

Institutional Peripherality: The Many Deaths of Humanity

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There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.¹

— Michel Foucault

So here are all my hopes and aspirations: nothing but puke.²

— Devin Townsend

THE humanities seem to be experiencing the longest death rattle of all time. Repeated proclamations trumpeting the inevitable “death of the humanities” have been loud and lengthy.³ This prophetic lament has not been without a cause: capital investment in the humanistic disciplines — both cultural and financial — has plummeted in recent decades. The systematic stripping of government funding from across the entire tertiary sector has meant that both money and prestige are scarcer than ever before. As a result, universities are undergoing massive corporate restructurings; their attempts to

mitigate financial downturn and maximise corporate profitability are resulting in something of an identity crisis for the sector. How could it be, we might ask, that in the last bastions of learning, it is learning itself that has come under threat? As Malcolm Saunders provocatively asserts, “teaching and research have been not merely degraded and devalued but totally subordinated.”⁴ To add insult to injury, many Australian politicians have descended into outright ridicule of the humanities, repeatedly threatening to undermine intellectual freedom (a right supposedly synonymous with tertiary institutions), as well as to deprive scholars of funds.⁵

Of course, the problems caused by this unholy trinity of fiscal contraction, government interference, and consumerist expansion do not affect universities alone. These are merely symptoms of contemporary society’s genuflection at the altar of market-based capitalism, wherein increasingly vigorous acts of fellatio are required to stimulate and (so it is hoped) satiate the deified phallus of finance. Sex work metaphors such as this are perhaps especially apt in our late capitalist moment. After all, it is “in commodity society,” as Susan Buck-Morss observes, that “all of us are prostitutes, selling ourselves to strangers.”⁶ But the predicament is exacerbated in the tertiary sector, as universities struggle to reconcile three competing tendencies: education, research, and profit.

Though it is easy to romanticise the history of higher learning, the widespread and popular image of tertiary education — existing with the pure aim of extending human understanding — is the height of naïveté. Indeed, when Terry Eagleton bemoans the current state of affairs and claims that “universities and advanced capitalism are fundamentally incompatible,” he makes a very basic misjudgment.⁷ He presumes that there was a point at which the tertiary sector was not already ideologically corrupt. The indoctrination of the individual, as Foucault reminds us, is always the implicit aim of all education, for it is a form of discipline and control.⁸ Universities have always maintained a conservative function, reproducing aristocratic structures and class divisions that entrench inequality.⁹ A major problem for institutionalised study, then, has been the looping effect produced by a

general academic gravitation towards certain types of discourse, and a corresponding suspicion of (and resistance to) material or scholarship that is truly different. Indeed, specific disciplinary training can often result in its own dribble of monotonous responses to novel ideas. Noam Chomsky's stinging critique of the failure of institutions to challenge their own systems of power is an apt reminder of this risk:

Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns.¹⁰

The existing pedagogical problems that plague academia have not been addressed, which ensures that the functioning of modern education is comparable to the promulgation of propaganda. Instead, all we have seen in recent times has been an increasing drive to meet ill-conceived efficiency dividends. These shallow aims have provoked a host of common complaints among tertiary educators. Some of the most obvious include the incorporation — or culling — of disparate departments; a stringent arbitration of the competitive “publish or perish” culture; the widespread casualisation of the academic workforce; exponential increases in student fees; and institution-wide pushbacks against the maintenance of academic standards in class and course assessments at all levels.¹¹

As it stands, the competition between, on the one hand, education and research, and on the other, profit, is not particularly stiff. With hobbled knees and an open lockjaw, the university sector sloppily persists in its servile pursuit of profit. Meanwhile, academics and students alike have become clients to be squeezed for returns. Recently, Liam Semler diagnosed the higher education system's malaise: it is undergoing, he writes, a “neoliberal shift keyed to furthering national economic agendas.”¹² Thus, the modern neoliberal university tends to

do more than merely devalue teaching and research activities. It also seeks to slavishly service the needs of the state through a shifting of the educational frame itself. Given neoliberalism's ability to engulf and monetise all forms of production, it should be no great surprise that universities are taking this path. Perhaps what is more troubling is the way in which this shift narrows our capacity for critical thought. As Jacques Derrida once observed,

An institution is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing, or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation.¹³

In its embrace of — and by — neoliberalism, today's mainstream tertiary system only reinforces entrenched economic power relations, despite the best efforts of many educators. Higher education now exists to produce acquiescent citizens who serve and prop up advanced capitalism. The current university system provides a chapel in which communion with the almighty neoliberal god is the transcendental goal.

As such, the tertiary sector requires a wholesale realignment of its priorities: education is not simply a commodity, and it should not be treated as such.¹⁴ It is also a living process, which requires constant attention. The recent changes sketched above will eventually require a reckoning, but the most urgent aspect of these problems is the fact that professional development is structurally discouraged in this system. This is a problem that seems to erase even the possibility that educators will engage in active critical analysis of their own pedagogical processes. The very notion of a professional tertiary teacher has become an anathema and, as Raewyn Connell observes, such antagonism to professional teaching is a direct consequence of contemporary economic realities:

Market-oriented neoliberalism is profoundly suspicious of professionalism; it regards professions as anti-competitive monopolies. Specifically, neoliberalism distrusts teachers.¹⁵

It remains very difficult to argue with this assessment. The actual figures are startling: more than half of all teaching is performed by casual and/or sessional staff, many of whom are left in precarious employment situations.¹⁶

Educators, in fact, now comprise a minority of the total staff members within most educational institutions. Universities, in particular, have seen unprecedented rises in administrative hiring, with “the number of administrators and administrative staffers employed” between 1975 and 2005 having “increased by an astonishing 85 percent and 245 percent, respectively,” according to Benjamin Ginsberg.¹⁷ As administrative staff have come to dominate the tertiary sector, so have academic disciplines increasingly been subject to cost/benefit analyses. In these analyses, popular subjects often take precedence — whether in research or teaching — since they are easier to market or “sell” to enrolment-seeking administrators. Observable outcomes come to attain positions of key importance. Hence, more esoteric fields, and difficult or controversial approaches and projects, are increasingly discouraged or seen as probable drags on profitability.

Which returns us to the humanities. All of the above leaves the liberal arts in an uncomfortable position, as the arts generally tend to be less concerned with practical outcomes than theoretical ones. The humanities, in short, often have nothing tangible to sell. Given the antipathetic economic and cultural climate of our moment, it would seem all but guaranteed that the arts have entered an irreversible process of atrophy. The slowing stream of students will eventually evaporate, and as specialists retire (or die) there will be no one left to replace them. Indeed, the arts offer notoriously uncertain career prospects to graduates. Students with an eye to teaching in higher education find themselves in ever more precarious positions, facing only grim prospects of permanent employment after graduating. In larger institutions, there will always be a glut of cheap labour to be taken on by graduate students; and it is to such students that the bulk of teaching work can be delegated, with many of these casual staff made aware of their responsibilities mere hours before classes are scheduled to begin.¹⁸

And yet the humanities, perhaps incredibly, persist. In fact, larger statistical trends indicate that the choice to study in the humanistic disciplines is actually *increasing*, with both undergraduate and post-graduate enrolment figures surging in recent years.¹⁹ The irony here is palpable, and culminates in a crepitating cognitive dissonance: the very system of market-based capitalism frequently blamed for destroying the humanities is simultaneously, and in accordance with its own logic, cashing in on the sector's growth. Indeed, it can be argued, alongside Benjamin Winterhalter, that "the humanities crisis is largely a positive feedback loop created by stressing out over economic outcomes."²⁰

Ay, and there's the rub. Any attempt to embrace, let alone consciously enact, a commercialisation of the arts results in its own unique set of problems. The humanities are, and should be, concerned with symbols: linguistic, anthropological, musical, and (yes) even economic symbols. They should be attuned to the ways in which these symbols can be manipulated, both to our benefit and detriment. However, the humanities must also be acutely aware that there is no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism and, as such, intellectual endeavour, as epitomised by humanist scholars, is by its nature prone to produce uncertain, even abstracted outcomes. After all, the broad movement of the humanities is one of rebellion. As emphasis is placed on critical thinking, the arts enact a forcible resistance to the seemingly irreversible slide towards homogeneity that defines the ideal capitalist–consumer society. The broad field of the liberal arts, then, is immensely valuable for the same reason that it is immensely frustrating for economic administrators: the arts inspire through their marginalised status, their peripherality. While many of the wounds sustained by the arts may well be self-inflicted, they are also the products of their unique and important modes of self-reflexive enquiry. And as much as the economic value of the arts is underestimated, it is also true that their questionable economic utility is one of their central strengths, for through critique the arts act as a rearguard in the war against mindless cultural commodification. In this post-truth world, governed by seemingly illiterate demagogues, academic criticism of culture and its entrenched power systems is of paramount importance, in spite of

the increasingly peripheral spaces these imperatives occupy, both in tertiary institutions and the popular sphere. But the humanities are in triage, and unable to adequately defend against the steady encroachment of economic contractions. Humanistic practice — both individual and departmental — continues to be quietly euthanised, and stripped of any saleable assets. This slow winnowing leads to a diminution in the number and specificity of humanistic disciplines. This in turn results in a more diffuse set of learning outcomes and a greater tendency towards generalisation, crushing the dynamic range of diverse specialities into a redundant blob of homogeneity.

Given this dire state of affairs, should we finally administer the humanities their Last Rites? As funding continues to be slashed across all disciplines, the humanities continue to be sidelined with increasing violence. The recourse is negotiated and signalled in current research trends. Newer approaches within many disciplines reject the largely arbitrary borders imposed on them by tradition and interdisciplinary bickering; indeed, most contemporary scholars reach beyond the ghettos in which the humanities have previously been confined. And yet, those who fund the arts are often oblivious to these shifts. Winterhalter's observation strikes deep at the heart of this situation: "conversation about funding for the humanities somehow manages to proceed in complete isolation from the actual practices of today's humanistic scholars."²¹ The rise — and, more pointedly, the increasing normality — of interdisciplinary projects is as profound as it is pragmatic. The "hard" and "soft sciences" are increasingly entangled; the holistic integration of disciplines is required, not only because knowledge should be transferable, but because interdisciplinarity buttresses against the division brought about by neoliberal capitalism. Humanities research and teaching are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, by design.

These movements toward interdisciplinarity across the humanities represent a return to the basis of higher education. The word university itself captures the collectivist aims of institutions of higher learning: university comes prominently from the Old French *univercité*, meaning community, and the Latin *ūniversitās*, meaning

everything.²² As a community of scholars, we need to be conversant in one another's discourses, and to articulate our arguments broadly for different audiences. This special issue of *Philament* aims to encourage an interrogation of the liminal spaces within and between disciplines, locales, and temporalities. As such, its general theme of peripherality is a transgressive concept: it refers to a threshold, and denotes a marginal quality. Peripherality is a nebulous term: though it might be seen to delimit horizons by setting specific boundaries, it may also be thought to liberate us from boundaries by recognising that which is non-hegemonic. Indeed, it is not just certain disciplinary frames that are being made peripheral; the ancillary nature of our own geographical positioning as Australians (in the so-called antipodes of the world) also means that our collective intellectual efforts risk being sidelined. In considering peripherality, we directly confront the discursive limits of our own practice(s) of knowledge construction, and through the lens of peripherality we may even begin to erode the rigid disciplinary boundaries that surround us, to enable the emergence of a more nuanced interdisciplinary dialogue. The conference from which the works in this issue were sourced provided just such a dialogical space, opening a lively interchange of knowledge that spanned multiple fields.

In fact, in that conference, we found that being sidelined can be productive. The chronic undervaluing of the humanities forces its practitioners to occupy positions of resistance, and it is from this central position of opposition, of peripherality, that the works in this issue emanate. Despite their divergent topics, historical time periods, and methodological approaches, these works share what the best research in the humanities should strive for: defiance. The articles in this issue are emblematic of this attitude. Alastair Whyte's article "Spaces Beyond Borders: The Peripheries of Utopia" recalibrates standard conceptions of utopia, charting the term's linguistic drift through an engagement with the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and William Morris. Jordan Church's article "'The Play of Elves': Supernatural Peripheries and Disrupted Kingship in Layamon's *Brut*" represents an original and compelling intervention into medieval scholarship

that speaks directly to the complexity of adaptive historical processes. Jessica Sun's article "The Peripheral Hunchback of Venice" explores the original multicultural city of the modern world, offering an enthralling guide of seventeenth-century Venice from a decidedly peripheral vantage point. The creative works are just as accomplished. Dawne Fahey's "1953 series" of "chemigrams" (one of which provides this issue's striking cover image) function as both contemporary and historical pictures: their anachronistic titling, which is at odds with their time and method of production, seems to reference the technological fragmentation of the twentieth century. Primitive's intricately wrought rap-poem exhibits the author's fascination with the etymology of words and their inevitable repercussions in the present. Finally, Buys's review of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) suggests how exchanges between the historical and the contemporary remain of concern to questions of textual production, and reminds us just how important political knowledge is to understanding the intricacies of our increasingly divided world. All of these works demonstrate the central significance of critical discourse in the arts for understanding the world in which we live.

It has taken a great deal of time and effort to bring this issue to fruition, and it would be unbecoming of me not to acknowledge those who have helped to make it a reality. The original "Peripherality" conference was a labour of love, and my sincere thanks go to the other members of my organising committee, Tanya Peša and Peter Wright, for graciously helping to conceive and manage the conference. Thanks also to Jason Falcatan, who volunteered to provide additional support over the course of the day. Financial support was provided by the Education Portfolio at the University of Sydney in the form of a HDR+ Student Grant, and further material support was provided by the Co-op bookshop, and I extend my appreciation to both institutions. I wish to extend my gratitude to Peter Marks, former Chair of the English Department and my long-suffering PhD supervisor (Don't worry, I'm nearly finished!), for his introductory remarks and administrative support. I am also indebted to the support staff in the English department — particularly Georgia Holmes — who helped me navigate

the nightmarish world of university administration. The biggest acknowledgement must, of course, go to each of the conference delegates, whose scholarly acumen made the paucity of my own all too apparent.

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An immeasurable thank you to my former students and now friends Brooklyn Arnot, Megan Buys, Sydney Nicholas, and Chelsea Eriean, all of whom have worked exceptionally hard to provide material for the forthcoming issues: you have all taught me more than I could ever teach you. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my friends and colleagues Jordan Church, Jessica Sun, and Alastair Whyte, who have delivered such rigorous and provocative works of scholarship. I am privileged that you entrusted your work to this issue, and I hope the experience has been as rewarding for you as it has been for me. Additional thanks are due to Dawne Fahey for the incredible art that adorns the issue and gave the conference a distinctly peripheral visual theme. And to Primitive: The Year of the Primitive awaits. Finally, I would like to dedicate my work on this issue to two people: my grandfather, John Brian Bowes, who was taken from us far too soon by the scourge of Alzheimer's, and my partner, Sophia Eloisa Falcatan, for putting up with all of my rhetorical posturing.

Ultimately, the humanities may (or may not) be dying. But, humanity is also dying. Our planet, raped by our insatiable appetite, is already stretched far beyond its limits. Perhaps, just perhaps, with some interdisciplinary collaboration, we can alleviate some of the near

endless global suffering. We still have much to teach one other, and if we can somehow overcome our frailties, we may just persevere long enough to see the coming of a new age.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 27.
2. Devin Townsend (Strapping Young Lad), “Detox” in *City* (Los Angeles, CA: Century Media Records, 1997).
3. For claims that the humanities have expired through a combined failure to modernise alongside an obsession with maintaining funding over a long period, see Victor Davis Hanson, “The Death of the Humanities,” in *Defining Ideas* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2014), <https://www.hoover.org/research/death-humanities>; Alan C. Purves, “Life, Death, and the Humanities” in *College English* 31, no. 6 (1970): 558–564. Alternatively, for a popular recount of the “historical myth” of the death of the humanities, see Benjamin Winterhalter, “The Morbid Fascination With the Death of the Humanities,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/the-morbid-fascination-with-the-death-of-the-humanities/372216/>; Blaine Greteman, “It’s the End of the Humanities as We Know It,” *New Republic*, June 14, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/118139/crisis-humanities-has-long-history>; and Daniel Falcone, “On the Slow Death of the Humanities,” *Counterpunch*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/06/17/on-the-slow-death-of-the-humanities/>.
4. Malcolm Saunders, “The Madness and Malady of Managerialism,” *Quadrant* 50, no. 3 (2006): 10.
5. The most egregious Australian example was in the 2014–15 Hockey-Abbott Coalition budget, which promised to veto Australian Research Council Grants in the humanities fields, and to significantly slash the amount of funding available across all areas. Details have since been expunged from the Liberal Party website, but the general outline can be found in ministerial interviews and opinion pieces from the time: see Patrick Stokes, “Waste Not, Want Not—The Politics of Why Philosophy Matters,” *The Conversation*, September 6, 2014, <http://theconversation.com/waste-not-want-not-the-politics-of-why-philosophy-matters-17894>; Ashley Hall, “ARC Wasting Taxpayers’ Money Says Hockey,” *PM* (Radio National, ABC), September 5, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2013/s3842173.htm>; and Simon Benson, “Abbott Vows to Cut Futile Research,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 5, 2013, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/abbott-vows-to-cut-futile-research/news-story/8cf7102643ab1649256324d1857e2bd0>.

6. Susan Buck-Morss, "The Flâneur, The Sandwichman, and the Whore," in *New German Critique* 39 (1986): 104.

7. Terry Eagleton, "The Death of Universities," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees>.

8. Foucault suggests that "in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating." See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 303.

9. This is not to imply that all universities have always been conservative, though many institutions are and continue to be so. My observation is that universities have functioned, quite literally, to *conserve* knowledge and its methods of interchange. Their methods of conservation, however, significantly impact upon the manner in which knowledge is constructed and construed in higher education.

10. Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Southend Press, 1989), 48.

11. See Ella Delany, "Humanities Under Strain Around the Globe," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/us/humanities-studies-under-strain-around-the-globe.html>; Liam Semler, "The Seeds of Time, Part 2: Presentism and Selfie Culture," *mETAphor* 2 (2017): 5–13.

12. Liam Semler, "Seeds of Time, Part 1: SysEd and the Leviathan of Learning" in *mETAphor* 1 (2017): 10.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy* 2, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 101.

14. To paraphrase an infamous graffiti conversation located in the toilet block opposite my office.

15. Raewyn Connell, "Good Teachers on Dangerous Ground: Towards A New View of Teacher Quality and Professionalism," *Critical Studies in Education* 50, no. 3 (2009): 217.

16. See Dan Edmonds, "More than Half of College Faculty are Adjuncts: Should you Care?," *Forbes*, May 28, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2015/05/28/more-than-half-of-college-faculty-are-adjuncts-should-you-care/>; Alastair Gee, "Facing Poverty, Academics Turn to Sex Work and Sleeping in Cars," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/28/adjunct-professors-homeless-sex-work-academia-poverty>.

17. This, Ginsberg notes, is much larger than the comparative number of concurrent student enrolments and professorial appointments, which increased at a rate of approximately 50 percent: Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

18. A wealth of anecdotal and statistical evidence supports this observation. See, for example, Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015); Hamilton Nolan,

“The Horrifying Reality of the Academic Job Market” *Gawker*, May 17, 2016, <http://gawker.com/the-horrifying-reality-of-the-academic-job-market-1776914525>; and Laura McKenna, “The Ever-Tightening Job Market for Ph.D.s,” *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/04/bad-job-market-phds/479205/>.

19. See Chase F. Robinson, “What Humanities Job Crisis?,” *Inside Higher Ed*, December 11, 2012, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/12/11/essay-questions-idea-humanities-job-crisis>. The latest figures can be found through the Humanities Indicators website: <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/default.aspx>.

20. Winterhalter, “The Morbid Fascination.”

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “university,” accessed May 2, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/214804>.