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## Iterable Ciphers for Insurrection

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# Iterable Ciphers for Insurrection

Dolsy Smith, The George Washington University

## Abstract

This piece situates the project of critique in relation to the idea of library instruction as labor and the library as an organization. If the laborer can come to reflect on the conditions of their labor, thereby achieving a measure of autonomy even at the grindstone, it's also possible that the critical subject can be induced or coerced to labor on behalf of the organization. In the attenuation of organized forms of solidarity at the workplace, the organizations that employ us demand more and more of their workers' time, energy, and commitment. In this piece, I surface these tensions in the interest of a different kind of instruction: studying to learn from fugitive forms of solidarity that, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest, endure because of their refusal to be organized, keeping the commons alive around and beyond the frame in which the subject studies their own reflection.

*Keywords:* reflection, *Critical Library Instruction*

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## Iterable Ciphers for Insurrection

*[W]e need to move beyond critique. For the simple reason that, due to its Kantian origins, critique cannot but restate (usually by the back door of redress) the premises of modern thought. How? Because the juridical and ethical figuring of the subject (respectively authority and liberty), both in thought and institutions (procedures, premises, and mechanisms), undermine the very critical and emancipatory project they are requested to ground.*

*-Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Hacking the Subject"*

*[T]he university is fucked up. It's fucked up over here. Why is it fucked up? Why is it that shit ain't the way it should be here? Yeah, there's some stuff here, but obviously there's stuff in other places too. The point is: it's fucked up here, how can we think about it in a way to help us organize ourselves to make it better here?*

*-Fred Moten from "The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stephen Shukaitis" in The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*

TFW<sup>1</sup> you realize that it's been ten years since you published an essay about feeling "stuck" in your efforts to bring critical perspectives to your work in library instruction. Ten years, and the feeling persists, of course. Tense years in the friction between the prerogatives of capital and the imperative of critique (or should we say the imperatives of capital and the prerogative of critique?). In that *kairotic* time of which Emily Drabinski (2017) writes, noting how the present demands that we divide our labor, our loyalties, and our care as library professionals between "compliance" and "critical engagement" (p. 78). For teaching, as a labor of fidelity and care putting selves in touch across intervals where selfhood comes into play *as a thing that, to hijack Gayatri Spivak's words, remains forever "singular and unverifiable"* (2004, p. 109)...for (let me start over) *that* sense of teaching, radical and impoverished by the grace of what knows itself only in the act of giving itself away, persists awkwardly, painfully alongside the demands of a managerial regime that succeeds insofar as it refuses to know itself as care. Or that is what counts, anyway: the accountability that insists on the quantifiable *as the verifiable*. In its control over the quanta of labor-power at its disposal, this regime aspires to a form of responsibility that admits of no response. Which is what domination seeks in its appetite for the resources of the commons, the communal, the commensal. Which is the university in its ambition, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) write, "to rid itself, like capital in general, of the trouble of labor" (p. 29).

You start over, you are always starting over. Stuckness, the feeling of getting into trouble in “those ‘stuck places’ where thinking occurs” (Eisenhower and Smith, 2009, p. 317), gives rise to an iterable labor. It troubles the grammar you count on, with its guarantees of clarity, and it clouds the critical reflection that you count yourself capable of making. Reflecting on what I wrote ten years ago, I need to record a debt to my co-author, Cathy Eisenhower. It was Cathy who brought to our project the feminist vocabulary for describing the gendered texture of our labor, and who prompted us to think through critical pedagogy’s entanglement with patriarchal authority in the classroom. And I need to record that essay’s chief deficit, too: while writing about patriarchy and capitalism, we said nothing about white supremacy. We said nothing about (our) whiteness, which is to say, we neglected it while speaking into that funnel, reproducing stuckness for others as the act of speaking for ourselves and making it stick. Since then, moving with relative ease from a position centered on pedagogy to one focused on library technology, I have reaped the benefits of what Mirza and Seale (2017) call the “technocratic ideology [...] bound up with white masculinity,” cashing in on how my race and gender position me as fit for the privilege and power associated with the mastery of data and code (p. 172). But I’m not here to repair a deficit or repay a debt. Nor do I intend to ply you with a story of progress or decline. To paraphrase Fred Moten, Cathy and I were posing the following question, which remains as relevant now as it was then: Why doesn’t teaching in the academy, the academic library, feel good? (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 117) If the peril and pleasure of the pedagogical relation are interminable (Felman, 1982), *this* question repeats itself within and against the grain of that relation. Or you might say that the question renders pedagogy granular to the sticky situations in which we find ourselves, that we find *in* ourselves. Let’s call it *the iterable*. I’m using this figure to acknowledge the persistence of a non-progression, of ways of getting stuck that are nonetheless how we get by, how we get along (Berlant, 2011).

I’m working alongside and learning from others who have sought to expose the stuckness of our profession in structural violence and institutional oppression. Writers who challenge the unmarked whiteness of the profession, bringing to bear critical-race theoretic and intersectional approaches (Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2015; de Jesus, 2014; Ettarh, 2018; Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015; Honma, 2005; Hudson, 2016; Hudson, 2017; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). And writers who have undertaken critiques through the frames of queerness (Adler, 2017; Drabinski, 2013), trans experience (Roberto, 2011), and disability (Kumbier & Starkey, 2016). Such work troubles the common sense of a field that claims

neutrality as security for the cultural authority that it borrows from the liberal state (Seale 2016a; 2016b). But as the credit afforded liberal institutions, including libraries, wears thin under the depredations of neoliberal social and economic policy, it has become fairly obvious that the profession is suffering a prolonged crisis (Enright, 2013; Popowich, 2018). We're in a car stuck in neutral and rolling down an incline. And to feel the slope of where we're headed, you hardly need to consult the field's academic books and journals. As the vibrancy of #critlib attests (compensating for an official discourse still captivated by its nostalgic image in the rearview of a meretricious empiricism), library laborers understand the conditions of their labor. And that includes the structures demanding labor's exploitation as value in vertiginous and unsustainable service to the bottomless bottom line. And they share that understanding through forms of resistance and solidarity that not only travel through the sentences of scholarly argument, but also spread as gut feelings, a specific gravity of practice, wavelengths of resonance in headspace, various kinds of vibe. It's not my aim to preach to the choreography that so greatly exceeds, in rigor and abundance, the reach of my own practice. Rather, I'm after a way of sounding the interval where the "trouble of labor" occurs. You might call it the gap between the organization and the profession. Perhaps, by plunging the imagination into that gap, critical writing or critique—which is, of course, only one kind of critical labor (Hudson, 2017)—can prepare us to attend to the trouble all around us. Perhaps it can prepare us to make some trouble ourselves, to amplify its sound.

What follows is not another critique of information literacy. Anyway, they—the other *they*, whose antecedent you are, too—are talking now about computational literacy, data literacy, etc. Their words are weighty with the entitlement to name reality as they see fit, not as they feel it. (Their words weightless as banknotes, as lines of credit, as financial instruments, tracing the future as the void everybody's labor will have left behind). TFW you realize that nobody will ever be literate enough. And if *information* literacy has, under the imprimatur of the ACRL Framework, become explicitly rhetorical (becoming what they wouldn't let it be before), the cynical part of you might observe that teaching rhetoric remains the task of those who see their labor obscured by the demands of capital for new skills, new kinds of capacity. Teaching the critical and the rhetorical, we struggle to stay afloat on the tide of STEM. Which is not to deny that the computational is rhetorical. For the data that we count on as inputs to, or outputs from, computational methods and algorithmic systems reflect the prejudices and ideologies of those who devised those methods and who built and operate those systems (Noble, 2018). None of that should surprise us. The world that human

activities produce is given back to us in the form of our knowledge about the world. Except that they, or we, or you, insist on turning that gift to a profit. *We* are asked, increasingly, to quantify our work, and the work of the students we teach and the colleagues we manage. Asked to supply management (the *they's* absentee antecedent) with the data that will tell the story of the work we do. But *theirs* is a work of rhetoric, too, a humanistic labor that forgets itself as such (Guillory, 2004) in recounting others' work to their credit. Meanwhile, so much of the work that *we* do, including how we produce data about our work – by which I mean our collective, commensal, sensual labor—remains uncounted, un(ac)countable. Whether student or teacher, manager or subordinate, the story of the body's trouble, the bounty of its gifts where the given resounds, remains untold. (TFW you begin to understand management as the humanism that we have left. Or that they deserve. For when you consider the ravages of capitalism and imperialism, past and present, you begin to see how the category of *the human* describes a particular kind of social position, the maintenance of which consigns others' labor to the mark of the thing and the taint of the machine; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 1984; 2003).

The feelings that concern us are here are hardly specific to libraries or library instruction. If anything, what might be specific to work in those spaces is the dawning of a kind of surprise, an awareness or a suspicion or a dread intruding on the relative complacency of a white-feminized, middle-class profession. For librarianship is a profession that, if rarely well remunerated, has remained (relatively speaking) exempt from the dangers and ravages of low-wage manual and domestic labor. And yet, those kinds of labor, too, occur within and make possible the libraries where the professionals work. And if the latter are feeling more acutely their proximity to those who toil under the stigma of low wages and contingent employment, this sense of crisis reflects trends that touch nearly all kinds of wage-labor in the United States. As a wealth of scholarship and public commentary attests, during the past two decades working hours have grown longer, wages have stagnated, schedules have become more irregular, and part-time, contingent work has proliferated (Henly & Lambert, 2014; Kalleberg, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2016; Shulevitz, 2019; Thompson, 2019; Williams et. al., 2018). These trends make work, for more and more of us, into what it has always been for many: a desperate instrument for staving off a more dire situation, rather than the means for achieving a better one. Feeling our precarity, many of us stand exposed to an organizational culture that demands more of us. More time, more intellectual and emotional resources, more commitment. It demands that we commit to the collapse of our

purposes and desires, individual and collective, into the goals of the organizations that we serve. Goals that are not democratically produced. By the same token, there is less time for hobbies, less time for family and friends, less time for solidarity, less time for the reflection and discussion and play that can channel bad feelings into activism and critique. Reading a draft of this essay, my editor asked me if I thought that the situation of labor in libraries had gotten worse in the decade since I wrote that other essay. Maybe it's just that the bad situations that have been there all along have become more obvious to someone like me. But I do think that the presently ominous aspect of liberal-democratic states, including our own – their swerve toward an authoritarian ethnonationalism in the further retrenchment of neoliberal social and economic policies – lends new urgency to a critique of the bureaucratic and corporate cultures in which we exist and recognize ourselves as subjects. Including the cultures of the university and the academic library. I am also thinking about, I'm also feeling, the inadequacy, as I have learned to perform it, of such a critique.

When Denise Ferreira da Silva (2018) writes that “we need to move beyond critique,” she's getting at the way that critical writing occupies a certain space, a stuck place at odds with itself (p. 25). “The juridical and ethical figuring of the subject” secures critique in a program of distinction, fundamental to the modern episteme, between the subject and its objects. The subject has rights and responsibilities, has knowledge, has freedom. The object does not. And this epistemological or metaphysical distinction anchors the subject's authority in the legal fiction that scores a bright line between persons and things (Rose, 1984). For persons arise, legally speaking, from the arrangements that grant them dominion over the things that become their property. But these *things* inevitably include the labor, if not also the bodies, of others. Modernity did not invent these arrangements, it is true. The feudal lord enjoyed dominion over the fruits of his vassals' toil, just as traditional patriarchy granted the husband authority over his wife and children. But capitalism and imperialism intensified the consolidation of persons and their property through violence on an unprecedented scale. Think of the enclosure of the European commons, which yoked workers to their total dependence on a wage, and the concomitant enclosure of European women in the domestic sphere (Federici, 2014). Think of the confinement of the vagabond and masterless parts of the population in the work-house, asylum, and prison. Look at where you stand and remember the settler-colonial seizure of lands from Native and Indigenous peoples dispossessed by enslavement and genocide, and think of how those lands were rendered productive for capital by plundering a continent of its people in order to create a maximally vulnerable, maximally disposable labor force (hooks, 1981/2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

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*Smith*  
*Iterable Ciphers for Insurrection*

[ PERSPECTIVES ]



Think of the ongoing terror and plunder that targets Black communities in order to secure status and profits for white America (Coates, 2014). Such violence is not anachronistic to the modern world but fundamental to it. “[A] deciding entity,” the modern subject occupies one side of the caesura, the Caesarian cut, dividing this subject from “an ‘other’ juridical entity under its authority (subjugated, oppressed, dominated)” (Ferreira da Silva, 2018, pp. 26-27). But no matter your privilege, you are born of that cut. You are born into the racialized and gendered regime of corporeal difference as juridical and ethical distinction. The legal subject, ditto the critical subject, carries with it the trace of its own potential thinghood. Like a bad memory, or a feeling you can’t shake.

A thing is what nobody wants to be. Not even when you want to be the object of another’s desire. Personhood as property in, and dominion over, one’s body situates the human body, as the fundamental unit of the liberal social contract, with its guarantees of freedom and integrity, over against the flesh. As Hortense Spillers argues, considering the plight of the enslaved, the flesh functions as a “zero degree of social conceptualization”; being *nothing but* flesh – not even having a body you can call your own—is acutely the situation of those exposed to the complete lack of such guarantees (Spillers, 2003, p. 206). And as Spillers suggests, your proximity to the power of decision measures your distance from the sectioned-off flesh that lust and greed make their thing. Spillers and others have taught us to see modern capitalism as a system built upon this foundational violence: the capture of the flesh as commodity. In this system, selling one’s labor-power for a wage enacts a flight away from thinghood (Chandler, 2000). Ditto those forms of embodiment that claim the psychological wages of whiteness (Du Bois, 1935/1977) and its allied norms. Nonetheless, the wage-laborer, while legally free to dispose of their labor as they see fit, submits to another kind of domination. Though less extreme, the employer’s dominion over the worker holds for the duration of the employment contract (Marx, 1867/1981). The employer does not own the worker, but they own the worker’s labor-power, as though the latter were a thing that could be cut away from the worker’s person. Compared to the enslaved, the wage-laborer is free. And the white cishet male wage-laborer remains freer than most. And yet, because liberal personhood is defined in terms of property, and because the ownership of property requires, for most people, waged labor, the category of the person under capitalism keeps company with this trouble in the flesh: “Domination of action separated from the actor leaves the concept of the thing in its integrity while perpetually tearing apart the integrity of the person” (Rose, 1984, p. 46). Thinghood threatens to engulf personhood, so the white supremacist carceral state endeavors to contain



this threat by the redoubled violence of its imposition on Black and brown people. In tandem with racism, the disciplining of the erotic by compulsory heterosexuality and a binary and hierarchical gender aims to exempt the masculine subject from thinghood through the objectification of women—and to bolster that exemption through violence against the flesh marked as queer, trans, and/or non-binary. And those caught in the intersection of this inhumane traffic in markers are the most liable to sustain damage (Crenshaw, 1989).

This flight of the subject away from their flesh is a flight toward self-management, toward a fantastic future “which is only ever to come” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 19). Like a holographic projection, the modern subject arises from a matrix of domination organized by the vectors of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. But perhaps this metaphor makes the process sound too neat, the person too clean. Persons emerge from the stickiness of property/the commodity, that universal glue of modern social relations. Personhood refers to that process, never complete, of unsticking oneself. As Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) describes, the residue clings to the skin. It gums up the body’s erogenous zones. It is felt—at different degrees of intensity, according to your distance from the normative embodiment of the subject of property—as a drag on the flesh in its motion through space and time. But the flesh exceeds the self-enclosure of the person. And if the flesh spreads outward into the vulnerability to violence and exchange, it spreads, too, into the openness to change. In that interval wherein we are never only ourselves, in which each of us is both more and less than the individual we want to be, there happens another kind of labor altogether. A work of spirit and resistance, drawing strength from the ungovernable, fugitive energy of the “undercommons” (Harney & Moten, 2013). A.k.a. the collective thing, the dispositions that elude the disciplines of the proper, surviving by tactics, pluck, and a bottomless bag of tricks; by hap, by hauntings, by touch; by lure, feint, cadge, and dodge. It has, this labor of becoming, no truck with integrity, but it puts trust in what’s iterable, and in what is ciphered enough to be heard and felt without being legible. Like “the secret once called solidarity” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 42).

*To profess*: the speech by which one proves oneself a somebody, a proper member of the order, answering the call of a vocation (Gumbs, 2014). Having a profession, calling oneself a professional, implies the possession of certain habits, certain accredited dispositions, that make one worthy, in some measure, of the public’s trust. As a professional, your dispositions – your know-how, your expertise, and your ethical commitments – are supposed to belong to you, regardless of who pays you for your work. Today, perhaps, you’re just not feeling

that “vocational awe” (Ettarh, 2018). But doesn’t critique remain, in spite of that, our best badge of fidelity to the projects of liberation? Yes, the fidelity is real. *And* in the same breath, critique becomes yet another value proposition for the university when we situate it in the enunciation of individuals – all those accredited somebodies—speaking truth to the state. This enunciatory work is supposed to produce civil society as a realm of freedom and self-determination. But as Gillian Rose reminds us, “both realms [of society and the state] are equally juridical” (1984, p. 2). Not least because civil society comprises the near-absolute dominion of the commodity form, which subordinates the nominally free subject to the “private government” of capitalist bureaucracy (Anderson, 2017). I’m talking about the workplace. I’m talking about the university, whose Foucauldian function as a disciplinary arm of the state is subsumed by its embrace of the corporate dispositions demanded by financial capital. Or more precisely, since the state has become the financiers’ weaponized arm, reducing itself daily to its paramilitary and carceral services, you might speak back to the state, but you are talking to the puppet on the hand. You are talking to the hand held up in manicured finesse in the boardroom where the trustees (not infrequently third-rate financiers) plot how to dispose of the remains of what trust they hold, while handing out sinecures to old friends. And if this feeling of being at another’s disposal, of being disposable, of having one’s livelihood held in trust by what one has no reason to trust, if this feeling still seems manageable (if only to a privileged few) in the classroom, then I’m not talking about the classroom. I’m talking about the conference room, the cubicle, the office, the converted closet meeting space. You know, wherever the voice of professional judgment is supposed to confront the organization’s demands for performances of fealty to its vision, its mission, its goals. Performances that include a strategic silence and a tired eye-roll about the organization’s historical and present failures. Where our professional weariness and our angry, desperate cynicism insulate the *status quo*. Where what precedes and follows this confrontation is our vulnerability: to the loss of wages, of privileges, of opportunities, of friendship, of the sense (so fraught, fragile, and important) of security. A vulnerability that no one escapes, even if some endure it less. But who is not too afraid, too embarrassed, too busy, too tired, too angry to speak the truth? When it hits too close to home, critique sticks in the throat.

TFW you enter the conference room where, every day for a month, a sentence sticks out on the whiteboard: “Flag ethical issues somehow” (the *somehow* underscored). The sclerosis of institutional equivocation accumulates on the surface of daily life, deadening zones of

feeling. The imperative of the ethical, *a la* Kant, intervenes against the instrumental as one kind of heteronomy propped against another, as if freedom were the vector product of two kinds of command. But autonomy's impossible angle is not sublime. Insofar as it remains transcendentalized, the ethical summons an absent sovereign perspective—that *somehow*—as the work of a triangulation demanding, always, that you try again. For between the necessity of exchanging your labor for the means to live, and your duty to respect all persons as ends in themselves, there is a third side, like a third leg to modernity's mad joint stool. I'm talking about the demand upon you, as a subject, to subjugate others, to make others into the means to purposes vanishing into surplus, i.e., profit. Or what Angela Davis calls the "abstract freedom to suppress other human beings" (ca. 1971, p. 5). This demeaning structure yields the work ethic integral to the modern subject, creating the latter as a thing dominated by domination (Gorz, 1989, p. 54). WTF—sorry, I mean, TFW it hits you how even *they* want to burn it down. Not the structure, but the *thing*. I mean, the sense of our thinghood, which is the dross we share; the gross, accumulated feel of the laboring, belabored flesh that makes the structure matter and gives it form. But what is the structure, then, if neither matter nor form? Maybe it is the animus further up the chain. The board members' animus. The animus of our elected and unelected leaders, in whose appetite for power we find our own appetites reflected. The animus back there in history (which is personal, institutional, national, and global) that drives us on. In other words, the structure is the conflagration itself, still raging, in which we burn and burn and are not made clean.

TFW you realize that your own bad feelings re-animate that animus with which the organization does its business. Its business being the correction or expulsion of dispositions that resist its authority, that refuse to be flexible, agile, conditioned anew. I'm talking about the colleagues who can't or won't re-invent themselves, who are getting left behind by the organization's changing priorities, who are aging into positions that, during the next round of layoffs, will be considered obsolete<sup>2</sup>. I'm talking about the students who, tired of hearing how they're remedial, know too well the history that repeats itself in the push for assessment and certification, which promises opportunity for all but drives those who have traditionally been denied it more deeply into debt. The kinds of refusal I'm talking about constitute the labor on which managerial or administrative subjectivity, dominated by its mandate to transform the organization, depends. Management's creative-destructive drive to burn it down amounts to a narcissism blocked from recognizing that its own animus springs from the same source as the refusal it would tame or transform, which is the resistance of the flesh to the violence that would have it vanish into labor and its labor

disappear. You, too, (and I mean *me*) have shared in the pleasures of that drive and the privileges it confers, just as you have embraced the emotional discipline of the agile project and the self-managed team. These forms of work illustrate a point made by André Gorz (1989): that greater autonomy at work comes at the price of a commitment to working harder. The promise of autonomy, you might even say, is sustained by the subject's emotional labor on behalf of a system that requires more than our fealty. It requires our consent to call domination *freedom*, and our willingness to deny how it feels. And that denial extends to the compassion you withhold from your incapable colleagues and your remedial students, and the jokes you make at their expense. Yes, you have become adept at speaking out of both sides of your mouth—a doubled speech that is, paradoxically, too *much* you, exhibiting that “grammar of authenticity” that has become part of the competence expected of all workers, who have to commodify not only their ability to work, but also their desire for it. However alienated, workers “cannot participate in an utterly cynical way, in pretend mode” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, pp. 459-60). For the demand for authenticity at work is really a demand (self-imposed as much as mandated from above) that we produce credit for the organization: that we make it something to be trusted, that we make it a source of truth. And in doing so, we produce our own credulity.

As Harney and Moten suggest, credit today appears as precarity's accomplice, alibi, bosom friend. As precarity's partner in gratuitous violence in the summer's over-budget blockbuster. Credit, as an economic measure, refers to the valuation of persons (or corporations, nations, etc.) on the basis of their ownership of private property. Which means that credit accumulates to some because it is taken or withheld from others. But if taking credit is a violent act, having credit, being creditable or credible, is a precarious performance. We credit—place our trust in—the system in order that we might gain credit. You believe in the work that you do and the organization that you work for because what else can you do? (When the layoffs happened, no one dared talk about the colleagues we lost, except in whispers and hushed tones, as though their having worked there was a painful secret. Like an illegitimate child, or a stigmatized illness. As though this event, precipitated by the decisions of a powerful few, had become our collective shame.) And even as the effects of worldwide precarity back up on their sources in the financialized economies of the so-called developed world, those of us who cling to the privileges of what was once called job security are advised that we had better behave as though we don't need it. And we are further advised that making ourselves believe this make-believe represents our best

chance for staving off precarity's pre-dawn knock on the door. (The open secret of what happened tells against the trust we place in the organization, against the idea that we belong there because we share its values. The secret threatens to expose the hidden logic of this shared trust: it's not that the organization values us, but that without it, we have no value of our own. Like our colleagues who got shown the door. To us who remain, they became nobody. Nobody is the thing that ciphers somebody's sums.) Precarity remains an other-people problem, and our fear of it others us from the people we feel we are supposed to be. Running scared, running on fumes, fuming and gunning for other people's ruin, professional reason rationalizes its part in precarity's manufacture by jokes, complaints, gossip, and the occasional inspired polemic over a glass of beer. Worn out from producing credit for somebody else, at the end of the day (of some days, at least), animus is the only feeling you have left to yourself. Or the only feeling of something held in common. Of something vaporous and fugitive, but also somehow solid. Of solidarity, I mean. So of course, you complain when management (your friends in management, who remain your friends) deploys that animus on behalf of an organizational vision it has become the managers' duty to espouse. You complain, because what else ~~can~~ will you do? Some days, this place strains credulity as if part of your job were to withstand the strain. By the door to the meeting room stands a giant bust of Winston Churchill: like a rock from outer space that left a crater called North America where another world was and is.

And truly, you know all too well that feeling when you find yourself, at the end of the day, alone with the phrases and sentences whose purposes you can't quite place. Critique can be a risky pursuit for your off hours, because it will never be other than off. But listen. Listen more closely; leave space for another study under your breath. Listen with those who know whereof you speak. I'm thinking of the perilous, precarious, and revolutionary ways of thinking and inventing together that Barbra Christian (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (2009) write about, practiced for centuries by those for whom survival itself was and is a revolutionary act. And as Harney and Moten argue, these forms of collective, fugitive agency are no stranger to the university, though the university is generally inhospitable to them: "Some still stay, committed to black study in the university's undercommon rooms. They study without an end, plan without a pause, rebel without a policy, conserve without a patrimony" (2013, p. 67). They don't work "for credit" but for debt: "debt to each other in a study group, to others in a nurses' room, to others in a barber shop, to others in a squat, a dump, a woods, a bed, an embrace" (Harney & Moten, 2013, pp. 67-68). An off-beat production that is an offering, this study in solidarity consolidates nothing. No method, no

policy, nothing like professional scholarship's epistemological guarantees. Nor has it any use for the "gregariousness" that talks itself white in the face in the symposia where we confront one another as the symptoms of our mutual alienation. The work of the undercommons is "encoded"; it is "hidden in plain sight" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 74.) It is a cipher, which is not nothing, though your desire to make its apparent nothingness signify—to signify that *you are something and somebody*—ensures that you miss it in spite of your fixation, that you misprize it in the act of exploiting it. Outside the courts and ledgers of the subject, the cipher is not the figure whose rhetorical production zeroes out a debt, yielding credit. Between the credible and the creditable, it reappears, interrupting the proceedings. "Hacking the subject."

You can't take credit for these ideas. Not anymore than you can claim to have a part in what Marisa Parham (2019) calls the "digitality of diasporic Black experience." But you are indebted to it all the same. Just as white privilege and power carry an impossible debt to Black labor. Just as white people's self-expression, or our sense of the self as bounded by a horizon of the authentic, relies on appropriations from Black culture(s), which punctuate performances of whiteness with a trouble that we are taught to ignore. Asking us not to ignore "the mechanisms by which other people's experiences emerge and reemerge across times and spaces that are separated and discrete," Parham describes the uncanniness of Black folk's encounter with the pervasive and spectacular violence of white supremacy: "Before you give me the details, I get it" ("With or Without You," para. 1). *It*, here, is the iterable thing, othering as a mode of temporality as much as a trope of identity. As for you, you don't get it, but *you* are a debt to *it*. You don't get it, but it touches you. The way *you* is sometimes a more intimate pronoun than *I*, its touch running deeper than what calls you to account. For digits do more than count. They keep time. Tactical, tactile time. I'm talking about *kairos* as "that feel when," at the crossroads (where the devil appears) between the serial and the punctual. I'm talking about what Fred Moten (2003) calls "the break." The cipher is meaning, figuration, etc., as it happens in the break. And also, as Parham (2019) writes, an "algebra" of violence ("*Al-Jabr*, the breaking of the bones") in which, by mercilessly working the coefficients of race, sex, gender, and class, we try to solve for *X*. But to quote Denise Ferreira da Silva (2018), "the cypher means at once: (a) the disappearance of value (nullification); (b) the absence of value (nothingness); (c) beyond any means for measuring (excess); and, more importantly, (d) the plenum (virtuality, as a possible new origin or beginning)" (p. 31). *Kairos* asks us what's beginning (again), "what comes next" (Drabinski, 2017, p. 89) because it's next to us, come on, under our skin. The thinkers of the kairotic



invite us to take seriously what it feels (like): it being the reality of feeling as it moves through us, putting us in touch, even if we deny ourselves that haptic chance in obeisance to the imperative of the privileged modern liberal subject: *Noli me tangere*. Caesar's we are—and yet, as a good friend of mine observes, “We can do good work *because* they're not paying attention.”

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> TFW: social media/internet abbreviation meaning “that feel(ing) when.”

<sup>2</sup> I'm using the term *organization* here, rather than *library* or *university*, for two reasons. First, I want to underscore the general nature of this process, which occurs across all professions and lines of work. Second, I want to emphasize how workers are encouraged or required to subordinate their identity as professionals, experts, etc., to their status as members of the organizations that employ them. This requirement further consolidates power in the hands of the employers, weakening the allegiances that, as sustained by professional organizations, unions, etc., can transcend the boundaries of the firm.

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