we wrote anything down! But for us the transition to writing things down had two impulses. On the one hand, we were trying to understand our workplace, and we wrote a couple of early pieces about conditions of academic labour, one called **the Academic Speed-Up**, and another called **Doing Academic Work**. There was not much to them, but they did make us realize we could not consume ourselves with what the university was doing to us, to our colleagues, and to our students (to say nothing of our neighbours and neighbourhoods). We needed to focus on what we were doing and on what had long been done, study, black

study. So we were impelled by black study, inspired by Edouard Glissant's phrase, 'the consent not to be a single being.' We didn't want to work or write by ourselves, to be individual authors, or voices, to be cited, acknowledged. We just wanted to go into debt. We had already asked for too much credit, because that is what the university wants you to do, and that is what we make students do, and that was asking all of us to hold ourselves in this impossible position of the self-determined person, or what we might call the usufructing self.

So the way we write is to lose that credit in conversation, jokes, over beers, in crowds of friends, with lovers, any way to get away from this impossibility and see what can come from this consent. And when I say any way, I mean it. We write in all kinds of ways and the only constant is losing the individuality and finding the sociality of our words and ideas. Our work emanates from our ensemble, and that's about it. Sometimes I write something first, sometimes he does. Sometimes I add or comment, sometimes he might inlay my prose, sometimes we might extend each other's sentences with commas and fragments, reversals and paradoxes, experimental phrasing and wording. In any case, we want as much to be less than two as more than two. Originality is our enemy, experimenting with what is already here is our friend(s).

This was the approach I tried to bring into the art world, while respecting what was already there, the forms of collaboration already at work, like the inspiring collectivities I have encountered, from Crater Invertido in Mexico to KUNCI in Indonesia. I don't know that I have much insight into this world but I have had the chance to spend time with my friends through its support. And I am benefitting from people who are writing about the art world today, Max Haiven, for instance, Marina Vishmidt and Nora Sternfeld, some of the most interesting theory is coming out of this conjunction. Stevphen Shukaitis brings together psychographic drift with class composition analysis at one point in his new book. You don't get that alchemy in studies of the creative industries! The importance of spending time together with your friends — a version of the leisure I want in my classroom — the art world is a place that has resources that can be liberated for that purpose. I witnessed this in the practice of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, for instance. More than anyone

else, the performance artist and dancer Valentina Desideri taught me this. Leisure, hanging out, as the ground for collective practice, as emergent, collective practice under constant revision, but also as the struggle against the time and unit measures, against the access, of logistical capitalism. Leisure as struggle. That was Michael Brown and his friends.

A second installment in this ongoing conversation ***can be found here.***

Jesse Montgomery *is an editor at Full Stop and a graduate student in the English department at Vanderbilt University.*
Michael Schapira *is an Interviews editor at Full Stop and teaches Philosophy at Hofstra University.*

Stefano Harney (part 2)

by Michael Schapira & Jesse Montgomery

What follows is an excerpt from an ongoing conversation between **Stefano Harney** and *Full Stop* editors Michael Schapira and Jesse Montgomery. Stefano, as will become evident below, is a real maverick — a free traveller on a host of righteous intellectual and affective registers. He is perhaps best known for ***The Undercommons***, an absolutely essential work on the contemporary university (and much, much more) co-written with **Fred Moten**. But an Internet search will show interests pushing in all kinds of exciting directions — from study to infrastructure, from cultures of finance to leisure, from public administration to the metroversity.

Part of this ongoing conversation appeared in the May 2017 ***Full Stop Quarterly: No Place***. The first part of our conversation **can be found here** and further installments will follow in the near future.

[Editors Note: This portion of the conversation transpired after an interlude of a few months as the heavy grading portion of the semester ran its course.]

Michael Schapira: This may be a little inarticulate at the moment, but I wanted to ask you something about the reception of *The Undercommons*. There was a website that you and Fred were interviewed on that had once been called Class War University but has since changed its name to Undercommoning. Its usually uncouth to ask authors about the reception of their work, but one really notable feature of *the Undercommons* has been that many readers have expressed how incredibly useful it is to think with. As we've talked about before, there are a whole range of books about the university — Benjmain Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty* or Frank Donaghue's *The Last Professors* on the rise of the all administrative university; Marc Bousquet and Jennifer Washburn's books on the contemporary university's shameful economic politics; Christopher Newfield's historical account of the rise of decline of our the U.S's state university systems — that are extremely helpful for their analytic clarity on certain issues. These are useful to think with, but in very different ways than the responses to *The Undercommons* that I have in mind. Your book is so formally inventive that I wonder if you have any reflections on, say, the uses and misuses of analytic argumentation as opposed to a more poetic form of writing when projects are in large part addressing similar issues.

There is also something interesting to me about the shift from *Class War University* to *Undercommoning*. If I can quote from an earlier email you wrote me, in reference to a discussion of the declining force of student movements in the late 60s and early 70s as universities navigated a transformed set of economic changes:

"I also think there is a story of something more radical than the student movement — wildcat strikers, black liberation armies, etc., that is not so much surpassed by economic changes but politically, violently destroyed. And with

it the possibility of more political democracy in general in society comes to a halt, at least temporarily."

The change in name of this website is I think a concession that this more radical perspective is richer than a more conventional class-based or economically focused one. I wonder if you also see anything significant in this shift, or maybe the website just wanted to go through a rebranding exercise and I'm reading too much into it?

Stefano Harney: And there is something kind of cool about the way we are writing to each other from under this work regime of bulk teaching, as my friend Marina Vishmidt called it. We're writing to each other from our conditions, conditions that we make harder by being kind to the students and to each other. So that's what we got to do, even if it makes us uncouth.

It's also good timing that you wrote to me about this comment I made to you in an earlier conversation because I just finished a terrific book called ***Dixie Be Damned*** by Neal Shirley and Saralee Stafford. They write about insurrections in the South from the dismal swamp in the 18th century to a 1975 uprising in a North Carolina women's prison. It's stirring stuff and then in a really sound, clear-hearted concluding chapter they surprised me. They said our enemies have been saved not by fascism but by democracy. It should not have surprised me, given that we were just speaking about Du Bois and democratic despotism, but it did. They are right. And I think it is in this sense that a better university would be worse for us, has been worse for us, in a paradoxical way. Some ask, 'Is another university possible?' Well, that implies this one is possible but more than that it suggests another university would be better for us. I don't know about that. This is not to say I do not find work like that of Marc Bousquet and Chris Newfield indispensable. I do. But there is something at stake in Shirley and Stafford's book and I want to talk with you about it because I think it connects to your question about how the Undercommons book has been read and used.

The authors quote Frank Wilderson on the way blackness can never be disimbricated from the violence of slavery. Then they say:

‘Those who would risk extending solidarity across racial boundaries would find themselves the recipient of exemplary violence in order to instill fear of constant consequence for this treason. Ever after, *meaningful cross-racial affinity can only be found in moments of revolutionary violence*.” (Italics in the original.)

Now this is an historical observation on their part, but to some extent it is also programmatic for the authors. As an observation, well, they have just convinced me of its validity in the last 250 pages, and as program, well, I’m not a pacifist. I’m for self-defense, and that can be violent. But do words like solidarity, affinity, to say nothing of the unlovely term allyship, accidentally preserve something we want to abolish? And I feel bad using Shirley and Stafford to make this point because theirs is such a good book, but maybe that’s why I feel compelled to say, ‘even here’ this question comes up. What I mean is who is this someone in solidarity with blackness, who is this ally of blackness, who is this someone with affinity to black struggle? I think this means that this someone has his or her own struggles and is indicating that now she or he wants to join not in common struggles, but in the struggles of blackness. Because in a sense you have to have your own thing to be an ally or to be in solidarity. Ok, but what are your own struggles from which you would be offering solidarity, allyship, affinity? Are you organizing in the white community, is that it? I think that is the implication, that you have been working in white communities, and/or on the environment, or feminist issues, etc. But the problem is, there’s no such thing as a white community. A white community is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. You can’t organize an oxymoron. The only thing you can do with a white community is work to abolish it. Moreover at that point of abolition we may be able to say there is no such thing as a community, that a community is an oxymoron. You can’t commune and have a community. Communing is anti-community. It’s undercommon. Maybe the only kind of community that is possible is the maroon community, because it is by definition not a community, and when in some historical instances (of necessity even) it became one, it took on the same murderous qualities of any community.

Okay, so then the question arising, if you do abolish the white community, what of the people who were marked as white, and in many cases who dwelt in the

supremacy of whiteness, what becomes of them? Well, in the practice of abolition they will move closer to the only thing they ever had that was about life and not death, about love and not hate, blackness. This is to say, people who present as white are not allies, or in solidarity, or showing affinity, because they have nothing of their own, no place from which to show this, no resource to bring, unless and until they embrace the one thing of their own they disown. The thing that can't be owned *born(e)* of the owned, blackness. Now white people aren't coming with much blackness, by definition. And this is why the underlying humility motivating terms like ally, solidarity, and affinity is not misplaced, if that is indeed what underlies their use in practice. In any case, whiteness is either absence or violence, and in either case, not much to offer as an ally. But on the other hand white people have a big role to play in the revolutionary violence Shirley and Stafford speak of because the act of abolition of white communities is a monumental task.

By contrast and in a sense to reverse while also honouring Wilderson's initial point, Black people have for the very reason of this unrelenting violence and its brutal failure, a lot of blackness, if I can put it that way, a special, (under) privileged relationship to blackness, as Fred puts it. So another way to think of the historical events Shirley and Stafford are speaking about as cross-racial moments would be to think about these events as moments in which there was not a total coincidence between black people and blackness. In a way we could read moments of non-coincidence as moments not of liberation from blackness but generalization of blackness.

But we have to be careful here. Blackness is neither the opposite nor the total reversal or abolition of whiteness. Blackness exists in/as the general antagonism. It's always anti-colonial, always fugitive. So what we tried to do in the book is to think about how study, and planning, and logisticality, and hapticality named capacities for expanding the social poesis of blackness, of the anti-regulatory, jurisgenerative improvisation of the use of each other. And we were thinking about how the undercommons of study might be a place where those in blackness and those coming into blackness might commune, might serve the debt together, in difference but not separability, as Denise Ferreira da Silva might say, not separability from that

quantum blackness that moves across and against property, subjectivity, development, usufruction. And if you want to say this is going to be a practice that is hard for a lot of people who do not experience the lived fact of the coincidence of being a black person and blackness, and it is going to be a humble practice, and even a practice of entering into service, feeling in debt, well that's okay, cause all of that is what blackness is too. The book is just trying to say this, in part from being in but not of the university and its structural violence of anti-black racism and settler colonialism.

In a way, Shirley and Stafford did not need to say this because they performed this kind of study when they wrote the book. They served the debt. I'm sorry I took so long with this part of our conversation, but you know when you are teaching a lot — and I've averaged I figure about six to seven full courses a year over my career, with a couple instances of gold-bricking — and when you finally find time to read in between and the book turns out to be really good, there is a special pleasure in it, right?

Michael, you mention you would like to talk more about leisure in the classroom. Me too, but as you said it I realized I used the wrong word, a problematic word. What I realize now is that leisure evokes free time that we have in opposition to work, no matter how much that leisure has now been commodified itself. But this opposition between free time and work is alien to the black radical tradition, something Angela Davis, Barbara Smith and many others have taught us for a long time now. The black body, especially the black female body, under racial capitalism, should either be working or must be interrogated for why it is not working. Free time doesn't come into it, but that is not the only reason. Free time itself has to be 'reworked' within an abolitionist history. Freedom is neither possible nor — more controversially perhaps — desirable. Fred and I talk about the opposite of slavery being something like service, not freedom, learning from Saidiya Hartman. And Denise instructs us to think of time outside its deployment in enlightenment European philosophy, instead through her concept of difference without separability. So a free time that is neither about freedom nor sequential time.

This is one reason why I am tempted to hide out in the term *otium* instead. And it is not just because neither leisure nor free time would really work. Otium is in itself interesting in its origins. Of course it is also problematic coming out of the Greek and Roman traditions and we will have to come back to that. Otium starts as a term in Greek that is in opposition to war. It is the time of rest, of peace, or pursuits antithetical to war, a way of being without war. Then with the Romans it starts to stand for time that is in opposition to public service, a way of being without the civic. The first sense gives us a time of preservation, of militant rest, in opposition to the ongoing war of settler colonialism. And then the second sense gives us a time without public service. Think of what we learn from Frank Wilderson about the impossibility of black civic life and we see the other side to this is some kind of anti-colonial otium, an otium of black operations. Otium is fugitive from the good cop- bad cop of politics and war.

But that's also not enough because there is something both collective and incomplete about this otium not captured in either its Greek or Roman usage, limited as those traditions are by the emergence of the supposed political subject. There's something else about this otium and maybe the closest I can come to it right now is through a phrase Che Gossett uses, 'an ontological cruising.' I came across this phrase in **an amazing piece Che wrote for the Verso blog** and it stayed with me. Here's the whole sentence: 'As queer and/or trans people of color, already dispossessed, we yearn to be with one another; our search and seeking is a be-longing, an ontological cruising.' Otium is this, not leisure, not free time, but this be-longing away from war, away from the public and the civic, and not an opposition to work but an alternative to it.

And so the question I want to ask you, Michael and Jesse is this. Think about the kind of places we teach. For me it has been places like Pace University where I taught the early bird anthropology course to students at 7:20 am who left at 8:30 to be mail clerks and secretaries on Wall Street, or the students on Staten Island I taught who wanted to be primary school teachers. So what would it mean to develop a 'preferential option for our students'? Because I think it might have something to do with conspiring to let this trans otium, this anti-colonial otium, this otium of black operations flourish in our classrooms and beyond our campuses.

Michael: **This is an absolutely crucial question that I want to complicate a little more in reference to something you have said about the actual existing business school. You argue that students at a business school are far closer to labor than to the capitalist manager class that they aspire to join. In fact that is not their aspiration at all. Describing the business student you say, "Unlike students in the rest of the university (and this of course is what disturbs the rest of the university) these students in the business school essentially stand before us, as lecturers who are supposed to train them, completely naked and say, 'we are simply labor and we simply want to be put to work. Tell us what to do in order to be useful.' So there's no mediation with them, there's no love of literature. There's no attempt at scientific discovery. There is just that laboring body saying 'tell me how to become useful again. Tell me how to become more useful.'"**

This would come as a surprise to many of my friends but I actually spent my first year in college at a very well respected business school. Within about three days I knew it was not the place for me because I realized that I craved that mediation that you describe, which sent me clear across the country to study philosophy at a big state school. The contrast has shaped how I think about the university and when your description of the business school student becomes more recognizable as the general disposition of students we meet in the classroom I get real depressed.

And here is the complicating bit. Jesse was just involved in a failed attempt to unionize graduate students at his university and ran up against something of a similar attitude amongst his colleagues. I'm currently part of the academic precariate — overworked and underpaid with no clear career path in sight. So the anxieties that you describe are on both sides of the pedagogical encounter.

Now, to come back to your question, I have no idea. I think in various forms Jesse and I have been inspired by Lars Iyer and his call to bring a kind of radical pathos into different academic settings. As you say, the business school can leverage ideas like entrepreneurship to recuperate the *Bildung* aspect of the modern university, and perhaps we can aim to

change the desire from a naked demand for work to a demand for the kind of mediation that the university can provide — a sort of "listen, we've all got problems" as the first gesture of teaching. Or like Socrates at the end of the *Apology* saying "gentleman, stay with me awhile, for nothing prevents us from talking to each other while it is allowed" in the time between being sentenced to death and the officers of the court hauling him away.

This is a long way of saying I'm not sure. I've suggested laying yourself bare in a different way than the laborer or developing a different relationship to death as two ways to get back leisure. I suppose this is like the existentialist's guide to teaching. But I do think you are right in what you said earlier, that getting sucked into policy is a bit of a trap despite the pressing policy issues like debt, unionization, job security, etc. It pushes the personal off the table in favor or professional concerns.

But this raises another question for me. In resisting the narrowing influence of policy we might be tempted to turn towards ideas, like the long tradition of thinking about the idea of the university. You and Fred have talked about study, as has one of my mentors in graduate school Robbie McClintock, who started writing on this theme in the early 1970s is ways that now look very prescient. There is a great bourgeoise tradition of using a discussion of ideas to distract us from focusing on issues of power and politics. What do you think is a salutary way to bring ideas back into our conversations? Does study stick out for you because it is not just an idea, but a practice?

I like what you are suggesting, Michael, about trying to be with the students through an analysis of our own condition in this conjuncture, and bringing that condition out openly and honestly. And you are right that it is increasingly all students who stand before capital as supplicants, without mediation, and it is increasingly all of us. Under these circumstances it might be important to distinguish between this exposure to capital and the persistence, perhaps especially in business education, of what Foucault called a total education, something Fred and I have been speaking about.

As you may recall he was talking about how the prisons *instructed* prisoners in every aspect of prison routine, to use your mentor's apt distinction from study. Foucault

says this total instruction attacked what it saw as the perversion of prisoners. And the first step in this attack, this instruction, was the individuation of bodies and minds. That's the first and most brutal reform, individuation. Perversion on the other hand therefore could be thought of here as the refusal to be individuated. It is another word for the entanglement of beings, the encircling, winding, curling flesh, blurred and indistinct parts, different but inseparable, as Denise Ferreira da Silva would put it. Total education is an organized attack on our perversions, our versions, our differentiated inseparability. The brutal individuation of the prisoner, his or her straightening, the construction of fortifications around each of these bodies not just around all of them, the training in the distinction of individualized bodies and minds. This is the instantiation of reform of total education. Literally a re-forming of these perverse unformed, under-formed, deformed beings into proper forms. That is why reform is the true punishment, the truly vicious side of the prison and of reforming, conforming societies like ours. We do the same in education.
In education the very first lesson is individuation in time and space. What are the first two lessons kids are taught? First, you can't touch each other. Second, you are required to stay. You cannot leave when you want to — to go to the bathroom or eat or because you are bored. You leave when they say. Fred and I have also been writing about the relationship between wandering and gathering, and refuge and receiving. And it all starts here. Kids are taught they cannot wander, and they are taught they cannot gather. By gather I mean as with the prisoners they cannot retain what society calls perversion, indistinct, experimental and blurring forms of senses and porous bodies being together. Collective *self-unorganisation*, wandering, seeking refuge and receiving is replaced by order, and the classroom as the only place they can be, or the playground and lunchroom at regulated times. Denied their own forms of both gathering and wandering, they are educated.

This instruction in individuation of the body and mind that precedes and accompanies instruction in the interactions, routines and spatial propriety of the student or the prisoner might be opposed to something else. This something else would be another kind of education, or study — the kind that prisoners persistently find a way to convene, as we know from the black radical tradition in prison, famously for instance with Malcolm X and George Jackson. Moreover there is plenty

of evidence that this kind of study has never gone away. For instance, I am reading an amazing doctoral dissertation by Angelica Camacho from UC Riverside who is writing about the families supporting the recent prisoner strikes at Pelican Bay, and the forms of study that emerged inside and outside with those strikes. We might call this a form of study that takes place despite instruction, despite the brutal individuation of solitary confinement, despite the sadistic separation of families — we might call this a partial education. As opposed to a total education, a partial education is, as its roots suggest, partisan. It is an education where as Mao said the one becomes two, or perhaps as Fred and I would say the one becomes both less and more than one. Totality itself is exposed as partisan in the process.

But a partial education is also partial in another sense — in the sense of being incomplete, and indeed being based on incompleteness, vulnerability, needing other people. Cedric Robinson speaks of a principle of incompleteness in communities in Africa, and elsewhere, in his great book ***Terms of Order***. I also remember this amazing moment where Albert Woodford is asked why he continued to think of himself as a Panther through all the years of confinement in Angola Prison even as the Panthers seemed to fade into history and commodification. He said he needed them. This most extraordinary figure who might otherwise be narrated as a lone, brave unbreakable singular man of principle, talks about himself very differently, as needing others, as being incomplete.

Of course entrepreneurs — the contemporary settlers — don’t need anyone. Consultants — contemporary hanging judges — don’t need anyone. And business education in this sense remains a false totality, and our students remain subjected to this total education of entrepreneurship and consultancy, customer relations and market research. All of which hides the massive infrastructure, the massive logistics operations is necessary for these entrepreneurs, consultants, and settlers to entertain their delusion that they are self-sufficient, self-authoring, sovereign. But all disciplines and every aspect of the university is involved in perpetuating this delusion of the individuate sovereign student/entrepreneur/artist/settler, not just the classroom, but admissions, career services, sports, student life, placements and internships, and alumni offices. All of them instructing students in the conduct of

every aspect of being a supplicant to capital, every aspect of bodily conduct, conduct of thought, and conduct with others (starting with the instruction to act as if one has an individualized, self-sufficient body and mind for purposes of conduct with others and improvement of oneself). And of course the students go back to their neighborhoods where the police instruct on conduct, where Chipotle and Burger King instruct on conduct. Medicine, sex, exercise everything instructed as conduct for supplication. PhD programs send out the first books to newly accepted students not on the subject matter but on how to survive graduate school and get an alt-ac job! But of course the greatest instruction is simply the daily routines imposed upon anyone who wants to be a college or university student and is not part of the haute bourgeoisie (they are subjected to their own version of the total education, one that harms not only them but others). The hectic, impossible schedules, the credit card debt budgets, the shit transportation, and the useless homework assignments carry out their own instruction in practice. So how can we avoid contributing as teachers and university workers to this total education? How can we join with the only force of resistance to all this delusional individuated sovereignty? That is, how can we join with the students?

I think a partial education abandons impartiality not in favor of critique but precisely through the insistence that the 'total' is less and more than one. And what this means is that some of this total is really *our thing*. I am not saying we do not have to be concerned with their shit, with this attempt at the imposition of conduct, of a total education. But rather that we can do so from our thing, through an ongoing vigilance about what is not ours, and a cultivation and love for what is ours. And here an important point should be made about a partial education. Their total education always becomes more and less than one, and any time they make it one, any time they try to make it total, we can make less and more of it. But our thing also divides in another way (in a way unfaithful to Mao but nonetheless). My friend Denise Ferreira da Silva has already shown us how: difference without separability. Or we might say partial education is sisterhood and brotherhood of, with, and for the general antagonism.

So we can practice this partial education as a form of study with our students. I try to do this with my students in Singapore around meritocracy and motivation, two forms of conduct important to total education in Singapore. I explain our university grading policy in which the university sets the number of A's, B's etc. one can give, no matter what the students do, and I place myself with the students as being in opposition to this. We talk about how our thing would be for each student to appear in difference, on her or his own, and how giving all A's would not solve this either. I am trying to explain the university too and inviting the students to show me why they already do this with all their differences, desires, singularities. We also work through Marx and Erich Fromm on alienation and try to make the one of their intended destination, the corporation, into the more and less than one of employer and employee, and employee against employee, etc. My students already have a version of this too — the old/new Fordist version still possible amidst the racialization, rapid growth, and state interventions in Singapore. The students readily divide life into work and leisure in talking about their future and their hopes, and many think of work already as not theirs. So how can I work with them on this by moving from leisure to otium in our conversations?

Jesse Montgomery: Apologies for being such a ragged correspondent these last few weeks, it's been an exhausting semester but this stuff has been great to read and think alongside. In the spirit of indebtedness, I'd like to send some thoughts and questions your way, Stefano.

I hope we can talk a bit more about bringing about *our thing*. I think this is a wonderful way to phrase and frame the type of academic, studious relationship we've been circling around and moving through over the course of our discussion and it actually helps me see the edges of some of my own efforts in the classroom this semester. I forgot if I mentioned this earlier, but I'm teaching a little writing seminar on the topic of jobs and work in literature, and a good portion of my students are training to be consultants and managers. This pairing was a bit unexpected and has been productive and frustrating in, I'd say, equal measure (I was joking with a friend recently about how no matter how bad your worst student is in a given semester, you always wind up feeling like your own worst student; but maybe we grow out of this?). I

say frustrating and productive because, as we've been discussing, many of my students have so internalized the demands of logistical capitalism that you have discussed, Stefano. I'm thinking in particular of the demand to complete and absolute access as well as the stifling responsibility of becoming the consultant, of bearing the weight of the universal algorithm at the age of, like, 22.

What's most shocking to me is the way in which the university has so thoroughly integrated the world of employment into the academic calendar. My students compete fiercely for prestigious internships each summer, they work during the semester not so they can pay rent (this is probably an overgeneralization, I'm sure some do work to defray immediate costs) but to build out a resume, they run their own businesses between writing papers and going to parties and drafting marketing plans. To further this, the university is doubling down and creating an "immersion program" where they tailor an individualized, custom fit educational experience no doubt keyed toward future employment (immersion here strikes me as either a baptism or a waterboarding). The blurb from the website reads:

"The Immersion Vanderbilt Initiative calls for all university undergraduates to immerse themselves in creative independent projects that give them the opportunity to engage, question and forge change. The parameters of Immersion Vanderbilt are to be kept broad and flexible, so students have the opportunity to work with a faculty mentor to forge a project that has the capacity to shape them for the rest of their lives."

I think these tendencies and incursions are nicely captured by your conception of logistical capital. Here, the university and its classrooms are suffused with the business world or its anticipation, and the institution continues to find new measures by which to make the case of employers in increasingly personal, personalized terms: here we can see the total education extends far beyond the university.

My questions then revolve around what types of solidarity can encourage this "difference without separability" (or vice versa). If I'm interpreting your prior email correctly, we want to help our students realize their own desires and

interests, those distinct form the imperatives of the market, say, but we also want them to recognize that those distinctions can connect them to others and that, finally, *we* can keep those connections to ourselves, that they constitute *our thing*. The university, on the other hand, is very good at selling itself to students as capable of helping them find *their thing.* How do we speak to difference without encouraging consumerist alienation? What collective identities or solidarities can we offer our students in the classroom to help them resist the demands of job market, or bad forms of individualism? Maybe I'm kicking the can down the road here, but leisure does seem to be a potential inroad here because it raises the question of needs or desires that the university can't meet (if we're defining leisure as a real break with the demands of university work or the involvement of the university). Maybe bringing students out of the university is helpful? Or bringing the outside in?

Thanks, Jesse, for these observations. I think your point about how we find solidarities is a key point, including how we find the secret solidarities already in effect, where our entanglement is already felt. Immersion programs like the one you cite at Vanderbilt are essentially the educational equivalent of water-boarding. They take students and plunge them into isolation to ensure no solidarity develops amongst them. To individuate them and convince them they are on their own. In a similar way we could understand student internships largely as the educational equivalent of putting those big earphones and blinders on Guantanamo prisoners. Anything to cut you off from everybody else, to immerse you in the isolation of the market, and especially to disrupt all the ongoing conspiracies without a plot, as Valentina Desideri and I put it. I am not trying to collapse the distinction here between torture and education, much less trivialize the crimes of torture. But internships and immersion programs as they are presently constituted are weapons in the domestic, economic war on us, and especially the war on our students. Universities 'reform' themselves with more and more of these programs designed to use the market to search and destroy what I called earlier any perversions amongst the student body that do not conform to individuation, sovereignty, self-sufficiency. This delusion of such individual sovereignty must be imposed, through things like

internships and immersion programs, where it is not taken up ‘freely.’ These university programs are counter-intelligence programs aimed at study.

Because given a little time and space, some kind of campus or bar or back staircase, students are likely to get together, for the sake of it, but also because it is absolutely necessary to survival. You need accomplices to survive. The authorities know this. They individuate us to put us at risk. That is why they want to intern students in the market as much as possible — because our market today is virtually without solidarities. The reason I keep thinking about a partial education is that it admits that we can’t make it on our own. We’re parts. We’re incomplete. Solidarity should be understood this way. It is not a matter of choice. It is not whether we choose to be in solidarity or alliance or whatever with each other. We have to be. And when we are immersed and interned, we don’t make it. Indeed solidarity is maybe the wrong word, or perhaps the word needs a new meaning. Maybe solidarity is where we are always interdicted from starting, in our inseparable difference. Maybe it is where we remain, despite all their efforts. Maybe solidarity is the condition of life. And a lack of solidarity must go under the name of death, the brutal individuation as Fred and I have said of murder for instance, or the murderous illusions of the subject, the settler, the entrepreneur. Maybe solidarity is not the right word in any case. Maybe as Hortense Spillers says the word is empathy. Or maybe it should be a phrase — the preservation of the ontological totality as Cedric Robinson teaches us.

In any case as you say, Jesse, the university and the market are the true ‘allies.’ Because they can make up strategic plans, rules about being allies, and *choose* to be allies. It is their true ‘allyship’ that forces us to be dependent on them for survival because it is true: we cannot survive on our own. Of course, we could survive in a conspiracy without a plot, amongst unseen accomplices, but this is precisely what university education is designed to disrupt, even though this conspiracy is often invisible to them. That’s disruptive innovation, as they say, destroying our necessary and yet always under-formed, vulnerable solidarities. Because when we say conspiracy without a plot we are trying to point to this perpetually not fully formed, incomplete love and pain of our undercommon flesh. We need each other, but not to

be whole, not to reconstitute our version of a total education, but to stay partial, and when necessary to help each other get partial again.

So as you rightly point out, Jesse, the university counters these conspiracies, our thing, with the promise of giving students ‘their thing’ — their USP, unique selling point — which is really not a selling point, but a price point — how cheap and accessible can we make you for what you can give an employer? They make a value proposition of our students. You are exactly right that the university tells the students, as it tells its academics, that our thing is just your thing, your individual thing. And as we have said it does not just tell us, but shows us by how it structures the total education of both academics and students.

This immersion in the market is doubled in the figure of the consultant. The consultant is nothing more than a demonstration of access. He or she can show up in your workplace and open it up in ways you thought were protected, solid. His presence is proof that you are now newly accessible. No one needs to listen to a consultant. He is just a talking algorithm anyway. But he has made his point by showing up. Still perhaps it is also a moment to see that this workplace was not our thing. It was part of a total education and we have to find our thing within it, find our conspiracy within the department, the program, or the workplace. It is a moment of antagonism we can also use with our students who want to be managers and consultants, I think.

How can there be both not enough work and not enough leisure? Students tend to know there is not enough work and if they get some work, there will be no leisure. And they seem to know that leisure’s not free. Indeed they can see that leisure is for sale everywhere, that in other words, it is inseparable from work. This can be studied. We can show it to be an inadequate way of thinking about our wants, our desires, inadequate because it has already announced it will not support us. The consultant is like the official notice in the mail that you cannot depend on the current structure of work and leisure to fulfill your hopes. The consultant takes no responsibility, and this gives us a chance to ask where responsibility does lie for our dreams. And maybe instead of thinking of being responsible to students, friends, comrades, lovers, we might think it terms of being responses to them. And we can

see our existence as responses threatened all the time, invaded by the university and the market seeking to draw responses away from us and toward it. We see those we respond to being accessed without their permission. So everywhere we see ourselves as responses and we see at the very same time the declarations of no liability, no responsibility. It is at this point that total education denies itself, declares itself as not containing everything, and certainly not all our hopes. We look at this total future and we see partially.

Annette Henry's classic piece on 'middle passage' epistemology is well worth remembering here. She observes the way two African American mothers are able to mix and re-mix two worlds for their daughters' education. She speaks of the double vision of an African-centric education in an American context, and what is really cool is that this double vision, this both/and as she also calls it, emerges as a kind of antagonistic both/and, a dialectical one, as it must, and therefore a creative, experimental one. I like to understand partial education this way too. Not double as in twice as much or twice as good but double like not one, where double vision is a bit blurry, not better but just with more emerging and converging in it, and at the same time not fully focused, not total vision, partial, partisan vision of the one become two. A partial education doesn't prepare us for work and leisure. It prepares us to retreat from both work and leisure, with our thing, and into our thing. And it reminds me to say that even though there is a war on us, our thing is not peaceful. Study is not quiet retreat, although it might have those moments of refuge. Study can be violent, if not physically, than in the way it breaks down the individuation we have built up, been forced to build up, even deluded ourselves into thinking was necessary. The goal of study is in this sense Taoist — the goal is not-knowing, discovering we do not know what we think we know, that self-knowledge, knowing thyself, is a dangerous delusion for us and others. Our thing in this sense can be tough, violent, but it is always at the same time, and inextricably, love.

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