CriSTaL
CRITICAL STUDIES IN TEACHING & LEARNING

2022, Volume 10, Special Issue
DOI: 10.14426/cristal.v10iSI.516

Endless Study, Infinite Debt:
On study inside and outside the university classroom

Astrid Lorange[1]# and Andrew Brooks[2]
[1]*School of Art and Design, University of New South Wales*
[2]*School of Arts and Media, University of New South Wales*
#Corresponding Author: a.lorange@unsw.edu.au

(Submitted: 20 December 2021; Accepted: 4 July 2022)

Abstract

This paper begins by considering the state of higher education in Australia, following structural changes facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We consider the longer-term effects of neoliberal ideology on the sector, charting the way that ongoing crises of/in higher education work to co-opt university workers and students into a position in which they are required to defend the idea of the university as a site of enlightenment. We then discuss the erosion of funding in the arts and argue that in concert with the diminished resourcing of the university, ad hoc social spaces within contemporary art have become temporary communities for study. We analyse a project of our own – *Endless Study, Infinite Debt* – which seeks to engage in the collective study of infrastructure, settlement, and racial capitalism. We consider how the university and art might be ambivalently engaged to practise forms of care and study against privatisation/professionalisation and towards solidarity.

Keywords: critical university studies, online learning, neoliberalism, care, pedagogical art, the undercommons

Introduction

When classroom learning in the higher education sector suddenly shifted to online delivery in early 2020, there were countless consequences. Some students – who may be homeless or precariously housed – lost access to the material infrastructure and resources that the campus provided, like showers, kitchens, and student union-provided meals and coffee. Other students could attend class when they ordinarily would not have been able to: from underneath their bed covers during a depressive episode, from the kitchen table as they cooked for family, from somewhere too far to commute to campus. Some students were without internet, computers, and library databases as campuses shut down. Some were able to listen to lectures as they worked, the Zoom window open

and on the clock. Some students suffered without the social cues provided by face-to-face engagement, eye contact, body language, and the contextual contours of speech. Some participated where they may never otherwise, via text-only contributions in the chat box that they could draft, edit, and publish in their own time. Some students were able to speak freely and without the risk that their being in public space might carry; some were unable to speak freely as the listening ears of their parents, or partner, or child, or housemate, or boss, were proximate.

In other words, when the space of the classroom was transformed and the conditions required for study changed, it was not as simple as saying that the experience of teaching and learning got better or worse. Questions of access – to infrastructures, resources, technology, and safety – have always textured students' experience of, or even contact with, higher education. And, questions of constraint – what precludes one from showing up, engaging, or feeling at home in class – necessarily differ according to each student's specific situation. Our students navigate trauma, violence, poverty, abuse, caring responsibilities, neurodiversity, chronic illness, the exhaustion of wage labour, and language barriers. The classroom after the pandemic represents both a certain kind of loss (the loss of people warming a room with intimacy, walking out into the courtyard together, passing each other in the hallways) and a certain kind of gain (the classroom that accompanies them wherever they are, wherever they need to be). Our interest in this essay is to think about how the changed conditions for teaching and learning require a shift in the terms of reference for how we perform analysis, if not a shift in the aim of that analysis: in other words, the inquiry remains the same, that is, how can we teach and learn in excess of the constraints on teaching and learning that are produced by the institution of formal education? Or: how can we work and study in the university but *against* what the university does to both work and study?

While we are ambivalent about what the sudden shift to online modes of delivery enables and constrains for students and teachers as they traverse the uncertainties of a global pandemic, we want to note here that the intensification of technological mediation in higher education, accelerated by the pandemic, will invariably lead to further shedding of labour and a generalised deskilling within the sector. This tendency was described by Karl Marx (1993), who distinguished between absolute and relative surplus labour, the latter referring to the production of surplus value through the introduction of measures such as the reduction of wages, the lowering of cost-of-living expenses, and investment in labour-saving technologies. Investment in constant capital (machinery, equipment, technology, software) corresponds to a decrease in variable capital (labour-power) which leads to an increase in the rate of exploitation where either fewer workers are required to produce the same amount of products or the same number of workers produce more products. Marx (1993) pointed out that over time the rising composition of constant to variable capital has a tendency to diminish the rate of profit, a condition which produces crisis. Marx's famous formulation of capital as a moving contradiction speaks to this paradoxical tendency in which capital 'presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of

wealth' (1993: 706). One way of arresting this diminishing rate of profit that investment in labour-saving technology inevitably produces is the shedding of labour-power, that is, the rationalisation of workers.

It is not simply that the rapid uptake of edutech technologies and online forms of delivery push more workers outside the sector, but that this tendency also has the capacity to further accelerate the restructuring of academic labour. Automated educational tools and edutech platforms that enable the easy reproduction of recorded lectures and other pedagogical content disaggregates the labour required to prepare and deliver courses, contributing to an already growing divide in research and teaching, and facilitating further reliance on casualised labour in the delivery of face-to-face education. While the relation between edutech and the pandemic is not the focus of this paper, it provides important context for how we understand the ambivalence of the online classroom as a space that both generates opportunities for students while contributing to a structural transformation of labour-power in higher education. And so, we remind ourselves that the university is a site of work.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney ask:'What would happen if every time people used the word "university" it came out sounding like "factory"?'(2021: 123). Their question invites us to challenge an enduring idea that the university is special or inherently radical. To foreground the university as a place of work is to remind ourselves that it is governed by the capitalist division of labour and that higher education, like any other commodity, is an expression of abstract labour produced by alienated workers. In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified neoliberal austerity policies in the higher education sector with the sudden loss of international student revenue used as the justification for massive job cuts and the widespread restructuring of academic work. These structural changes have been accompanied by appeals to produce flexible and agile learning environments that afford students more agency in navigating their degree programs – such appeals often imagine flexibility as the means by which the contemporary university realises its commitment to pastoral care as well as provides students with the most up-to-date and economy-proof credentials. The equation of care with flexibility fits snugly within a rhetoric of self-care that is often invoked as an antidote to the ills of neoliberal capitalism, in which flexibility is presumed to equate to self-empowerment despite the fact that the production of agile work and learning spaces also commonly coincides with the erosion of resources and the rationalisation of support workers (counsellors are replaced with mental health modules; learning support services are transferred to for-profit corporations and offshored or automated; professional staff are centralised and reduced, leaving fewer and fewer points of contact for students).

The shift to working from home for the majority of university staff has occured with little support or resourcing. Staff and students have been required to manage their own transformed work and study capacities under contradictory conditions that cite a crisis as the means for both temporary changes and permanent restructures. One tendency that we have observed is the way that the

pandemic has further entrenched a logic of individuation that is central to the contemporary university. While the university has long been structured by a rhetoric that emphasises tangible job-readiness through competitive self-improvement and comparative assessment, it is increasingly adopting a rampant professionalism that is imported from managerial discourse. We sit through department meetings where some colleagues argue that they should be allowed to mandate the use of cameras in their online classrooms, that they should be able to eject students from their class who refuse to become visible in a Zoom tile or a Teams window. They invoke professionalism as a rationale, telling us that this is the world we now live in and that students must prepare themselves to work online, to interview for jobs online, to embrace 'the new normal'. Improvement, advancement, professionalisation are invoked as principles that legitimate the use of coercive and punitive approaches to teaching and learning. But why should the student embrace professionalism when they are, by definition, not claiming a wage for their work in the classroom and so not yet professionals (even if they might be creating value through the use of various edutech platforms)? Our interest then is how we might resist these very logics in order to consider forms of study that resist competitive professionalisation and encourage critical thinking, without disavowing the need for students to graduate into employment. We remind ourselves that the history of work sites is not only a history of workers' division and alienation, but also history of collective organising, an insistence on sociality and collaboration in the face of individuating logics of the wage and the market, and a story of how to imagine work in terms that exceed the capital relation.

The assertion of the university as a factory allows us to conceptualise a shared but differential relation to an institution ultimately concerned with the extraction of surplus value. But we can also invert Moten and Harney's proposition in order to remind ourselves that under contemporary capitalism – where social relations beyond the sphere of production and labour take on an increasingly immaterial quality – the factory itself might also be understood as a university. In the era of the social factory, the workplace becomes a site of continuous improvement that relies upon an endless cycle of training, surveillance, monitoring, and retraining. The factory has become a site of knowledge production, mobilising technological innovations, and investing in outsourced educational programs that seek to improve productivity not only through training directly pertinent to the job but also through an investment in wellness modules, mindfulness workshops, and personal development. If the university is a factory and the factory is a university, how might we come together to practise forms of study and care that seek to illuminate the contradictions that constitute the classroom?

Moten and Harney tell us that

> it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment … In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. (2013: 26)

This injunction to steal from the institution is troubled by the institutional invitation that the employee *should* steal, that is, that the employee should extract what they can from the workplace in order to maximise their individual store of human capital. Against this invitation to steal in a manner continuous with the drive to increase surplus value we ask how might we steal from the institution in order to build our collective, rather than individual, capacity? Might we build spaces of study adjacent to, and outside of, the university that are antagonistic toward the professionalisation of learning? Reflexive and collective study of the university itself must reckon with the role that institutions that trade in the production of knowledge have played, and continue to play, in the production and legitimation of concepts – such as 'Man' and property – and categorical distinctions – such as race, gender, and sexuality – that underpin capitalist modes of exploitation and settler-colonial forms of dispossession and appropriation.

In what follows, we first begin by considering the state of the higher education in Australia, tracing the effects of neoliberal ideology and austerity on the sector, and charting the way that the ongoing 'crisis' of/in higher education works to co-opt university workers and students into a position in which they are required to care for, and defend, the idea of the university as a site of enlightenment and a public good. The implicit demand to care for the university even as it is being dismantled is understood in terms of what Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell (2018) call 'the crisis consensus'. We then consider the erosion of funding in the arts sector, trace different appeals towards 'recovery' and transformation of the sector's economic model, and argue that in concert with the diminished resourcing of the university, critical and social spaces of contemporary art have become temporary communities for study. Pedagogical art projects have, with varying consequences, responded to the devaluation of both art and education. We reflect on an ongoing project of our own – *Endless Study, Infinite Debt* – which seeks to use the infrastructures and resources of both universities and arts organisations to engage in collective study of infrastructure, settlement, racial capitalism, as well as the histories, aesthetics, and practices of resistance.

The university

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a devastating restructuring of the Australian higher education sector, with more than 40,000 jobs lost across the sector from May 2020 to May 2021, and with the Federal government rewriting the rules of its pandemic wage subsidy scheme, JobKeeper, three times in order to prevent universities from qualifying (Duffy, 2021). Such a move combines appeals to market-based solutions and budgetary necessity with an amplification of an ideological attack on the sector. The neoliberalisation of education results in the shrinkage of budgets for education according to an underlying logic of privatisation and individuation articulated by economists like Gary Becker and Milton Friedman of the Chicago School of neoclassical economics (1993; 1955). Becker's work reconfigured the notion of 'human capital' in relation to education, arguing that the difference in the earning capacity of different workers was the direct result in how much each

individual had invested in their own human capital through education rather than in relation to the production and exchange of commodities. Annie McClanahan (2019) shows that Becker drew on an already established discourse of human capital, which from the 1940s was used to defend subsidised education in the US for the regeneration of a post-war labour force. In the 1970–80s, as productivity waned, producing a capitalist class 'desperate for new sources of profitability and increasingly fractured by internal competition' (McClanahan, 2019:106:106), Becker and others reimagined human capital discourse in terms of a relationship between a privatised education sector and the individual consumer of educational products.

Becker (1993) developed a theory of economic behaviour in which human capital was taken to be a product of market investment whereby supply is determined by investment from individuals and/or governments. This emphasis on human capital breaks with the labour theory of value by correlating investment in education and training with rises in wages in a singular fashion which, in turn, obscures the centrality of the exploitation of workers in the production of surplus value. The effect of such economic thought was to do away with the troublesome category of class by rendering all workers entrepreneurial subjects in charge of their own destiny. Becker's articulation of the economics of education posits that investment in education from both individuals and governments will produce a more prosperous society *en masse*, with higher levels of skill and training driving industry innovation and productivity. The global decline in productivity since the 1970s which has resulted in the expansion of low wage, often precarious, service work might appear to contradict the claims made by the Chicago School. And yet the idea that direct investment in education (supply) leads directly to increases in wages (demand) continues to underpin how education is imagined. Writing on the long downturn, as Robert Brenner describes the period beginning in the '70s, McClanahan argues that

> "Neoliberalism" … usefully describes the regnant policy structure and cultural ideology that were necessitated by a crisis of capital accumulation: put vulgarly, it is the discursive effect for which economic decline is the historical cause. (2019:107)

In other words, the promise of neoliberalism – the promise of new horizons of profitability amidst deregulation and privatisation – is offered precisely because of, and not despite, economic crisis. For this reason, the promise remains largely illusory to those for whom personal responsibility and private investment have become functionally compulsory modes of economic participation. The much-vaunted entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism who invests in their own future obscures the reality of a rapidly expanding population who have been pushed outside the discipline of the workforce and the wage, or into more and more precarious forms of labour.

Educational programs such as bachelor's degrees remain tied to presumptions around future earning power, rendering education in utilitarian terms and measuring graduates according to the

slippery criteria of 'job readiness'. The conjoining of future prosperity with education justifies the erosion of public funding, with education figured as that which is tied to individual, private investment towards economic self-improvement (Connell, 2013). In 'The Role of Government in Education', Friedman (1955) made a distinction between what he called 'general education for citizenship' and 'specialized vocational education', with public funding for the former tolerated on a basic level. Fifty years of the neoliberal experiment has seen even this base level of general education come under attack, as education is further subjected to the twin logics of individualisation and privatisation. Such neoliberal economic rationale is part of what underpinned the Morrison-led Federal Government's attacks on the higher education sector. But this economic logic is fused with an ideological hatred of what is perceived to be an elitist university class hostile to the conservatism of the former government and encapsulated in an image of the humanities.

We can see such ideological attacks when the former Federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge, disparagingly described universities as 'woke' on Twitter or threatened to cut funding to student unions over the political organising they undertake on campuses across the country (Tudge, 2021; Ollivain, 2021; Ferguson, 2021). The conflation of an instrumental approach to education indebted to Chicago school economists and an ideological attack on universities as hotbeds of budding leftism is endlessly reproduced by conservative media who defended the fee hikes imposed on humanities degrees with zeal, writing:

> The coronavirus pandemic has made us poorer so we can't afford to lavish so much on subjects unlikely to deliver a private return to the individual, let alone a social one' and 'If tearing down statues is the thanks taxpayers get from tipping millions of dollars of subsidies into critical theory courses at university, it's about time we stop chipping in. (Creighton, 2021)

Needless to say, such arguments ignore employment statistics that show humanities and social science graduates are as, if not more, employable than those from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020).

Excluded from stimulus funds and subject to such ideological attacks, universities across the country, in a bid to preserve their surpluses, responded by sacking one in five university workers, undertaking mass workplace change projects, and aggressively courting industry partnerships (Duffy, 2021). Proposals are tabled to replace Deans with CEOs and schools with 'Employment and Start-Up Centres' (Abbott, 2021). The university, understood as representing market values, must be preserved, and preservation means adaptation, we are told. With each restructure, university executives around the country further entrench the presumption that education is the remit of the individual who desires to invest in future prosperity. The framing of education as a public good and the university as a site of enlightenment are tactically invoked in order to rally disaffected workers and students to reinvest in the worksite despite the fact that these have always been nothing more

than ideals which, more often than not, obscure the forms of violence and coercion that have always been part of the institutionalisation and commodification of knowledge. University administrations advance an idea of community and care that requires identification with liberal imaginings of the university. Workers and students are expected to band together around these shared investments despite the dismantling of the material conditions for teaching and learning. Boggs and Mitchell describe this state of affairs as '*the crisis consensus*', which they define as

> a mainstay of political ideology that functions with particular ardor in higher education, where it pivots on the invocation of the university as good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core. (2018: 434)

They continue:

> The crisis consensus thereby settles in advance the constitutive problems and paradoxes – to say nothing of the forms of real expropriation and violence – that continue to constitute the university as such. (2018: 434)

To speak of 'the university' requires some careful clarification. The university is not a monolith, nor is it the same kind of worksite for the teacher, the administrator, the cleaner, or the casualised employee. And while the chief product that the university appears to sell is 'education', the actual business model of the contemporary university is far more complex: the university deals in large-scale industry partnerships, lucrative real estate speculation, military contracts, and where education is concerned, highly competitive international markets where the fluctuating value of export commodities correlates to unpredictable geopolitical shifts and financial crises. University executives trade on an image of the university that is equal parts an inheritance of an enlightenment ideal of an institution concerned with the production of knowledge and 'truth', and a flexible and agile corporate structure that trades in 'human capital' in order to produce 'job-ready' graduates. When we speak of the university, we are always speaking of a set of dynamic conditions and structural operations which determine the working conditions of people in the higher education sector and the learning conditions of students in the higher education system while also always acknowledging that this foundational relation – of teachers and students – is a fraction of what actually goes on in the university. When we speak of the university, we also speak of that which happens against, alongside, and in lieu of its normal business; we speak of the capacity to find common, undercommon, and uncommon spaces in its classrooms, hallways, courtyards, libraries, and smoking alcoves. In short, when we speak of the university we speak about both the institution as a place that constrains, even prohibits study as well as the university as a social world in which study is made against the odds.

In this analysis, our aim is to resist being interpellated into a form of defensive or protective care for the university that emerges from 'the crisis consensus', and instead to practise forms of mutuality and solidarity that are concerned with building consciousness and social infrastructures that enable us to survive the structures that harm us. The forms of care we have in mind are indebted to practices of mutual aid and seek the cultivation of solidarities that traverse institutional settings and identity positions. We understand care to be about finding ways to create social and material infrastructures – often in ad hoc ways – that enable the distribution of resources necessary for living. Here we draw inspiration from the Black Panther Party's Breakfast Program, the support structures developed by abolitionist organisations like Sisters Inside, the forms of social reproduction practised in blockades such as Standing Rock and Djab Wurrung Embassy, as well as the friendships that nourish our everyday lives. We figure care as an active practice that is responsive to the specific needs of specific people, and one that requires mutual agreement of the terms of interdependence. Care is responsive to an always evolving set of conditions: it might be expressed as forms of pastoral care for students or in the refusal to demand that students provide 'evidence' of hardship or ill-health; it might take the form of striking in solidarity with precarious colleagues; in some instances, it might be expressed by speaking up, in others by shutting up. Care always moves in excess of an singular institutional setting, and so practising care within the workplace is not at odds with desiring more revolutionary demands, like the abolition of work and the wage relation. Saidiya Hartman figures care as an 'antidote to violence' (cited in Kaba, 2017). Hartman positions care as that which enables survival in the face of contemporary forms of violence such as policing and incarceration. But care is not always the antithesis of violence and in some cases, the two must be thought as inextricable. The revolutionary or emancipatory practices of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense or Sisters Inside are bound to revolutionary forms of violence where the abolition of structures of oppression or the destruction of symbols of dispossession or the violent defense of personhood and communities can be understood as expressions of care. If we are to take seriously the transformative potential of education – its capacity to unsettle inherited norms such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism – then we must acknowledge that care in the classroom might entail a certain violence toward the self that enables such transformation to occur. Care, therefore, is an antidote to violence from above which might necessarily require an unsettling and uncomfortable confrontation with the self. To practise care is to commit to find ways to sustain each other as we navigate institutions and structures and as we struggle to transform them.

Disorganising the arts

Since 2007, federal spending on the arts in Australia has declined by 18.9% (Blake, 2021). In 2016, the so-called 'Black Friday' announcement that more than 65 arts organisations would lose multi-year funding from the Australia Council for the Arts signalled an intensification of an already austere approach from a government openly hostile to art (Croggon, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic,

and as arts organisations across the country endured (or failed to survive) lockdowns, cancellations, and closures, a decimated sector saw even more dire conditions. Approaches to facing the widespread, long-term, and ideologically motivated devaluation of the arts have varied. Some people have campaigned for increased funding on the basis of the significance of the arts sector's contribution to the national economy; others have appealed to the necessity of art as a public good, never more important than in times of crisis and isolation. Others took a different approach still, arguing that 'recovery' should not be taken as the default objective without first interrogating what is being recovered and how such a recovery might prohibit actual and transformative change. Following this line of inquiry, we might consider, as Giles Fielke (2020) does, that the recovery of the arts sector requires leaving in place the logic of rent-seeking that currently underpins artistic production. As Fielke notes, 'increasing costs, especially rental costs, mean that a large percentage of funding that comes from arts grants goes straight to landlords'. Here the production of art is tied to the labour market despite the fact that the work of art is an unusual commodity that has never conformed to the rules of Marx's abstract and generalisable commodity form and the labour of theory of value that linked to this. Might the repeated calls to 'recover' the arts sector be an appeal to simply reproduce the status quo in which art is treated as industry and workers returned to their exploitation? This, of course, is not to suggest that the question of how to live does not apply to the artist but rather that the reproduction of the artist might be decoupled from the production of art. Such a proposition is to dissociate the work of art from the logics of individuation and possession, as that which might stand outside an economics in which the work of art is always rendered, as Fielke puts it, 'a means to an end'.

Stephen Palmer (2021) instructs readers to look to social reproduction theory to critique the idea that we might 'recover' from the current conditions in which art finds itself unable to reproduce itself as a sector but for an enormously under- or unpaid labour force. Instead, we might consider how the production of art and aesthetics could be redirected away from the reproduction of value based on the exploitation of cultural labour and toward the reproduction of the social in terms not defined by exchange but rather by the accrual of unpayable debts. This is to say, how might the infrastructure and resources of art – the limited access to funding, the use of space and resources, the production of publics – be put to use not in the service of the production of work to be sold and traded but in the generation of community refuses to acknowledge the individual (and the individual work) as its primary focus? Art, when it breaks with being a means to an end, can provide a space in which community can be forged, study can be practised, struggle can be waged. Art has a long history of such endeavours, and in the current climate in which both the higher education and arts sectors are losing public funding and infrastructure, artistic projects and collaborations are becoming critical (albeit often temporary) sites for collective study. As the university classroom has dematerialised, and as the capacity for artists and arts workers to access time, space, and materials has been eroded, 'study' has emerged as an increasingly important form for work to take, both in

itself – continuing the tradition of pedagogical and socially engaged practices of art making – and as a response to the constraints on both studying and making art under capitalism.

We look to collectives such as the Martumili Artists, a group of traditional custodians from one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world, the Martu people of the vast area across the Great Sandy, Little Sandy, and Gibson Deserts in Western Australia. The collective assembled in the early 2000s in response to stalled Native Title negotiations, which at that point had been underway for almost 20 years. When Native Title was finally granted in 2002, the area covered would exclude significant traditional sites of the Martu people, including where much of the region's water comes from, which the government would go on to approve for uranium mining in 2015 (MCA). The collective creates large collaborative paintings which serve as an opportunity for the community to come together – to talk, eat, sing, share. The curator Anna Davis writes:

> Each work is the product of highly social conditions; people come together to paint and talk, tell stories and sing. … Painting plays an integral educative role in Martu communities. It is one of a number of formal and informal methods of sharing experiences, remembering and passing on knowledge of Country and culture to younger generations' (MCA).

Here the act of making is an act of asserting the sovereignty of Martu people, a sovereignty which is incommensurable with, and beyond the reaches of, settler sovereignty. Making is itself an act of resistance to ongoing violence of settler coloniality.

We find inspiration in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s which insisted that the excess found in Black music, poetry, and art was continuous with the excess that animates forms of struggle such as riots and practices care/mutual aid such as the infamous Black Panther Party's Breakfast Program. Here artistic production and study was also in the service of enacting a mode of complicity in which revolutionary struggle could be supported and encouraged. One of the movement's loudest voices, the poet Amiri Baraka (1985: 249), described the Black Arts Movement as seeking 'to create an art, a literature that would fight for black people's liberation with as much intensity as Malcolm X our 'Fire Prophet' and the rest of the enraged masses who took to the streets.' In Baraka's articulation, the work of art is not a means to end where the end is the appropriation of the work through privatised consumption, but rather incessantly seeks to contribute to a collective that is always in the process of forming and reforming, insisting that another horizon is possible. Here the work of art is synonymous with the work of study and can be understood as that which is always unfinished, concerned with generative destruction rather than concrete ends. As Moten (2011) puts it, thinking the relation between the riot and the poetics of Baraka and others, 'the poetics of the open field, especially when performed in the narrow cell, was always tied to the sociopoetics of riot, of generative differentiation as a kind of self-care, of expropriative disruption as a kind of self-defense, of seeing things as a performed social theory of mind.'

In our local context, we look to the work of collectives like Frontyard and Incendium Radical Library as spaces that enable the undercommon socialities to thrive and flourish. Frontyard is, in the words of its caretakers, a 'Not-Only-Artist Run Initiative' (Frontyard). The space is a house on unceded Cadigal Country in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville and is owned by the local Inner West Council. Frontyard is run by a team of caretakers (artists, designers, community members) committed to producing a communal space for studying and gathering. The caretakers describe the space as 'a pro-active, multi-purpose space where the local arts loving community come together for practical skills-sharing, critical research and survival tips.' Anyone can use the space by simply contacting one of the caretakers and booking some time in the shared calendar. It commonly hosts dinners, readings, study groups, residencies, activist meetings, and more. The space has a kitchen, a couple of 'studios', a meeting room, a worm farm and a compost, a small garden, a library, a risograph printer, and of course a front yard. It is an experiment in resisting outcomes in favour of processes, in making a space where things can happen and in cultivating such a space against the compulsion to articulate its value in terms of measurable value or KPIs or policy reports.

Incendium Radical Library (IRL) feels, in many ways, like a companion space to Frontyard. The library is currently located on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation in Footscray in Melbourne's inner west (although at the time of writing, IRL was currently looking for a new space). The founders of the project, Anne-lise Ah-Fat and Tilly Glascodine, write that

> Incendium Radical Library started because we wanted to challenge the commodification of libraries, whether government, university, or council based. … We see intentional spaces such as this as essential meeting places to develop community. Incendium is for anyone who is interested in critical literature or a comfortable space to read. (Incendium Radical Library).

The library is an undercommon space, in which one might study in ways that refuse the call to order imposed by the nexus of the market and the state. The space is home to IRL Press, an independent press that publishes critical poetics, the IRL letter writing group with people inside prison and other community and activist activities. These experiments in forging collectivities and being in relation are examples of intellectual and artistic production that take the general antagonism as the always incomplete end to endlessly struggle toward. Such spaces and movements enact what Moten and Harney call the undercommons, which they explain refers to those spaces 'where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons' (2013: 28). But how do we practise togetherness when we are forced to be apart? How can we use the resources of university and the arts in a moment in which we are confronted with physical separation, where individuation is entrenched by the mere fact of social isolation?

Endless Study, Infinite Debt

Early in 2020 we were approached by Liquid Architecture, an arts organisation that supports experimental and interdisciplinary critical work with a focus on sound and listening, to facilitate a project for their *un-ear-thing* program, an experimental pedagogical initiative which comprised, in its first iteration, four discrete projects which each took the form of a workshop/study module. Liquid Architecture introduced *un-ear-thing* as follows: 'the program takes the metaphor of the 'ear to the ground' as a departure point for exploring how collaborative, experimental listening might excavate buried knowledge and help navigate the hazardous conceptual terrain of the present.' Snack Syndicate, the critical art collective that comprises the two of us, were asked to lead the first project for the program, building on our ongoing endeavour *Endless Study, Infinite Debt*, an open-ended project that commenced in 2018.

Endless Study, Infinite Debt began while we were in residence at Artspace in Sydney with a newborn baby, wanting to open our studio space to collective study and planning but without any concrete objectives or aims. The project began as a series of readings, study sessions, and a list of people, texts, themes, and concepts we wanted to spend time thinking about and collaborating on; our first desire was to convene a group of people to think about infrastructure. What is infrastructure, how is it differentially accessed/denied, and what can be done to imagine a more just world in which 'the living mediation of what mediates life', as Lauren Berlant (2016: 393) describes infrastructure, is available to all? From this early desire came the Infrastructural Inequalities research network, a collaboration with the Housing for Health Incubator at the University of Sydney, and a public program, exhibition, open access journal, and reading group. Subsequently, Infrastructural Inequalities has gone on to study policing, incarceration, and abolition and is currently working on a project focused on paper infrastructures and bureaucratic violence. Meanwhile, *Endless Study* has gone on to find new lines of inquiry: in 2019 we responded to a commission from curator Tara McDowell, who asked us to contribute to a program accompanying the curatorial studies doctoral program conference at Monash University. For that particular iteration of *Endless Study*, we responded to each doctoral candidate's project in the form of a dedicated text which offered an engagement with the research as a gesture of intimacy and solidarity: close reading is the form our study takes when we read each other as an act of friendship. The third iteration, in 2020, was devised for *un-ear-thing*.

By the time the planning phase for *un-ear-thing* arrived, the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived and rearranged every aspect of life. An initial rough sketch to be in Melbourne for an intensive weekend of in-person study turned into a plan for a series of online sessions on how to come together despite lockdown measures, physical isolation, and the crisis of social reproduction wrought by the pandemic. In conversation with Liquid Architecture, we decided to concentrate our study on study itself: how we do it, why we do it, how it sustains us, and how it helps to build a liveable future. Responding to the theme of *un-ear-thing*, we figured the project in terms of listening: if we cannot

touch each other, cannot breath the same air of a bar or living room or hallway or even street corner, can we listen to each other in a way that provides the intimacy required to collectively understand, analyse, and survive large-scale crisis? We devised a plan for a series of sessions guided by collaborators who could each approach the question of how we listen in times of isolation differently. Our desire to work with other people was in part borne from a desire to be connected across time, space, and the confines of lockdown; it was also in part a desire to communise our artist fee from Liquid Architecture.

Tom Melick, a writer, editor, and teacher, led a session on the overnight ubiquity of Zoom, and what it means to suddenly have work, education, and intimacy subsumed by a single proprietary software. Kynan Tan, a critical data studies scholar, media artist, and meditation teacher, considered the peculiar place of listening through digital networks and against the fatigue caused by multiple layers of mediation and abstraction. Artist and researcher Spence Messih asked us to tune the ear to the dead: to history, the archive, and the many voices who occupy the margins and undercommons of the past. Academic, activist, and film-maker Jason De Santolo led a session on listening to Country, showing how the project of decolonisation involves resistance against the occupation of land, water, and air. Finally, Trisha Low, a Bay Area-based writer and editor, invited workshop participants to consider how hospitality can be practised as a form of long-distance care and sustenance. We asked each collaborator to devise a study session as well as produce a short, situating text which would act as a guide to the session and record of its inquiry. These five sessions followed an initial, introductory session where we, as Snack Syndicate, led a session and set out the guiding questions for the six-week module.

For each subsequent session, we prepared an introduction for the collaborator-host, accompanied by contextual commentary on the week's events during the unfolding global pandemic. This became particularly vital as the enormous, historical waves of uprisings began in Minneapolis following the murder of George Floyd by police and that brought together social movements across the world, including here in Australia where ongoing and First Nations-led resistance against the settler state, the prison industrial complex, and foundational anti-Black racism expressed explicitly internationlist messages of solidarity, highlighting the shared histories that unite distinct sites of the racial capitalist project. At the end of the project, we had the six situating texts from the different sessions as well as occasional materials produced in individual sessions (these included a collaborative book, a zine, a PDF library, and a playlist). Together, these material traces comprised a score for study in a moment of convergent crisis and were archived on Liquid Architecture's web-based journal, *Disclaimer*. The project, as a whole, was called 'Endless Study, Infinite Debt: Protocols for listening in (and after) social isolation' (hereafter 'Protocols').

As university workers, 'Protocols' sat both inside and outside the normal remit of our job. Our workloads stipulate a proportion of time dedicated to teaching, research, and service. But a project like 'Protocols' sits across all three. On the one hand, we might claim the commission from Liquid

Architecture as a non-traditional research output. But on the other hand, the project was more about facilitating a space of collaboration, in which case, we might instead claim it as a curatorial or editorial output. These claims may or may not be 'counted' as research, depending on the complex metrics that each claim is subject to in the assessment phase of the reporting process. In any case, the project is not part of our teaching allocation, though of course its format and commitment made it very much an extension of our pedagogy. Perhaps it would be considered 'service' insofar as it was a public-facing project designed to facilitate the sharing of ideas within and across discourses of contemporary art and theory. Since the project ran at night, outside of work hours, from our own home, and attracted an artist fee, it also in many ways was precisely *not* part of our job and afforded us a certain flexibility in its production. The vague territory in which critical and creative work is both recognised by and in excess of academic work provided a productive kind of contradiction for our project, which we imagined as a form of study that both draws from our experience in the classroom (designing a course, preparing materials, devising a syllabus, cultivating the social space of learning, facilitating discussion) and that is necessarily outside the official space of the classroom (the project was open to anyone, there were no learning outcomes, there was no assessment). To run a study program under the auspices of a critical art project also required a direct engagement with and analysis of the various institutional constraints that delimit our actions through university codes of conduct, software licences, and artist agreements. As we try to do in the classroom, for this project we attempted to openly address the different ways that the space of study comes already circumscribed by various conditions that confine, if not outright prohibit, the very possibilities for study.

Across the six weeks of the project, and with a group of 40 or so participants, we noticed a number of things. First, study is so much easier when taken as a collective task, when understood in social terms as something that brings people together and that provides a form of nourishment that is necessary for properly contextualising the work we do to understand the world. Second, study must be responsive to the conditions in which it arises; we needed to talk each week about what had come to pass since we had last gathered, to consider the world itself as the ever-moving object of our study. Third, the work we do as teachers and artists is above all about making small, contingent publics; it is about developing forms of study that can sustain life outside the formal sites of learning or making that we might find ourselves embedded in. Finally, it is not in the university classroom alone, nor in the sanctified space of the 'artwork' that study can be taught, learned, or practised. Rather it is in the ways that these sites exist in tension with their institutions, and in relation to their outside, that study emerges as a relation that necessarily exceeds whatever confines it. As in class, where we try to engage our students such that they take our lessons seriously enough to take them into every aspect of their life (work, family, nation), so in 'Protocols' we made a 'collective score' that could be used as a critical tool for negotiating the specific crisis of the pandemic as well as the concomitant crises that preceded it and were intensified because of it. And, insofar as the classroom

provided us a model for how to run an online learning module elsewhere, so too did the experience of teaching outside our job provide us with a sense of how to return to the classroom less exhausted by the university in austerity mode and more energised by the fact that when we enter class we still largely enjoy the autonomy and possibility of speaking together about whatever it is that needs to be spoken about on a given day. Despite the degraded conditions of teaching and learning in the sector today, that autonomy remains, and we see the classroom discussion as that which connects us in the university to the space of study elsewhere.

Complicity and abolition

At this point, the reader may be inclined to draw attention to the seeming contradiction of critiquing arts funding while receiving grant-secured fees, or the call to study beyond the university while accepting a wage from the same institution. The contradiction is, of course, real: we are entangled with these institutions and structures whether we like it or not. The question is not *whether* there is a contradiction but rather *how* we might heighten the contradiction to the point of breaking (Moten et al, 2021). This is a lesson we learn from Moten and Harney (2021) who study General Baker and League of Revolutionary Black Workers – a Black radical movement that assembled across Ford and Dodge manufacturing plants in Detroit in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they struggled to abolish the very sites of work that they drew their wages from (and the misery of value that reproduces the relation of waged work in the first place). The task of heightening the contradictions we find ourselves tangled up within requires abandoning the pressure to individuate and becoming part of the collective, which Moten and Harney call 'the general antagonism'.

University and artistic work is often imagined to possess a unique quality – such work is presumed to be connected to the identity of an individual in ways that other jobs are not. Perhaps this is a legacy of a romantic ideal of the intellectual or the artist. Or perhaps it is a product of mythologies of the artist or the intellectual as a figure of radicality. Regardless of the origin, the question of complicity rears its head over and over again in relation to production of knowledge and cultural objects. But as Moten and Harney (2021) teach us, to dwell on the question of complicity is to find ourselves yet again trapped by the compulsion to individuate. At the root of the concern around one's complicity, they teach us, 'is the fear that they cannot sort themselves out in the midst of this complicity. The person cannot say this is 'me,' my strategy, and my relation to the institution. Complicity indicates a kind of falling into something and not being able to disentangle what you see as yourself from the institution and its (anti-)sociality' (Moten and Harney, 2021: 124-125). The General Baker and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers were unconcerned with whether or not they were complicit with the institution they sought to destroy precisely because they had cultivated an alternate sense of complicity with each other. 'They didn't feel guilty or conflicted about working for General Motors. They didn't identify with GM or derive their identity from their relative antagonism with GM' (Moten & Harney, 2021: 125). They were able to disaggregate the work from

the job, the worker from the institution. On this alternate conception of complicity, Moten and Harney write:

> To be complicit with others, to be an accomplice, to live in ways that always provoke conspiracy, a conspiracy without a plot where the conspiracy *is* the plot – this complicity can help us. This second use of complicity emphasizes our incompleteness – when you see us you see something missing, our accomplices, or something more, our conspiracy … We can provoke here not a strategy of within and against, but a way of living that is within and against strategy, not as a position, relation, or politics, but as a contradiction, an embrace of the general antagonism that institutions feed off but deny in the name of strategy, vision, and purpose. (2021: 125)

This sense of complicity is ongoing, an always incomplete and always iterative process, and one that requires study. We seek not to deny the contradictions we are implicated in but rather to commit our energies toward the production of this second sense of complicity. The task, as we see it, is to use the resources available to us – the resources of the university and the arts – to practise this complex form of being in relation as we struggle toward the abolition of structures and institutions (the workplace, prisons and police, the settler colony) that reproduce and uphold the capital relation and its myriad scenes of subjection.

We write this paper at the end of a long and exhausting year, as colleagues from universities across Australia receive news of yet further rounds of redundancy and the wholesale restructuring of education. We write it as we reflect on the term just finishing, in which we each taught from our home in lockdown, speaking to students who, inside their own homes, expressed an overall ambivalence about the peculiar conditions of our coming together while apart. Weekly, we receive emails about the staged 'return to campus', a plan that seems to promise something impossible and undesirable: there is nothing to return to, because we cannot return to the time before the pandemic. We cannot return to the campus now transformed, to spaces decommissioned and defunded, communal spaces marked now only for transit. At the same time, we receive emails about the future of the faculty, campus, degree structure, the future of learning in the post-pandemic world. In these emails, the unexpected pivot provided by the pandemic has opened up a new set of possibilities for a streamlined product, a new idea of the campus as a distributed network across the world. Against both the notions of a return to normal business *and* a future written by the unpaid work of pandemic-era transitions, we write this paper in order to ask how we can remain committed to study as a form of life that cares for and sustains the work we do in the classroom, but that also allows us to situate that work in a broader political context in which we strive for something that far exceeds our jobs. What we steal from the university and the institution of art are capacities, affordances, networks, relationships, and infrastructures for building contingent publics. And when we find

ourselves in intimate scenes of study with others in these contingent publics, we find ourselves united by that which would seek to divide us: in this sense, we are united in the larger task of abolishing the structures that underwrite division.

Author Biographies

Astrid Lorange is a Senior Lecturer at UNSW Art & Design who lives and works on unceded Wangal land. Her research focuses on how critical reading practices/publics come to navigate power, transform social relations, and imagine a better future. She co-wrote *Homework* with Andrew Brooks. She is a founding member of the Infrastructural Inequalities research network and one half of the critical art collective Snack Syndicate. She co-edits the publishing collective Rosa Press.

Andrew Brooks is a writer, artist and teacher living on unceded Wangal land, who lectures in Media Studies in the School of Arts and Media, University of New South Wales (UNSW). *Homework*, co-written with Astrid Lorange, was published by Discipline in 2021. He is a founding member of the Infrastructural Inequalities research network and one half of the critical art collective Snack Syndicate. He co-edits the publishing collective Rosa Press.

References

Abbott, M [@mathew_abbott]. 2021. FedUni announced a huge restructure yesterday. *Twitter*, 23 November. Available at: https://twitter.com/mathew_abbott/status/1462977446349705221 (Accessed 23 November 2021)

Baraka, A. 1985. The wailer. *Callaloo*, 23: 248-256.

Becker, G. 1993. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education.* 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berlin, L. 2016. The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times. *Environment and Planning D*: *Society and Space*, 34 (3): 393-419.

Blake, E. 2021. Australia's arts sector shredded by latest Covid shutdown and won't survive without government help, report warns. *The Guardian*, 26 July. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/jul/26/funding-for-australias-arts-sector-needs-a-public-led-reboot-to-survive-report-finds (Accessed 8 October 2021).

Boggs, A. & Mitchell, N. 2018. Critical university studies and the crisis consensus. *Feminist Studies*, 44(2): 432-463

Connell, R. 2013. The neoliberal cascade and education: an essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education*, (54)2: 99–112.

Creighton, A. 2021. Want to study Foucault? Don't expect a cent. *The Australian*, 19 June. Available at: https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/uni-fee-shakeup-explosion-of-degrees-

has-sapped-their-value/news-story/86cee36cb7a65ddc1e79a4dbf2ceaaff (Accessed 4 October 2021).

Croggon, A. 2016. The 70% drop in Australia Council grants for individual artists is staggering. *The Guardian*, 19 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/may/19/the-70-drop-australia-council-grants-artists-funding-cuts (Accessed 26 October 2021).

Duffy, C. 2021. 'One in five' university jobs lost as COVID-19 border rules continue to bite. *ABC News*, 13 September. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-13/covid-job-cuts-at-universities-prompting-fears-for-future/100447960 (Accessed 4 October 2021).

Fielke, G. 2020. 'Community Immunity: The Revolution Was Televised'. *Minority Report*. Available at: https://min.report/giles-fielke/community-immunity-the-revolution-was-televised (accessed 1 November 2021).

Ferguson, R. 2021. Every Australian university has adopted Morrison government's free speech code. *The Australian*, 12 October. Available at: https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/every-australian-university-has-adopted-morrison-governments-free-speech-code/news-story/756becf4e06a609bf1f96141328d8640 (Accessed 4 October 2021).

Friedman, M. 1955. *The role of government in education*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Frontyard. About. *Frontyard*. Available at: https://www.frontyardprojects.org/about/ (Accessed 10 October 2021).

Incendium Radical Library. About. *Incendium Radical Library*. Available at: https://incendiumradicallibrary.com/About (Accessed 10 October 2021).

Kaba, M. 2017. 'Free Us All'. *The New Inquiry*. Available at: https://thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/ (Accessed 8 December 2021).

McClanahan, A. 2019. Serious Crises: Rethinking the Neoliberal Subject. *boundary 2*, 46(1): 103–132.

Marx, K. 1993. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin.

Moten, F. 2011. Necessity, immensity, and crisis (many edges/seeing things). *Floor*, 10 October Available at: http://floorjournal.com/2011/10/30/necessity-immensity-and-crisis-many-edgesseeing-things/ (Accessed 10 October 2021).

Moten, F. & Harney, S. 2021. *All Incomplete*. New York: Minor Compositions.

Moten, F. & Harney, S. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* . New York: Minor Compositions.

Moten, F., Harney, S. & Shukaitis, S. 2021. Refusing completion: A conversation. e-*flux*, 116. Available at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/379446/refusing-completion-a-conversation/ (Accessed 20 October 2021).

Museum of Contemporary Art. Martu Artists. *Museum of Contemporary Art*. Available at: https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/martu-artists/ (Accessed 16 October 2021).

Ollivain, C. 2021. The right's 'free speech crisis' is an ideological attack on universities. *Honi Soit*, 8 August. Available at: https://honisoit.com/2021/08/the-rights-free-speech-crisis-is-an-ideological-attack-on-universities/ (Accessed 30 September 2021).

Palmer, S. 2021. Art in crisis: Resilience, recovery, reproduction. *un Magazine*, 15 February. Available at: https://unprojects.org.au/article/art-in-crisis-resilience-recovery-reproduction/ (Accessed 28 October 2021).

Tudge, A [@AlanTudgeMP]. 2021. The woke unis strike again. *Twitter*, 9 June. Available at: https://twitter.com/alantudgemp/status/1402529234073964545?lang=en (Accessed 1 October 2021)

RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020. Do humanities graduates have the same job prospects as science graduates?. *ABC News*, 19 November. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-19/fact-check-humanities-science-graduates-uni-fee-changes/12822186 (Accessed 7 December 2021).