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Contemporary Issues in Higher Education: Introduction

Daniel B. Saunders

Abstract

Once considered an “atheoretical community of practice,” the field of higher education appears to be shifting to prioritize an explicit engagement with theory. This special issue aims to strengthen the forces supporting that shift by providing discussions of topics that are familiar to higher education scholars and practitioners—online education (Selznick & Schafer), race and affirmative action in college admissions (Ward and Baez & Sanchez), student debt (Gildersleeve), student development theory (Smithers & Eaton), and faculty work and educational research (Kuntz)—in new and theoretically rich ways. In what I found to be a series of important, challenging, and at times conflicting arguments, articles in this special issue demonstrate the significance of theoretical engagements as scholars and practitioners attempt to understand and respond to contemporary issues in the field.

Keywords: theory, knowledge creation, higher education, current issues

As of 2016, there were 86 English-language academic journals that focused specifically on higher education (Tight, 2017). Together, these journals published more than 40,000 pages, or approximately 16 million words (Tight, 2017). As Tight argues, “On most topics, there is a significant amount of accumulated research of relevance that can usefully be consulted, though practitioners and policymakers often appear reluctant to consult it” (p. 12). These staggering numbers suggest that there are plenty of outlets for higher education scholarship, and the need for a special issue focusing on one of the widest topics available, contemporary issues in higher education, would be quite minimal.

Yet, the need stems not from the lack of publishing outlets, but from the ways in which higher education scholars meaningfully engage with theoretical foundations of their research. To this point, Tight (2004) argues:

while it is possible to identify the theoretical perspective or perspectives underlying any piece of published higher education research, these perspectives are mainly implicit. Higher education researchers, for the most part, do not appear to feel the need to make their theoretical perspectives explicit, or to engage in a broader sense in theoretical debate. (p. 409)

Because it is impossible to conduct a study without any theoretical perspective undergirding it, these implicit theoretical perspectives may be so closely coupled with commonsensical understandings that the author can take them for granted. There is evidence to suggest this is the case, as studies on students often implicitly treat them as customers (Saunders, 2014), studies concerning racial climates, access, outcomes, etc. rarely engage with the concept of racism (Harper, 2012) and instead point to individual and community attributes positioned within broader human capital
arguments, and studies of the economics of higher education are decoupled from discussions of the emergence and reign of neoliberalism, commodities, or consumption (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017), just to name a few of the problematically atheoretical areas within the field. Such an easy reliance on dominant understandings may be difficult for the field to overcome, and may make it difficult for those who are engaged with explicit theoretical perspectives and theoretical debate to find an accepting home for their scholarly creations within academic journals in the field.

Alternatively, higher education scholars may not believe such theoretical explicitness is important. If this is true and a dominant view in the field is that theoretical explicitness is not important, two things may become apparent: 1) for those of us who attempt to engage with theory in a meaningful way, what a bummer of a field to be in!; and, 2) the current composition and priorities of the field are not permanent, and scholars may demonstrate the importance of theoretical explicitness through their contributions to understanding existing literature and research in the field. Combined, the “hopeful bummer” that we may feel as scholars of higher education provides the foundation of this special issue.

Unlike traditional disciplines that have specific shared knowledges, concepts, practices, and exemplars, or what Kuhn (2012/1962) described as paradigms, higher education is a field of study that engages with a substantial number of different disciplinary and methodological perspectives (Tight, 2013). Because of this diversity, authors, reviewers, and editors may have the ability to shape the field in ways that alter the priorities exhibited through published literature absent the need of a Kuhnian scientific revolution therein. Indeed, Tight’s (2012) more recent investigations show published studies are increasingly including at least some engagement with theory, and a new journal, Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education, was recently with the broad purpose “to extend conversations on the importance of philosophy, critical social theory, and philosophical method in the study of higher education” (https://www.peterlang.com/view/journals/ptihe/ptihe-overview.xml). These two developments point to a shift in the prioritization of theoretical engagements within the field, and this special issue hopes to strengthen the forces supporting that shift.

Being the guest editor for this issue, I found myself in the strange position of having my opinions on the field matter (beyond the classroom, my colleagues, and the small circle of folks on which I hope my opinions have some impact) in terms of the ideas and approaches that will occupy a small space within the academic literature in the field. Grounded in the belief that there are multiple and conflicting understandings of many foundational concepts in the social sciences, I made a deliberate effort not to be the arbiter of arguments, theories, and definitions within the issue. Instead, this issue (hopefully) demonstrates that conflicting and/or overlapping understandings of foundational concepts can differently inform the ways we make sense of specific issues and are important as the field continues its emerging prioritization of theory within published works.

The articles included in this special issue engage with topics that are familiar to higher education scholars and practitioners—online education (Selznick & Schafer), race and affirmative action in college admissions (Ward and Baez & Sanchez), student debt (Gildersleeve), student development theory (Smithers & Eaton), and faculty work and educational research (Kuntz)—though authors engage with these topics in what may be some unfamiliar and, at times, conflicting ways. I believe the conceptual tensions some readers may detect across articles can be the foundation of productive disagreements within the hopefully emerging theoretical explicitness in the field of higher education, and demonstrate the need to reject reductionist approaches to theory/philosophy that close off new ways of knowing and coming to know.
The issue begins with the most traditional philosophical investigation among the articles. Benjamin Selznick and David Schafer “apply a continental philosophical perspective to certain conceptual challenges presented by the spread of online education” to explore the relations between technology, education, and society (p. 7, this issue). Far from treating online education as a transactional educational modality narrated by discourses of individual student access and success, Selznick and Schafer promote online education as a relational and community-oriented educational practice. By engaging with Honneth’s work on social freedom, the authors present a compelling argument concerning the problematic outcomes of an online education focused on “individual achievement at the expense of intersubjective engagement” (p. 17, this issue). Opposing essentialist arguments that present online education as a necessarily problematic practice that supports commodification and exploitation or as an inevitable outcome of a long march of technological innovations in higher education, Selznick and Schafer ask those engaged with online education to challenge normative orientations of online education and construct potentially emancipatory alternatives within their work.

The issue then moves to two articles that share a concern for affirmative action in college admissions, though this concern is approached in two meaningfully different ways. First, LaWanda Ward investigates Supreme Court oral arguments in recent affirmative action cases by embracing the conceptual roots of Critical Race Theory (CRT) within legal studies and attempting to demonstrate the normalcy of White privilege and its (re)production through the legal system. Supported by a critical discourse analysis of five Supreme Court oral arguments involving race-conscious admissions, Ward challenges dominant discursive representations of that are argued to be grounded in recycled narratives of interest convergence between White students and Students of Color. In place of such narratives, Ward calls for a more explicit commitment to race-conscious admissions that are not grounded in such transactional logics, concluding “Candid declarations of inclusion and explaining how the legacies of most institutions of higher education require race-conscious admissions policies is warranted in order to combat the prevalence of the normalcy of White privilege” (p. 37, this issue).

While Ward’s argument is grounded in CRT, the third article in this issue, authored by Benjamin Baez and Gerson Sanchez, approaches affirmative action through neoliberal governmentality. Their approach enables different understandings, conclusion, and implications than those found in Wards argument, which demonstrates the ways that “thinking with theory” (Jackson & Mazzie, 2012) can result in meaningfully different outcomes of inquiry. Engaging with the Court’s decisions as well as amicus briefs filed by the AFL-CIO, ExxonMobil, and General Motors, among others, Baez and Sanchez reveal that the logic supporting affirmative action has fundamentally changed from the liberal ideal of individual liberty, justice and equality to the neoliberal rationality of the self-governing and economically-driven individual. As “diversity” becomes an instrument of neoliberal rationality, its benefits are understood through the logic of individual skill development and an “investment” in both individuals’ “human capital” and the subsequent value of that capital within a “global marketplace.” With the collapse of the traditional liberal ideology upon which many narratives concerning affirmation action were built, affirmative action in college admissions becomes problematically “saved” by neoliberal governmentality by understanding diversity as a form of human capital. The authors end with a call to have us imagine different ways of rationalizing social life, and, to begin, we should refuse the economic rationalizations of education that are so pervasive today, even though the imperatives of late capitalism appear to compel them. (p. 52, this issue)
Ryan Evely Gildersleeve authors the fourth article in the issue, which extends Baez and Sanchez’s discussion of late capitalism and focuses on the role of debt in shaping student subjectivities. Gildersleeve assertively states,

I contend the subjectivation of students is made possible only via the debt economy, as the radically neoliberal version of late capitalism has become the ubiquitous epistemic technology of contemporary academe. That is to say, one cannot be “known” outside of neoliberal ideology in contemporary American higher education. (p. 56, this issue)

This assertion is supported through a critique of the liberal humanist foundation that grounds many discussions of students, combined with an exploration of Mario Lazzarato’s writings on immaterial labor and debt, and situated within assemblage theory. Gildersleeve not only provides fantastic overviews of the complex theoretical foundations upon which the discussion is built, but also weaves a fascinating argument which situates debt not in relation to money as it is traditionally understood in the field. By engaging with debt as a source of student subjectivity, this argument brings forth both methodological and theoretical challenges those who aim to explore economics of higher education and address issues of social justice created through the debt machines that shape much of higher education finance.

The fifth article in this issue, by Laura Smithers and Paul Eaton, continues the focus on student subjectivities and engages with one of the cornerstones of the field of higher education: student development theory. Providing both an historical overview of the development of student development theory within the field and a critique of the dominant understandings of students and subjectivities therein, the authors engage in a substantial discussion of problematic discipline/control and dividualization regimes that undergird much of the literature. They offer the concept of nomadic subjectivity as articulated through Braidotti’s work to counterbalance these regimes, and call upon higher education practitioners and scholars to “unlearn student development theory as it is in order to think of what it might be” (p. 81, this issue). In what is an extremely comprehensive and nuanced engagement with student development theory, Smithers and Eaton declare,

Unlearning student development theory does not mean we (re)ject the important insights and perspectives it offers, but asks us to critically examine the cuts and structuring proclivities it places on our practice, our imagination, and envisioning of student affairs educators’ ethical responsibility to college students. (p. 81, this issue)

With their thorough engagement with theorizing students within student development theories, the authors provide an extremely important contribution both the literatures on student development theory and the emerging theoretical explicitness in the field.

The final article in the issue, by Aaron Kuntz, presents an extended engagement with the Foucauldian foundation of Baez and Sanchez’s argument, shares a foundation in Lazzarato’s work with Gildersleeve, and grounds a critique in the dividualization occurring within higher education in ways similar to Smithers and Eaton. Kuntz presents

a particular reading of governing, one that succeeds through turning humans, relations—all matter—into calculations: a quantification of things that include affective states. This
contemporary context encourages an anti-materialist ethical positioning that severs activities from bodies and asserts logics of preemption as necessary and normal. (p. 94, this issue)

These calculations are complicit in the “thingification” of faculty and educational research that is made possible through the extractive and preemptive logics that foreclose the potential of critical interventions within the University. Arguing “resistive practices must extend from a different relational logic and a more robust sense of materialism else they accelerate the very processes they are invoked to disrupt,” Kuntz “asks how one might productively intervene in such circumstances in ways that challenge the extractive and preemptive logics of our contemporary time” (p. 96, this issue). This question is at the heart of critical research in the field, and must be taken seriously if we are to disrupt the normative patterns of reproduction upon which much of higher education is built.

I found the articles included in this issue to be extremely challenging. They challenged my understandings of theories I thought I knew well, introduced me to new theories I had not yet known, and repeatedly made me pause and reflect on my own research and educational practice. After reading the articles I felt almost as if I knew less than I had known before I started; that I had engaged in the process of “unlearning” that Smithers and Eaton call for. I hope readers will find themselves engaging in a similar process, and see these articles as examples of an expansive potential within the field of higher education to think with theory.

References

Online Higher Education and Axel Honneth’s Social Freedom

Benjamin Selznick & David Schafer

Abstract

This paper considers online higher education in the context of Axel Honneth’s social philosophy. To begin we provide an overview of current trends in, and challenges presented by, online education. In our pivot toward philosophical approaches, we review phenomenological and systems-theoretic accounts of online education. We then consider Honneth’s project and orientation toward normative functionalism as forwarded in Freedom’s Right, positioning his work in dialogue with existing topic perspectives. We close with an interdisciplinary discussion and advance the idea that social freedom, as proposed by Honneth, is critical to the long-term success of any educational enterprise.

Keywords: online education, connectivity, Habermas, Honneth

The dramatic expansion of web-based technologies is having an undeniable impact on postsecondary education. Providing evidence of growth, a series of annual reports (Allen & Seamen, 2008, 2016) have tracked the emergence of online learning as a modality for pursuing higher education. Their recent report found that 5.8 million students in the United States took at least one online course during the fall 2014 semester (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Turning to administrative perspectives of offering postsecondary education online, this study also found a shift in attitudes towards prioritizing online education within the academy: whereas in 2002 less than half of all chief academic officers believed that online education was critical to the long-term strategy of their institution, the figure now stands at 63.3% (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Clearly, online education is here to stay.

As the spread of online learning continues, new questions and lines of research inquiry must emerge in order to understand the nuanced aspects of this important educational shift. Specifically, key questions remain as to where the emphasis of such inquiry should be placed. For example: should studies examine the extent to which online and face-to-face education are somehow equivalent? Are traditional outcomes of student success (e.g., course completion, educational persistence, grades) still relevant given the increasing plurality of course types and student motivations? To what extent do specific online pedagogies exist and how can they be improved? These and other questions are timely and have received significant attention across the literature (e.g., Banna, Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015; Evans, Baker, & Dee, 2016; Perna et al., 2014). In this article we argue that while important, these questions examine the manifestations of online education without fully considering its underlying purposes, ideals and goals.
An interdisciplinary effort between higher education and philosophy research, the purpose of this paper is to apply a continental philosophical perspective to certain conceptual challenges presented by the spread of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2016). To effectively engage this work, this paper will progress through three sections. First, we will provide a brief overview of the current state of online education discourse, suggesting current research is framed by two primary currents: a predominant narrative of student success and an emergent narrative of how digital learning can effectively establish connectivity and build community.

The paper will then introduce philosophical inquiry aimed at understanding the normative foundations of online higher education. This section will begin with phenomenological and systems-theoretical accounts, specifically as offered by Dreyfus (1999) and Habermas (1984/1987). Next, we introduce insights from Andrew Feenberg (2002; Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012), who provides a more constructivist perspective of online education and its historical trajectory. Finally, we discuss in detail ideas developed in Axel Honneth’s (2014) recent work—Freedom’s Right (FR)—that speak to the dynamic intersections of technology, education, and society. Through this discourse, we hope to introduce a framework for considering online higher education in the context of what Honneth terms social freedom. We close by discussing how our research might inform future investigations.

**Literature Review**

Moving beyond overarching descriptive information, education researchers have explored online postsecondary education and its effects on students, faculty and institutions (e.g., Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014; Fontenot, Mathisen, Carley, & Stuart, 2015; Picciano, 2006). After conducting a review of the empirical literature, we recognized two primary currents in this research: a dominant current focused on student success (e.g., student persistence, learning) and an emergent current focused on understanding the extent to which online learning can build communities and promote social interaction. Crucially, while we understand that forms of involvement have been historically and empirically linked to success across educational outcomes (e.g., Kuh Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016), we consider the interpersonal connection aspect separately due to the unique contours (e.g., non place-based, potentially asynchronous, not necessarily degree granting) of online postsecondary learning and our identification of this distinction in the literature base.

**Student Success in Online Learning**

Given its centrality to higher education research and practice, a large number of studies considered the extent to which forms of student success were associated with online learning as an educational modality. Such studies typically engaged questions along three themes: persistence, learning, and measurement.

One set of studies, spurred on by the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and their notable drop-out rates relative to place-based courses (see Cochran et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2016; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Jordan, 2014; Perna et al., 2014), focused on predictors associated with student persistence. For example, in their comprehensive study of 44 MOOCs covering 2.1 million observations over 2,900 lectures, Evans et al. (2016)
found evidence that patterns of persistence existed in these iterations of online education. Specifically, there tended to be large enrollment drop-offs in the initial week with a subsequent leveling out; longer courses had lower rates of persistence and completion; and certain additional design features (e.g., titling videos to appear more accessible, taking a pre-course survey) could significantly and positively influence student persistence.

With respect to connections between persistence and leaning, literature also investigated questions concerning the extent to which students completed a course more as function of the content or the platform (Wang & Baker, 2015) and factors that contributed to making a MOOC “sticky” (Oakley, Poole, & Nestor, 2016). In tandem with studies exploring differences in learning outcomes as a function of course format (e.g., Fonolahi, Khan, & Jokhan, 2014; Jones & Long, 2013), the weight of the evidence suggests that learning modality (e.g., face-to-face vs. online) made less difference than anticipated when evaluated against traditional success metrics, with students often learning at similar levels across platforms (Fonolahi et al., 2014). Such research also found that persistence and success were at least partially attributable to those pre-course attributes (e.g., self-efficacy to complete, academic preparation; see Wang & Baker, 2015) and experiences with quality teaching (Cole & Timmerman, 2015; Oakley et al., 2015) that have been repeatedly demonstrated to influence persistence and achievement across post-secondary settings (e.g., Mayhew et al., 2016).

An important set of challenges appearing in the success-orientated literature—especially with regard to MOOCs—were those associated with determining appropriate sampling frames and outcome measures. On the sampling front, debate persisted regarding who should be considered a student (e.g., a registrant or a starter; Perna et al., 2014) and the extent to which individuals’ intentions for pursuing the coursework (e.g., certificate, professional credential, curiosity; see Evans et al., 2016; Koller, Ng, Do, & Chen, 2013) could be effectively considered with regard to persistence patterns. An additional set of measurement concerns existed in terms of student outcomes, suggesting a need for new and/or improved metrics capable of effectively demonstrating forms of engagement (Dixson, 2015; Ruby, Perna, Boruch, & Wang, 2015) and learning (Perna et al., 2014) in these digital spaces. Succinctly summarizing this set of challenges, the authors of one study noted: “User interaction with curricular resources happens at different times, in different sequences, and at different rates. In addition, conventional measures of achievement seem to be disconnected from what many users intend to achieve” (DeBoer, Ho, Stump, & Breslow, 2014, p. 82).

From our interdisciplinary perspective, we observe an important tension between the project of studying student success patterns and the difficulty of establishing accurate metrics. Namely: if the measures are disconnected from the intent, what are such measures actually reflecting? Can they truly measure forms of student success? Or learning? Furthermore, if such measures are used to establish an evidence base that eventually deems online education “unsuccessful”, how might that process reinforce long-standing concerns in the eyes of students and faculty that online learning is a lesser form of postsecondary education?

To explore an alternative empirical avenue, we reviewed an emergent current in the literature that emphasized how online educational environments might be utilized to build communities of learners and educators.
Establishing Connectivity in Online Learning

New research attempts to focus attention away from standard indicators of success (e.g., course completion, test scores) toward a different set of outcomes: those prioritizing learning with others and promoting mutual recognition (Baasanjav, 2013; Banna, et al., 2015; McDaniels, Pfund, & Barnicle, 2016; Lee & Bonk, 2016; Schroeder, Baker, Terras, Mahar, & Chiasson, 2016). A primary example of this effort is found in a recent study by Schroeder et al. (2016), who sought to understand factors that influenced connectivity—“conceptualized as students’ feelings of community and involvement, not their level of access to the Internet”—among students enrolled in an online course (p. 244). This study found that feeling recognized as a valued member of the online learning community was positively and significantly associated with looking forward to interacting with other students in the class, making one’s presence known in the course, and knowing students in the course on a personal level. On the other hand, experiencing connectivity was negatively and significantly correlated with feeling as though one was an isolated learner or had not formed a bond with other students. This study demonstrates initial evidence not only that what Schroeder et al. term “connectivity” can be formed through online learning, but that connectivity can and should be studied as vital to the online learning enterprise (p. 244).

Additional studies focusing on community building have pursued similar empirical avenues, seeking to demonstrate online education as a learning modality that can support and encourage students’ feelings of belonging (Baasanjav, 2013); identify structures that support learning communities (McDaniels et al., 2016) or hinder positive learner-learner interactions (Phirangee, 2016); and emphasize the importance of high quality student-faculty interaction in the online space (Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014). With respect to faculty practices, research has further endeavored to understand how high quality (Crews, Wilkinson, & Neill, 2015) and culturally-responsive (Heitner & Jennings, 2016) teaching practices that encourage identity development and create an environment of cooperative, active learning can benefit students pursuing online coursework. Providing an additional perspective, one qualitative study of faculty tasked with online teaching (Terosky & Heasley, 2015) found that instructors themselves “want[ed] a greater sense of community and collegiality around online teaching,” and were challenged to “grapple with the value of online education and their role in this medium of teaching prior to addressing other concerns” through interaction with a supportive community of peers (pp. 155-156).

Findings across studies suggest powerful, if intermediate, conclusions: not only can online education support community building and engage mechanisms that encourage community development among peers, faculty members and advisors can prove central to learning in the online context. Furthermore, connectivity might be considered both a contributor to forms of student success as well as an important area of inquiry in its own right that might lead to the establishment of alternative metrics and expanded definitions of success in contemporary higher education.

Summary

The literature reviewed on student success and connectivity provided a valuable understanding of the state of this discourse and initial findings into the nature and operation of online learning.
learning. However, we recognized through this review that the majority of inquiry into this topic does little to consider the purposes and goals of online education from a conceptual perspective. This is problematic as, without first establishing the ideals underlying online education, this work can only serve to describe the effectiveness of educational practices rather than evaluate future directions for online learning. Given this gap in the literature, we turn to inquiry that can better help establish this necessary foundation.

### Philosophical Perspectives of Online Education

Since the first development of educational software and online courses, critics and enthusiasts have debated the pedagogical merits and drawbacks of what many initially took to be an inevitable future for higher education: the “virtual university” in which the traditional, physical university is entirely replaced by Internet-based learning (Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012). Thirty years into the development of online education, a more sober perspective has emerged. The inevitable virtual university appears to be no longer quite so inevitable, and the traditional university appears more resilient than early commentators of online education believed. Nevertheless, as the literature review illustrated, the significance of the Internet for the future of post-secondary education is still very much an open question as online courses and large MOOCs have become increasingly prevalent.

The range of critical debate on such technological advances is extraordinarily vast, and includes questions over pedagogical quality, their impact on the social relationships between university faculty and administration, the influence of commercialization on content design and programming, and the democratic potential online courses harbor for broadening educational access, (e.g., Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012; Levidow, 2002). It is not our intention here to do anything like a comprehensive accounting of such debates or to weigh-in with any decisive stance on the meaning of online tools in higher education. Instead, our more modest purpose will be to illustrate the ways in which Honneth’s social philosophy can open needed space between two major perspectives on online education: a phenomenological perspective and a Critical Theory perspective in the spirit of Jürgen Habermas. As we shall see, Honneth’s basic framework is at once able to account for useful and pathological developments in online education technology, while avoiding the limitations of the phenomenological and functionalist alternatives that currently dominate critical discussions of online education.

### Phenomenological and Systems-Theoretic Accounts of Online Education

Entering the discussion from a phenomenological approach, for Hubert Dreyfus, the main concern about online education has to do with the quality of education itself. According to Dreyfus (1999), quality is determined by the extent to which educational experiences help students gain mastery of any discipline. Achieving mastery requires immersing oneself in study, resolving completely upon a subject and therefore necessarily resolving to not study other, unrelated subjects. But to negate possible life-projects in this way is necessarily risky: the material may prove too difficult or uninteresting, the career trajectory resulting from this line of study hopeless. Ultimately, then, the crucial requirement for committed learning is a leap of faith in the resolved-upon area of study.
But on Dreyfus’s (1999) view, online education only impedes our readiness for such a leap. Given the universe of information instantly available to them, Dreyfus is concerned that online students will never commit to a particular field, dabbling here and there, researching the value of the subject matter rather than the subject matter itself, and likely backing out of courses the instant they cease to stimulate. For Dreyfus (1999), this problem is indeed a necessary aspect of online education. “As far as I can see, learning…can work only in the nearness of the classroom and laboratory; never in cyberspace” (Dreyfus, p. 20, emphasis added). Dreyfus is thus advocating for what might be considered a opposite of this remote style of education provided online: a return to an apprenticeship model of education, in which knowledge is transmitted directly from teacher to student. The Internet, for Dreyfus, can only be a source of nihilism in education, and the solution is for students to resolve on a personalized, interactive and ultimately face-to-face relationship with a mentor.

Alternatively, the problem with online education from the Habermasian perspective is not a concern about nihilism per se, but rather a risk of a colonization of the crucial lifeworld sphere of the school by market forces. Thus Timo Jütten, an established Habermas scholar, has identified online education as situated in a recent historical trajectory in which public funding for universities has decreased and caused universities to compete for students and research funding (Jütten, 2013, p. 598). On one hand, reduced public funding means that students must privately finance their education. Given that higher education is increasingly requisite for high-earning jobs, an “education apartheid” has emerged between wealthy and poor in the competition for such jobs (p. 597). On the other hand, the quality of education is threatened, as the demands on professors to compete for research funding begins to overshadow teaching responsibilities. And though Jütten says little explicitly about the impact of online media specifically on these trends toward commodification, from this general perspective, as long as technology can be employed in the service of increasing university revenue and decreasing costs, a marketized education system will promote online education wherever it can (see also Noble, 1998). Indeed, the prospects for such a future seem promising. Prima facie, the Internet appears to offer the potential to exacerbate already existent trends toward the commodification of education in the way that consumer goods were commodified in the industrial revolution (Noble, 2001, p. 3), while the move online serves as another opportunity to adjunctify the faculty workforce and reduce its independence (e.g., Winner, 1998).

To broadly frame these quasi-historical materialist accounts of online education, Habermas’s basic systems-theoretic model of social functioning is useful. Like Habermas, they all conceive of education as a holistic process that is essentially dependent on communicative interaction between teachers and students, and significantly, all tend to portray the technological medium as foreign to this lifeworld sphere of education. On this view, technology deterministically transforms personalized student-teacher relations into impersonal market transactions. Conceived in this way, it makes sense that, also like Habermas, they discuss possibilities for

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1. In speaking of “lifeworld” here, we refer to Habermas’s sense from TCA (Habermas, 1984/1987) of an existing stock of taken for granted assumptions which are drawn upon whenever so-called “validity claims” are problematized and “redeemed” (i.e., affirmed or denied). Habermas there is taking the term “lebenswelt” from Husserl’s later work, even though Habermas’s notion differs from Husserl’s in important ways (Ion, 2015). A discussion of these differences is beyond the scope this project as, in arguing in favor of Honneth’s basic approach as a “middle way” between functionalism and phenomenological accounts, we need only consider the latter in their formal aspects, and so may abstract from debates about the proper interpretations of substantive notions like “system,” “lifeworld,” etc.
social resistance basically in terms of resisting the intrusion of technology in universities. According to this Habermasian view, such resistance will be made inevitable whenever institutions (like the university) that are functionally necessary for continued societal reproduction become threatened by the colonizing effects of technology (Jütten, 2013, p. 599).

But there are important problems with the solutions offered by both phenomenological and systems-theoretic perspectives. Dreyfus’s (1999) endorsement of traditional apprenticeships—which a priori seems rather antiquated—is not made any less unrealistic by the fact that his argument unfolds without any consideration of the social context and market imperatives that bear down on the choice of one’s education. The Habermasian view, by contrast, suffers from lack of evidence to support its claim that resistance to technological colonization of higher education will be inevitable. Whereas the trends toward commodification identified by these theorists appear to be universal in scope, resistance to them has been scattered and relatively minimal (Jütten, 2013, p. 599).

One way to account for this lack of evidence for the colonization thesis might be to claim that neo-liberal ideologies have become so entrenched by average social participants that the new realities for students and faculty ushered in by digital technology² have simply been accepted as normal. Thus, as some suggest, students may not protest rising tuitions, nor faculty the increasing research and teaching burdens, to the extent that both groups are taken in by ideologies that attribute their struggles to poor individual performance rather than to systemic disadvantages (e.g., Jütten, 2013; Winner, 1998). No doubt, such problems of false consciousness have indeed set in, given the otherwise highly irrational current economic situation faced by most university faculty and students. Nevertheless, another alternative explanation would be that the technology is no “intrusion” on higher education, but rather has been adapted to suit the needs and desires of students and faculty. Such a view would problematize the determinist perspective on the technology given above in favor of a constructivist view: the development of the technology is a highly contingent process that is constantly in flux. If this much could be shown, then the supposed opposition between technology and education assumed by the above perspectives would be put into question. Online technology would no longer be an intrusive “outside” to education, but would, in principle at any rate, harbor the potential to develop meaningful relationships between students and teachers. It is just such a perspective that is suggested by the constructivism of Andrew Feenberg.

**Feenberg’s Technological Constructivism**

According to Hamilton and Feenberg (2012), the origins of online education ultimately trace to the development of Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) software in the 1960s and 1970s. On the model of CAI, educational material was programmed into computer mainframes, and information was retrieved with relatively few interactive features. Students could access information that had been stored and assessments generally took the form of pre-programmed tests of the material. It is really on the model of CAI that the concerns about commodified education expressed above find their purest form. As Feenberg and Hamilton (2012) describe this quasi-Taylorized educational model: “at the heart of this approach is an analysis of teaching

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² Especially the two trends noted above of increasing financial burdens on students coupled with decreasing quality of education, as faculty must focus more and more on research rather than teaching.
as a set of performances which can be isolated, described, broken down, and rationalized in to simple functions” (p. 50). To be sure, such “teaching machines” brought with them certain advantages, which Hamilton and Feenberg are careful to note. Most importantly, of course, they promised to reduce education costs by replacing human instructors with programmed materials (p. 49). But they also held out the promise of increasing educational access and flexibility (p. 51).

Nevertheless, there was significant enough criticism of the CAI model, particularly on the part of educators, that those within academia began to seek alternative ways of utilizing computers for the purposes of education. The bourgeoning academic and private use of the Internet during this time provided the key for the movement away from the CAI model. Thus, the emergence in the late 1980s and early 1990s of programs such as the management courses offered by the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, which were run on forerunners to the Internet like the Electronic Information Exchange System. These programs were much more interactive than their CAI predecessors, and aimed at facilitating computer conferencing among students and between students and teachers. According to Feenberg (2002), the results of these proto-online courses, as they have continued to develop with the emergence of the Internet, have been the very opposite of automated, teacher-less education:

The Internet can now do more than merely improve the materials available in the traditional correspondence course; it can also add human contact to an educational model that has always been relatively impersonal. Using email and discussion forums, groups of students can be assembled in online communities where they can participate in classroom discussion with teachers on a regular basis. (p. 127)

Marking a shift from the viewpoints of Dreyfus and Habermas, the crucial point in Feenberg’s view is that there is nothing in the online technology per se that means that the classroom experience must cease to be a location of personal interaction between students and teachers. The problem with Feenberg’s account, however, is that it fails to clarify its own normative foundations: what, ultimately, is the problem with a directionality for online education that emphasizes isolated individual achievement as opposed to community development? Ultimately Feenberg has no answer to important questions such as this, which suggests the need for deeper philosophical justification. In the next section, we argue that Axel Honneth’s recent social philosophy can be of use for this task.

Honneth and Online Education

*Freedom’s Right* is a groundbreaking text of recent critical theory, not only because it marks a significant shift in Honneth’s own thought—away from a focus on philosophical anthropology and toward more concrete investigations of existing forms of ethical life—but also because of its place within the history of the development of Frankfurt School thought broadly. Honneth’s basic philosophical aim in this text is to establish a basis for social criticism adequate to the demands of post-metaphysical society: i.e., one capable of avoiding unacceptable metaphysical assumptions about human nature at the root of orthodox Marxist forms of criticism on one hand, while not abandoning the project of critique altogether on the model of descriptivist social science. But whereas Habermas had also tried to navigate this philosophical middle-
ground in his own landmark *The Theory of Communicative Action*, his view ultimately cedes too much to the side of descriptivist systems theory. In particular, in criticizing the colonization of lifeworld by system, Habermas commits himself to a problematic view of the latter as “norm-free,” and thereby leaves himself with no way to criticize objectifying forms of social interaction that may occur within so-called normal (non-pathological) systems functioning. *Freedom’s Right*, in effect, marks Honneth’s renewed attempt to negotiate a compromise between metaphysical critique and uncritical descriptivism, without relying on what he rightly perceives as highly problematic assumptions of systems-theory.

While *Freedom’s Right* (2014) has little explicitly to say about the nature and social significance of technology, and even less to say about developments in education, we demonstrate in this section that the basic critical framework Honneth develops in *Freedom’s Right* suggests an approach for diagnosing social pathologies that can make sense of the possible advantages and dangers of online education. The basic argument of *Freedom’s Right* is built from three crucial premises: (1), that modern institutions cannot continue to function if they are not perceived by participants as securing for them some form of freedom; (2), that there are three different paradigms of freedom, namely, negative freedom, reflexive freedom and so-called “social” freedom; and (3), that the first two forms of freedom are both conceptually and historically derivative of the third.

Premise (1) is an expression of Honneth’s normative functionalism. According to this view, social institutions require, for their continued functioning, that all participants be able to view the norms they embody as legitimate—i.e., as intrinsically valuable and for which submitting to the institution holds worth. According to Honneth, institutions, then, are legitimate if and only if they are seen by members as securing the basic conditions for freedom. In the absence of this basic condition for legitimation, social institutions will cease to function normally: i.e., social disturbances will arise in the form of protests, demonstrations, etc.

Premise (2) disambiguates the meaning of freedom. *Negative freedom* is Honneth’s term for the freedom we experience as bearers of legal rights in modern democracies: a freedom from interference by others within the confines of our legally established private lives. *Reflexive freedom* is the freedom we experience as rational autonomous agents, not merely beholden to our subjective desires but capable of a positive vision of how things ought to be which we at once freely create and submit to as our reason commands. Finally, Honneth’s innovative idea of *social freedom* is the freedom we experience as part of a social world of autonomous beings like ourselves. Social freedom is the freedom that comes from finding oneself in the other; from recognizing oneself and being recognized by others as part of a community that both co-determine (i.e., institutionalized forms of mutual recognition).

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3. Though distancing himself importantly from Habermas’s systems-functionalism, Honneth’s own “normative functionalism” remains tied to a basic functionalist critical framework, according to which social institutions may be criticized to the extent that they represent basically unsustainable forms of practice. On Honneth’s normative functionalism, such dysfunction results from the failure by particular institutions to adequately realize their own immanent ideals. In this sense Honneth is able to distinguish normal (sustainable) institutional activity from social pathologies, the latter defined as “any social development that significantly impairs the ability to take part rationally in important forms of social cooperation” (Honneth, 2014, p. 86). In thus adopting the language of social pathologies, Honneth follows Habermas in identifying some form of functionalism as the only meaningful avenue between the overly metaphysical criticism of Marx, Lukács, and early Frankfurt School theory on one hand, and the insufficiently critical accounts of society from descriptivist social science and systems theory on the other.
Much of the argument of *Freedom’s Right* comes in defense of premise (3), which establishes the priority of social freedom over the other forms. According to Honneth, both negative and reflexive forms of freedom need to assume a social context from which they can only emerge as a kind of interruption. The basic idea is that both legal and moral versions of freedom assume a monologically self-contained subject and build theories of sociality on that basis, but Honneth convincingly argues that before we can come to any such sense of fully formed autonomous selfhood, we must always exist within a prior lifeworld context in which we are recognized as the agents we become. Honneth is therefore able to portray institutions of legal and moral freedom as affording us mere ‘possibilities’ of freedom—i.e., momentary interruptions of our lifeworld interactions that may be useful in gaining critical perspective on them—and contrasts these to the “reality” of social freedom, which he understands as the social context itself to which we are always inevitably beholden. For instance, individual property rights, *qua* institution of negative freedom, provide us a space in which we may experiment and form critical opinions of different ways of living. Nevertheless, in order to even conceive of the various life-goals with which we might experiment in our individual private spheres in the first place, we must at some point emerge from the latter and interact/exchange ideas with others. Furthermore, according to Honneth, if we are to fulfill our individual projects, we will inevitably need to engage in the lifeworld context out of which our sphere of property rights has been established. Thus, to put this in Honneth’s language, social freedom must always undergird the negative (and reflexive) forms of freedom.

With this basic argument established, Honneth is able to identify social pathologies as resulting from systematic misunderstandings of the norms embodied in particular social institutions. Institutions come into crisis when they lose sight of the essential priority of social freedom by their overemphasis on one of the other derivative forms of freedom. The empirical burden on this account is not in finding evidence for a theory developed in abstraction, however, but rather in deriving an understanding of the norms that govern social institutions by careful historical analysis of those institutions. Honneth calls this the task of normative reconstruction. A normative reconstruction of the sphere of education clearly establishes it as a sphere of so-called social freedom.

On the view we are proposing, learning spaces are social communities where all members see themselves and are seen by others as co-constituting members of a communal we. This idealized educational experience is in large measure where we “learn in the course of [our] ‘upbringing’ to develop desires and goal[s] that can only be satisfied through the complementary actions of others” (Honneth, 2014, p. 49). For Honneth, school is where we learn to be ourselves as much as we learn anything else.

From this perspective, pathologies result when social forces push us to lose sight of this communal nature of the school by an overemphasis on one of the other forms of individual freedom (i.e., negative or reflexive freedom). Thus, for instance, when an exclusive focus on our individual interests takes over—grades, standardized test scores, class standing etc.—to the neglect of our role in a greater academic community. The question for empirical study from Honneth’s social freedom orientation is whether, *from the perspective of participants*, online education fosters a greater sense of community or whether the new frontier in education is rather one of increasing isolation and anomie. If Feenberg’s sociological thesis is correct, there is no reason to suppose that either direction is impossible for online education technology. If Honneth’s philosophical thesis is correct, however, the problem with the latter direction for online
education is that it will ultimately cause social disturbances by prioritizing individual freedom over social freedom.

**Discussion**

If Honneth is correct that engagement in institutional practices is an expression of a desire for freedom, and if individualistic forms of freedom are ultimately derivative of social freedom, it follows that any social institution must prioritize the latter if it is to continue. How social freedom is to be optimally emphasized in the design of online courses, education software, the integration of online media into traditional classrooms etc., are questions that will certainly be answered and re-answered over time. Our claim here is more modest, and only seeks to offer Honneth’s groundbreaking social philosophy as a more robust philosophical foundation for thinking about online education research and practice. With this said, we might consider initial strategies regarding how to operationalize our argument to the benefit of students, educators, and the social contexts in which both exist. To these ends, we conclude with a brief discussion.

Current higher education research has sent a resounding and clear message: leaving key aspects of learning (e.g., community building) to chance, rather than designing specific curricular environments that provide students with the challenges and supports required to productively learn and develop, simply does not work (see Mayhew et al., 2016). Given its structural potential to anonymize and isolate, those charged with designing online education must do more than hope that offering learning experiences will somehow result in the communal experiences required to sustain such learning. Adopting this mindset may at best not promote learning and at worse actually undermine attempts by individuals to effectively engage in meaningful and substantive educational experiences. Furthermore, as stressed at the outset, adopting the orientation that online is not a learning space conducive to building community could ultimately serve to reinforce this problematic narrative and lend credence to the notion that online is a dilution of traditional higher education.

One example of how such community building might be effectively accomplished is through considering the unique ability of digitally mediated spaces to incorporate a level of transparency into learning that is practically impossible in more traditional environments (Dalsgaard & Paulsen, 2009). As the authors of one study describe: “transparency enable[d] students and teachers to see and follow the work of fellow students and teachers within a learning environment and in that sense to make participants available to each other as resources for their learning” (p. 1). In other words, online postsecondary education holds potential to facilitate learning that is inherently collaborative, cooperative, and socially reinforcing. Rather than bemoan what is lost in the online space, or even assume that the digital environment could or should proceed in more-or-less the same way as the traditional one, incorporating pedagogical strategies that could not possibly occur in a traditional classroom recognizes the critical imperative of leveraging the technology of the medium to the advantage of fostering social freedom.

We also consider the importance of entering online education environments with the correct measures of desired outcomes and more clearly defining what is meant by “student success” in this arena. In general agreement with DeBoer et al. (2015), we believe it is inappropriate to exclusively migrate measures that show effectiveness in traditional learning and assume they will be able to effectively capture all the nuance and purposes of the online environment. We
instead highlight the importance of examining the extent to which individuals are not only learning course material, but also gaining opportunities to interact in meaningful ways with others. The work of Schroeder et al. (2016) provides a helpful pathway forward in considering an effective theoretical and empirical strategy for conducting this research by seeing connectivity (i.e., social engagement) as an outcome in its own right. We might further consider how future narratives of success or achievement in the online space will hinge on the extent to which such forms of education help individuals learn while also securing social freedom—as we have seen numerous times in the new decade, one without the other is unsustainable in the long-term (Fain, 2015).

Addressing the concerns offered through the lenses of Dreyfus and Habermas and leveraging the insights of Feenberg, we suggest that a future possibility exists in which online education comes not to be associated with forms of adjunctification or commodification through introducing a simple idea: much as quality in-person faculty teaching is, at least nominally, valued by institutions and students alike due to its demonstrated benefits across many higher education outcomes (see Mayhew et al., 2016), so too might the ability to provide high quality educational experiences online that promote student learning and social freedom come to be similarly valued and properly evaluated. While such a standard might not immediately apply to MOOCs due to their open-access structure and diversity of motivations (see Evans et al., 2016), it could well apply to the integration of online learning into educational curricula ranging from the community college to the graduate school level. Imagine the possibilities for high quality education, research, teaching and learning should online education be understood, supported, valued and institutionally recognized not as being “a lesser form of” or even a “different modality toward” providing educational experiences, but rather a vehicle for explicitly promoting as quality education an orientation toward social interaction.

Finally, we propose that the philosophical arguments presented in this paper can offer educators and other postsecondary stakeholders helpful claims in defense of supporting the necessity of positioning social freedom as integral to online education. First, Dreyfus’s suggestion of a return to the apprenticeship model strikes us as outmoded, offering very little to support social freedom, especially when one considers the extraordinary potential for access to such opportunities to rely on existing social capital. To the Habermasian view, that online education ultimately and inevitability reduces postsecondary learning to an impersonal transaction, we present the perhaps more pragmatic alternative that almost nothing about applying new technology in the context of education can ever really be considered inevitable. To provide a counterpoint to the Habermasian claim: new technologies utilizing video conferencing in classrooms especially designed to facilitate this learning modality can lead to increased digitally-mediated communicative interactions between students and faculty members (see Smith, 2017).

Perhaps most powerfully, we have shown that Honneth’s recent social philosophy provides the philosophical resources needed to explain why approaches in higher education that emphasize individual achievement at the expense of intersubjective engagement may become socially problematic. Furthermore, given this basic normative orientation, it follows that technology will undermine the aims of students and instructors to the extent that it is designed and institutionalized in ways that cause students to become isolated from each other and from instructors. Nevertheless, we also oppose the view from systems theory and phenomenology that suggests such any such trajectory for technology must be inevitable. As we observe in literatures
connected to MOOCs, experiencing high quality communication with faculty and TAs is possible, and in fact encourages students to stay in MOOCs (Oakley et al., 2016); experiencing the educational environment in isolation, however, is more closely associated with the persistent dropout rates we see in such courses. We again wish to express that students leaving a course is not necessarily an adverse outcome; we merely offer evidence that environments that intentionally connect students to instructors and other learners are closely associated with promoting engaged forms of higher education. This issue does become somewhat more pressing, however, when considering the rapid growth of online learning as a state-level postsecondary education solution (see Smith, 2017) and the extent to which policymakers and other stakeholders must make choices regarding how much (or little) attention and resources are devoted to building educational communities online that ultimately reinforce learning, while helping their participants secure social freedom.

**Conclusion**

Honneth’s social philosophy considers both how historical choices have generated existing environments and how environments can promote or impede the achievement of social freedom. From this perspective, we encourage educators and educational researchers to engage in more fundamental conversations about contemporary higher learning: Can education that does not actively strive to promote a sense of community, or what Honneth terms social freedom, ultimately sustain itself? Does the move online threaten (or, alternatively, promote) personal relations among students and between students and teachers that are of more primordial importance to learning than even the curriculum itself? While we do not have immediate answers to these questions, we believe that this research may provide future scholars across disciplines with better frameworks for defending a community-oriented direction for online education.

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An All White Enterprise: How the Normalcy of White Privilege is Maintained in US Supreme Court Race-Conscious Admissions Oral Arguments

LaWanda W. Ward

Abstract

A conservative agenda is being advanced that has taken control of defining equality and race discrimination. Over 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education (1954), there continues to be legal challenges within higher education centered on race; however, White plaintiffs have commandeered civil rights discourse to allege reverse discrimination. In order to shift the discourse of equity in higher education to empowering People of Color, it is important to critically question societal constructs that have stymied racialized progress such as White privilege. This writing advocates for the re-centering of race focused strategies that result in equal access for the goal of moving towards productive efforts of equity in higher education for People of Color. Through a Critical Race Theory lens and a Critical Discourse Analysis methodology, the normalcy of White privilege is analyzed for ways in which it is (re) produced by the justices and all attorneys in the U.S. Supreme Court oral arguments for higher education race-conscious admissions cases.

Keywords: white privilege; race-conscious admissions; Critical Race Theory; Critical Discourse Analysis

Higher education race-conscious admissions policies are under attack in the courts and the legislature. Racism prior to the Civil Rights Movement was easily recognized because it was not only socially accepted but had the endorsement of law, specifically the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), that separate but equal was constitutional. This law allowed Whites to deny Blacks and other People of Color access to public resources such as education. After federal laws were enacted to prohibit racist practices and behavior, opposition changed its appearance and discourse (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005). For example, when individuals are accused of being racist for voicing opposition to affirmative action, they deny the label and assert their position as advocacy for “fair, just, and egalitarian” (Augoustinos, et. al, p. 318) policies to bring about societal equity.

“College access discourses are laced with racially coded language determining who can attend college and what college they will attend” (Patton, 2016, p. 12). Because “the evidence of deep-seated racism is stronger than one might suppose, and that a focus on racism could have important implications for legal doctrine” (Aleinikoff, 1992b, p. 973), an exploration of legal discourse is warranted. To date the Supreme Court has only ruled on race as a consideration factor...
for the admissions processes of selective institutions. However, these cases and their artifacts, for this writing, oral arguments, are important because all public institutions of higher education are seeking to be in compliance with the Court’s decisions to avoid litigation. Additionally, the more attention brought to the flawed logic of viewing reverse discrimination as a legitimate legal argument, the sooner a discourse revealing the White hegemonic structures and practices in higher education access can move to the center.

An inextricable link exists between race, law, and higher education. “From the judicial enforcement of the nineteenth-century fugitive slave laws through most recent race-conscious affirmative action cases, judges have tried desperately to explain the law’s response to racial oppression” (Ross, 1996, p. 21). My objective is to demonstrate how advocacy for the maintenance of a system of White privilege is achieved by all participants, including attorneys representing the universities, through selected excerpts from Supreme Court oral arguments regarding race-conscious admissions in higher education.

The dominant use of politically correct terminology coupled with the reliance on established legal precedent utilizing the U.S. Constitution has created a “racial grammar” in the race-conscious admissions narrative that “is a distillate of racial ideology, and hence, White supremacy” (Bonilla-Silvia, 2012, p. 174). The ways in which the use of race as a consideration factor in race-conscious admissions policies is framed as both an inhibitor and conduit of access to higher education is evidence of how racial discourse evolves to appear innocuous yet it maintains a racial order that reduces equity opportunities for People of Color.

A component of the appellate process mentioned but not often given much scholarly attention is the Supreme Court oral arguments for the race-conscious higher education admissions cases. Oral arguments are the first public opportunity to learn what each side in the race-conscious admissions debate is asking the Supreme Court to consider and rule on in its decision. Of great importance is the absence in the legal rhetoric of acknowledging the negative realities caused by the normalcy of White privilege that stymies advancement in all societal institutions. Hence, an interrogation of these legal artifacts is worthy of exploration. Through the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I identified the presence of the normalcy of White privilege rhetoric as a recurring racialized theme in select excerpts from Supreme Court oral arguments about the use of race as a factor in race-conscious admission processes. Rhetoric prohibits the Supreme Court, universities, and society from addressing the continued influence of race and racism in the plight for equity in access to higher education.

**The Normalcy of White Privilege**

The normalcy of White privilege is a by-product of colorblindness. Its impact on the race-conscious admissions in higher education cases is realized through the belief of Whites that they have a legal property right to higher education access of which only Students of Color have deprived them of unfairly (Harris, 1993). The sense of entitlement for admission to higher education institutions, especially selective ones, has led to lawsuits and financial support by those who oppose race as a consideration in the admissions process.

The normalcy of White privilege fuels the view of Whites to rightfully be in possession of many of the opportunities and resources in American society which stems from the historical establishment of Whiteness as a valuable commodity. “Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits [set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being White],

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and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” (Harris, 1993, p. 1713). Harris connected race, property, and law to reflect the historical creation and modern-day maintenance of Whiteness as a subordinating power in society.

Whiteness is the norm in America, but goes unnoticed and unacknowledged because of its normalness (Lipsitz, 2014). Combined with privilege, it is a powerful and oppressive system in our society. “White domination is never settled once and for all; it is constantly reestablished and reconstructed by Whites from all walks of life” (Leonardo & Harris, 2013, p. 143). The White supremacist groups are joined by people who do not self-identify as racists including diversity champions and social justice advocates in the maintenance of White domination and beneficiaries of White privilege (Leonardo & Harris). Therefore, individuals who do not name racist acts, statements, and policies share the same deficit as anti-social justice proponents because as long as White privilege is unnamed, it will continue to dominate society’s institutions.

Leonardo and Harris (2013) asserted “Whites have been able to develop discourses of anti-racism in the face of their unearned advantages” (p. 140). Additionally, feeling confident in one’s entitlement due to White privilege, some Whites view themselves as being successful due to their individual efforts and refuse to acknowledge White privilege assistance. DiAngelo (2011) asserted that racial arrogance can develop from this viewpoint, causing Whites to confidently argue about the deficient status of People of Color being attributed to non-race factors as well as dismiss any factual information about White privilege’s negative impact on People of Color.

Racial arrogance fuels conservatives to seek out ideal litigants for reverse discrimination lawsuits. In Bakke, neither the university, justices, nor Bakke raised as issues the fact that five seats were set aside for wealthy donors’ children and the university negatively viewed Bakke’s age as an impediment to his admission (Lipsitz, 2014). The dominant focus and narrative were centered on the 16 Students of Color who were deemed unworthy of admission. Additionally, Harris (1993) contended Bakke had an expectation that he would be admitted and the Supreme Court’s rationale that set-aside programs such as the one at UC-Davis did not meet constitutional muster confirmed his perspective that “the property interest in Whiteness was given another form and further hegemony” (p. 1770).

Opponents of race-conscious admissions programs have strategically worked to orchestrate lawsuits that would reach the Supreme Court with the goal of it finding such programs unconstitutional. Barbara Grutter, Jennifer Gratz, and Abigail Fisher, all White women with palatable narratives for both conservative and liberal Whites, set the perfect stage for arguing violation of their equal protection rights under the 14th Amendment. In the context of higher education, Whites view themselves as having a right to obtain a degree and therefore entitled to a seat in undergraduate, graduate and professional schools. This sense of entitlement has been reinforced in higher education since its inception and has resulted in lawsuits filed against selective universities supporting the inclusion of People of Color but overlooking provisions for legacies, athletes, or other Whites with lower scores.

The Normalcy of Whiteness in Higher Education

Whiteness being normal aligns with the rhetoric of innocence, which is a concept discussed by Ross (1996) as a legal tool used by White lawyers and judges. White plaintiffs are considered and presented as innocent victims who have not contributed to the denial of admission to People of Color in higher education, therefore they should not be deprived of attending their selected

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institution (Ross, 1996). He asserted the avoidance of Whites benefitting from People of Color’s oppression is a key component in the rhetoric of innocence because it “obscures this question: ‘What White person is innocent, if innocence is defined as the absence of advantage at the expense of others?’” (p. 46, emphasis in original). The realities of racism are repressed and overshadowed by the rhetoric of innocence, therefore, People of Color are easy targets because their marginalized place in society has been politically, socially, and legally framed as unworthy of being admitted to a university over a White person.

A major concern to social justice advocates is that the culminating effect of the five Supreme Court decisions involving race-conscious admissions will negatively impact all races by validating White privilege and deflating the aspirations of those who strive to ensure racism is not ruling the day. Education is one of the most prevalent societal institutions from which the citizenry learns democratic principles of equality, justice, and fairness. If it becomes a reflection of stereotypical notions of society about racial groups and mythical beliefs of equity, reform will be even more challenging to achieve.

Legal Discourse

The formalism, an emphasis on “cases and doctrine over policy, critique, and interdisciplinary approaches” (Delgado, 1997, p. 1109), of law contributes to the continued marginalization of People of Color with the effect of “reducing human factors and fact patterns into pre-existing forms called precedent. It minimizes the role of judgment, experience, politics” (p. 1125), racist structures, and systems. The formality of law with rigid tests and approaches such as strict scrutiny, are “a deflection. It [formalism] points you neatly away from the things that matter” (p. 1130) in the context of race-conscious admissions cases, attorneys defending the higher education institutions are confined by legal doctrines that “make it appear as though law is fair, neutral,—a science with only one right answer” (pp. 1133-34). Additionally, language is a powerful tool especially when it is intentionally arranged by attorneys in their oral arguments to persuade nine Supreme Court justices that their client should prevail. Narratives are woven into eloquent arguments that resonate with or invite push back from the justices. As the sophistication of legal rhetoric about race and equality has evolved, so has the judiciary’s acceptance of arguments in which “the central theme of White innocence and the use of abstraction to obscure reality run through the tapestry of our legal and social rhetoric of race” (Ross, 1996, p. 24).

Supreme Court oral arguments are an important part of the appellate process for several reasons. One, they allow the public to observe societal issues being advocated prior to the Court’s decision-making process. Additionally, transparency and visibility of the federal government’s judicial branch carrying out its expected role is a reflection of a democratic society (Martineau, 1987). “For the judicial system, accountability is crucial, since it depends on public confidence and acceptance of the result in its processes” (p. 11). Two, several years expire before a case reaches the Supreme Court and typically the person who filed the case no longer has a personal investment in the Court’s ruling, but its decision affects others and establishes a rule of law that guides future decisions. “Oral argument helps judges avoid becoming too isolated, and serves to remind them that they are not the only participants in the judicial process, and that their decisions directly affect individual lives” (p. 13). The impact of a decision regarding whether race can continue to be used as a factor in admissions policies in higher education not only influences colleges
and universities, but also how corporations and other public entities will create racial diversity policies.

Third, supporters of oral arguments argue they “can assist judges in understanding the issues, facts, and arguments of the parties, thereby helping judges decide cases appropriately” (p. 13). Specifically, in the race-conscious admissions cases, counsel for both sides have the opportunity to communicate the importance of their client’s position with the goal of providing clarity or sharing omitted content that may not have been expressed in the submitted briefs.

Supreme Court Justice John M. Harlan wrote: “oral argument is exciting and will return rich dividends if it is done well…there is no substitute in getting at the real heart of an issue and in finding out where the truth lies” (Harlan, 1955, p. 6). This observation by Justice Harlan is questionable and requires exploration in lieu of the framing, ahistorical, and acontextual rhetoric espoused during oral arguments concerning higher education race-conscious admissions practices.

Currently conservatives and anti-affirmative action groups have an arsenal of language at their disposal that not only resonates with society but with the courts, especially the Supreme Court. Post-racial societal rhetoric is communicated in a format that allows the maintenance of racism without using inflammatory language or espousing prejudicial statements. Specifically, in the advocacy and opposition to racial equity in higher education, strategic framing in oral arguments is utilized by those advocating for both sides of the matter.

Within the race-conscious admissions debate, arguments given on both sides are prime examples of the flaws within the law. “Conservatives argue that affirmative action violates the principle of equal treatment and is unfair to innocent Whites” while “Liberals reply that it is a reasonable response to past injustice and necessary to assure future broad democratic participation” (Delgado, 1991, p. 937). Both sides use the same constitutional provisions to assert their cause. “Our constitutional legal culture tends to play down the depth and breadth of racism in American polity. Continuing inequality is rarely attributed to continuing discrimination” (Aleinikoff, 1992a, p. 350).

**Analytical Framework**

To explore the use of overt and covert racialized language in the Supreme Court’s race-conscious admissions in higher education oral arguments, CRT will be employed as the theoretical framework. CRT is a legal based theory that emerged in the mid-1970s as a challenge to mainstream notions of race, racism, and racial power in American society. CRT probes the legal system and questions its established and accepted foundational doctrines such as equality theory, legal reasoning, and neutrality in constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Since CRT does not have a standardized set of tenets, several scholars have developed guiding principles for scholarly exploration. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) grounded CRT in three main principles. First, racism is the norm and not the exception to the rule. People of Color experience offensive language and actions influenced by stereotypes and presumptions, which are created and (re)produced through societal institutions such as family, education, the workplace, and legal system. Second, the thesis of interest convergence or material determinism which occurs when the maintenance or elevation of Whites is not disturbed when People of Color are assisted in their plight for access to societal resources. Legal scholar and designated intellectual father of CRT, Derrick Bell is credited with coining the interest convergence thesis. He argued that instead of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) being a civil rights triumph, it occurred because Whites
with resources had an agenda more so than bringing equity to the Black community. The U.S. aimed to maintain its political status as a world leader and the showing of Blacks being beaten and mistreated in the international news was discussed as possibly jeopardizing the nation’s position. Finally, the third principle of importance is the social construction thesis, which is “that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7).

Because CRT has an activist component to its application, legal storytelling and narrative analysis are tools used to bring attention to marginalized voices. “The ‘legal storytelling’ movement urges Black and Brown writers to recount their experiences with racism and the legal system and to apply their own perspectives to assess law’s master narratives” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). The most compelling response to critics of storytelling is that competing narratives are at the center of how laws are made and reinforced (Hutchinson, 2004). The prevailing story becomes law. For example, beginning with Allan Bakke, race-conscious higher education admissions Supreme Court cases have highlighted narratives that focus on deprived White applicants who were denied acceptance to their school of choice because unqualified Students of Color were selected. Counterstories that critically examine the role of White privilege in higher education are needed to shed light on the continuing inequities that exist.

For this writing, I utilized narrative analysis to reveal the normalcy of White privilege as one racialized theme in Supreme Court oral arguments. “In legal discourse, preconceptions and myths...shape mindset-the bundle of received wisdoms, stock stories, and suppositions that allocate suspicion, place the burden of proof on one party or the other” (Hutchinson, 2004, p. 43). In race-conscious admissions oral arguments, the dominant narratives of victim and White privilege overshadow why the race-conscious programs were created and are being maintained, which is to address historical exclusion. Truth is a skeptical concept to critical race theorists especially in the legal context. When arguments are made that do not account for history, politics, social, or economic factors, truth is viewed as being socially constructed in a manner that is most detrimental to People of Color (Hutchinson, 2004).

**Critical Race Theory in Higher Education**

CRT has been used to critique issues in higher education ranging from affirmative action cases (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004), and higher education as a system (Patton, 2015; Solórzano, & Yosso, 2002; Yosso et al., 2004). Race-conscious admissions policies are situated within the larger political and social context of access to higher education, therefore, CRT serves as a catalyst to demonstrate how racism and White supremacy are embedded and perpetuated through institutional policies. As a theoretical tool of inquiry for Supreme Court oral arguments, CRT is appropriate because scholars who utilize it are able to critique law’s role within historical and contextual reasoning to advocate for racial justice. Additionally, CRT provides a legal lexicon that can demonstrate how law is malleable and utilized to maintain inequities in higher education. Beneficial to this writing, CRT provided a platform for the normalcy of White privilege to be interrogated for its role in legal discourse as well as engage in exploration of how the educational and legal communities reinforce racial inequality in higher education.
Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis “is a problem-oriented and transdisciplinary set of theories and methods that have been widely used in educational research” (Rogers, 2011, p. 1). Specifically in higher education, CDA has been used by scholars on a variety of topics such as unmasking themes of heterosexual hegemony in an HBCU dress code policy (Patton, 2014) and revealing a discourse of neoliberalism in community college mission statements (Ayers, 2005). These writings shed a critical light on normal appearing higher education policies.

CDA does more than reveal “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 1995, p. 204). This transformative methodology advocates for progressive change that gives the voiceless a voice and a language of empowerment. According to McGregor (2003), “discourse analysis challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition” (p. 2). The Supreme Court oral arguments and the justices’ questions in the higher education race-conscious cases were and remain reflective of society and the status of equality efforts in our nation.

The use of CDA provides higher education scholars a valuable methodological tool to explore higher education discourse about access since many inequities in higher education are less overt; therefore, they have to be uncovered in the ostensibly neutral language and policies implemented. Power takes various forms and can be exercised in several different ways. It is not always manifested in the form of abusive force, but in subtle and natural seeming occurrences. “The power of dominant groups may be integrated in laws, rules, norms, habits, and even a quite general consensus” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 355), which when all are combined create a White hegemonic enterprise.

While CRT provides tools for the identification of the normalcy of White privilege that are expressed in the oral argument discourse, pairing it with CDA, a critical communications-based methodology, allows for concentration on the use of language as a tool of power and persuasion. CDA is a complementary tool for CRT because, according to Fairclough (1989), CDA’s main objective is to expose ideologies that are veiled in written and oral communication with the goal of resisting and rising above the dominance that is pervasive in our society.

Employing a line-by-line analysis to the five U.S. Supreme Court oral arguments transcripts, I approached the text by reviewing the way words and phrases were framed to convey arguments and questions. I also considered if textual silences, “the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand” (Huckin, 2002, p. 348) and code words, “non-racial rhetoric to disguise racial issues” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 118) were being utilized by many oral argument participants. With the undergirded notion of how “standard, liberal-coined civil rights law injures the chances of People of Color and solidifies racism” (Delgado, 1991, p. 945) as well as the understanding of how “American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated” (Harris, 1993, pp. 1713-1714), I embarked upon a critical analysis of Supreme Court oral argument excerpts from five race-conscious admissions cases.
Analysis and Discussion

*Bakke v. University of California* (1978)

In *Bakke* the normalcy of White privilege through the rhetoric of innocence was introduced in the below exchange involving White male UC Davis medical school’s attorney Archibald Cox and White males, Justices Stewart and Powell. “The invocation of the ‘innocent White victim’ of affirmative action” (Ross, 1990, p. 298) was the underlying message conveyed within the questions about Whites being denied access to all 100 seats. A presumption of innocence surfaced, but “not the product of any actual and particular inquiry. It is presumed that the White victim is not guilty of a racist act that has denied the minority applicant” (pp. 300-301) an opportunity to attend medical school.

**Unknown speaker:** It did put a limit on the number of White people, isn’t’ it?

**Attorney Cox:** I think that it limited the number of non-minority and therefore essentially White, yes, but there [are] two things to be said about that. One is that this was not pointing the finger at a group which had been marked as inferior in any sense and it was undifferentiated that operated against a wide variety of people...

**Unknown speaker:** But it did put a limit on their number?

**Attorney Cox:** It -- In each class? I'm sorry. It did put a limit on the number of not minority people in each class. It did put a limit…?

**Justice Powell:** Do you agree then that there was a quota of 84?

**Attorney Cox:** Well, I would deny that it was the quota. We agree that there were 16 places set aside for qualified disadvantaged minority student…

**Justice Powell:** Now, the question is not whether the 16 is a quota. The question is whether the 84 is a quota? What is the answer to that?

**Attorney Cox:** I would say–I would say that neither is properly defined as a quota.

**Justice Powell:** And then why not?

**Attorney Cox:** Because in the first place–because of my understanding in the meaning of quota and I think the decisive things are the facts. And the operative facts are this is not something imposed from outside as the quotas are in the employment or the targets are unemployment sometime today. It was not a limit on the number of minority students. Other minority students were in fact accepted for the regular admissions program. It was not a guarantee of a minimum number of minority student because all of them had to pay

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1. Author Bernard Schwartz (1988) credited Justice Stewart with this question. The Supreme Court transcript designates the speaker as unknown.

2. This is Justice Stewart speaking again. The Supreme Court transcript designates the speaker as unknown.
him the testimony is that all of them were fully qualified, alright. It did say that if there are 16 qualified minority students and all were also disadvantaged. Then 16 places shall be taken by them and only 84 places will be available to others. (OA, pp. 1-2)

From a CRT perspective, attention is focused on how instead of Attorney Cox countering the justices’ questions with contextual and historical information in alignment with what he was already arguing, the lack of Student of Color in medical school, he acquiesced to the rhetoric of quota of 84, which resulted in him contributing to the normalcy of White privilege. By avoiding “the argument that White people have benefited from the oppression of People of Color, that White people have been advantaged by this oppression in a myriad of obvious and less obvious ways” (Ross, 1990, p. 301) and that Students of Color have been absent or extremely minimal in number in admission to the UC-Davis medical school, attorney Cox cosigned on the framing of the issue to ignore the role of racial exclusionary practices embedded in the medical school’s history.

The discussion of a quota of 84 is a crucial example of the normalcy of White privilege. The narrative centered on an oxymoronic exchange about Whites being limited to accessing the largest number of seats instead of all 100. “Within this rhetoric, affirmative action plans have two important effects: they hurt innocent White people and they advantage undeserving Blacks [and other People of Color]” (Ball, 2000, p. 46). Victimization and fear align within the rhetoric of innocence yielding the false portrayal of a dominant presence of People of Color on college campuses, in this context, medical schools. The normalcy of Whiteness was also threatened at the implication that an institution of higher education that was predominantly White could potentially extend equal or substantial access to People of Color. Quota took on a different meaning.

After UC Davis’s attorney gave his argument, the White male attorney, Reynold Colvin, for Allan Bakke who is also a White male, came before the Court. His opening arguments were interrupted by Justice Stewart when he asserted Bakke’s right narrative. Even in attorney Colvin’s attempt to clarify his position, the normalcy of White privilege continued to be reinforced by his assertion that Bakke’s race was the reason for his denial.

Attorney Colvin: …He stated that he was excluded from that school because that school had adopted a racial quota which deprived him of the opportunity for admission into the school and that’s where the case started…. He stated three grounds upon which he felt that he had been deprived of the right to admission to that school…

Justice Stewart: You spoke Mr. Colvin, of the right to admission, you don’t seriously submit that he had a right to be—

Attorney Colvin: Allan Bakke’s position is that he has a right and that right is not to be discriminated against by reason of his race and that’s what brings Allan Bakke to this Court. (OA, p.8)

Probing the framing of the right argument reveals that arguing the issue as being solely about Bakke created a self-centered approach to alleging racial discrimination grounded in individualism which set the standard for future race-conscious cases involving individuals and not groups of people. “Individualism erases history and hides the ways in which the wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit whites today. It allows whites to view
themselves as unique and original, outside of socialization” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 59) therefore des-erving admission to their selected institutions of higher education.

In an interview years later about the Bakke case, attorney Colvin reflected on his experience during that time. He stated the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause does not mention race nor specific groups for coverage. This type of logic led to his legal strategy to legitimize the use of a constitutional amendment that was originally created to provide People of Color a legal tool for equality to be used to the advantage of Whites. It also supports the “claim that the Equal Protection Clause demands that persons be judged as individuals, not of the basis of irrelevant group identifications” (Aleinkoff, 1992, p. 974). Framing People of Color and Whites in the same societal position supports ignoring how structural racism continues to prevail.


Barbara Grutter sued the University of Michigan Law School and was represented by a White male, Kirk Kolbo. In his opening statements before the Court, attorney Kolbo introduced the normalcy of White privilege by arguing that Grutter had a personal right protected by the Constitution not to have her race counted against her. That race—that the application would be considered for free from the taint of racial discrimination. The law school intentionally disregarded that right by discriminating against her on the basis of race as it does each year in the case of thousands of individuals who apply for admission... (OA, p. 3)

Justice Breyer challenged the normalcy of White privilege by specifically questioning why a White person who was not admitted did not endure harm by the athletes and alumni children who were admitted through preferential processes. Attorney Kolbo used a few legal tactics by pointing out that the Equal Protection Clause has not been ruled to apply to alumni benefits. Equipped with the ability to use the Equal Protection Clause by decoupling it from an inconsistent history of being interpreted by the Court to marginalize People of Color, attorney Kolbo avoided addressing the power of alumni networks.

**Justice Breyer:** The reason that the injury is more severe to the white person who doesn't get in when that white person doesn't get in because she's not an athlete or he's not a—he's not a alumnus or he's not any of the other things that fits within these other criteria? What is the difference there is?

**Attorney Kolbo:** The difference is the Equal Protection Clause, Your Honor. It does not apply to alumni preferences in scholarships. It applies to race.

The normalcy of White privilege was defended under the guise of the rhetoric of innocence and minimization of the powerful systemic relevance of alumni networks. Alumni connections were
not probed for their decades of White hegemony resulting in few People of Color having the same types of access to coveted resources. Many members of society assume that because there have been improvements in students of color gaining access to higher education, a certain level of equality has been reached and now outlandish numbers of privileged people of color are experiencing preferential treatment. Even when people of color have financial wealth, they are not shielded from negative stereotypes and marginalization.

Views of affirmative action as a policy of preferential treatment usually contain several presuppositions about the admission or hiring practices that are said to bestow preferences. The language of affirmative action as preferential treatment implies the following: (a) that there are clear criteria of merit that can accurately gauge the “quanta” of the current capabilities of the individual applicants,...(b) that a rich enough set of such criteria are applied to candidates, each in appropriate measure, so that the several dimensions of the individuals’ personal capacities to contribute significantly to the institution or profession are all given the weights they deserve; (c) that all these criteria are applied fairly and impartially in the various stages of the selection process; (d) that the beneficiaries of affirmative action are not the “best qualified” on the basis of these accurate criteria impartially applied, but rather are selected over “better qualified” candidates either as compensation or in the pursuit of desired social goals; (e) that the beneficiaries of affirmative action are the only significant group of people who are not admitted into the institution or profession purely on the basis of the aforementioned criteria, and that everyone else is admitted purely on their rank order of merit. (Harris & Narayan, 1994, p. 18)

Also supporting Grutter’s position was the federal government, hence, Solicitor General Ted Olson, a White male in the George W. Bush Administration, framed the admissions program in two ways that reflected a mischaracterization of the law school’s use of race. The word preferred conveyed the message of unqualified and underserving People of Color being awarded unearned admission over qualified and deserving White applicants.

**Solicitor General Olson:** …this program at the University of Michigan Law School fails every one of the Court's tests. First, it's a thinly disguised quota which sets aside a significant portion of each year's entering class for preferred ethnic groups.

**Justice Souter:** But they have a reason for it. The reason for it is they want to produce a diverse class and the reason they want to do that, using it as a plus, they say, is to do the things I said before. They think it breaks down stereotypes within the class. They think it's educationally beneficial. They think it supplies a legal profession that will be diverse and they think a legal profession like business and the military that is diverse is good for America from a civics point of view, et cetera, breaks the cycle. Those are the arguments which you well know. (OA, pp. 22- 23)

Justice Souter countered Solicitor General Olson’s argument. A CRT perspective yields that while the list included various perspectives being brought into law classes and diversifying the legal profession, absent from it was any account about the relevance of historical exclusion of People of Color from law schools as well as the experiences of those who are currently students.
The continued decoupling of systemic racism and access to higher education stymies the dismantling of dominant ideologies of Whiteness and its privileges.

The only female and White attorney participating in the oral argument was Maureen Mahoney. She served as one of two attorneys representing the University of Michigan’s Law School. At one juncture, Justice Scalia interrupted attorney Mahoney’s argument exposing the realities of the normalcy of White privilege in that there were White students admitted to the law school with lower grades and LSAT scores when compared to students of color.

**Attorney Mahoney:** And what the evidence shows in this case is that it is common for white applicants to be admitted with lower grades and test scores than even minorities who are rejected because–

**Justice Scalia:** Does the Constitution prohibit discrimination against–against oboe players as opposed to flute players? (OA, p. 49)

Through a CRT lens the recognition of Justice Scalia’s deflection of the discourse to a non-race related scenario allowed the normalcy of White privilege to remain intact. Justice Scalia demonstrated a commitment to maintaining White supremacy as evidenced by his use of an incongruent comparison of musicians to People of Color. Putting musicians and People of Color in the same category equates a decoupling from historical and contextual relevance of experiences. “In the arguments of the conservative discourses that are now circulating, the barriers to social equality and equal opportunity have been removed. Whites, hence, have no privilege” (Apple, 1998, ix). Justice Scalia’s tactic resulted in the maintenance of reverse discrimination claims as legitimate as opposed to exposing them for their lack of legitimacy.


Solicitor General Olson also argued in *Gratz*. In the following passage the normalcy of White privilege was communicated in his argument by questioning whether all applicants regardless of race add value. However, not acknowledging that Whites are the dominant students on campuses and in classrooms does not accurately communicate environment dynamics. A CRT lens revealed a perspective of how attorney Kolbo framed an argument that White applicants’ skin color precluded them from admission but served as an advancement for Students of Color being accepted. This assertion is flawed and fed into the normalcy of White privilege because the reduction of race to pigmentation allows people to argue that categorizing by perceived phenotype is discriminatory. Race is presented as lacking power. The historical but silenced racial stratification saturated with privileges for Whites, is absent and unacknowledged.

Historically, because “whiteness as property was the critical core of a system that affirmed the hierarchical relations between white and Black” (Harris, 1993, p. 1745) and has been reinforced by the legal system, the continued perspective of societal privilege and resources belonging to Whites permeates legal discourse without seeming unjust and most of all natural.

**Solicitor General Olson:** What we’re saying is that if you assume that because you are white or you are red or you are brown or you are black, you must have certain experiences and you must have certain viewpoints.
Justice Stevens: The argument is that you need to have enough of them to demonstrate that the point of view does not always fit just one person.

Solicitor General Olson: –that’s a self-contradictory rationale that they’ve come up with. They’ve said first of all you have these characteristics because you’re black but we must admit enough of you into the class to prove to the other students that—that black isn’t the reason you’re—

Justice Breyer: No that is not—the argument is basically that, look, people who have grown up in American and are black, regardless of race, not, not regardless of race, regardless of socioeconomic background have probably, though not certainly, shared the experience of being subject to certain stereotypical reactions from people throughout their lives. And indeed many of the students in our class will have stereotypical reactions. And it’s good for them as well as for everyone else to rid themselves of those reactions. And we want people in this school of all kinds who are black, because that will be helpful education. (OA, pp. 22-23)

Justice Stevens challenged Solicitor General Olson’s claims about the admission of Black applicants. However, the exchange between them had the impact of othering People of Color because they both used language such as them and labeled people as colors which trivialized their humanity. Justice Breyer intervened with a realistic assessment of the racial inequity in society and countered the normalcy of White privilege exchange but his realism was diminished with an interest convergence narrative by privileging the benefits to Whites of being exposed to People of Color in educational settings. Interest convergence manifested in his narrative because “racially minoritized students often are treated like ‘native informants’ in the classroom, and the benefits of racial diversity at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) becomes unidirectional, with racially minoritized students carrying the burden of educating their white peers” (hooks as cited in Harris, Barone, & Davis, 2015, p. 26).

Fisher v. University of Texas (2013)

In his opening comments before the Court, attorney Bert Rein, a White male, invoked a White victim narrative by asserting that Abigail Fisher suffered an injury because of UT’s admissions model. Attorney Rein’s advocacy of a constitutional injury and denied right to equal treatment are similar to the arguments made by attorneys for Bakke, Gratz, and Grutter during their oral arguments before the Court. The embedded notions of Whiteness as a property right and White racial innocence discourse were countered by both Justices Sotomayor and Ginsburg. While attorney Rein did not state directly that Fisher deemed herself entitled to admission to UT, it was an understood message “that the consideration of race created an uneven playing field that lowered her chances of admission” (Boddie, 2015, p. 318).

Justice Ginsburg: The injury -if the injury is rejection by the University of Texas and the answer is, no matter what, this person would not have been accepted, then how is the injury caused by the affirmative action program?
Attorney Rein: …the first injury that was before the Court was the use of a system which denied equal treatment. It was a Constitutional injury, and part of the damage claim was premised directly on the Constitutional issue…The–the denial of her right to equal treatment is a Constitutional injury in and of itself, and we had claimed certain damages on that. We–we started the case before it was clear whether she would or wouldn't be admitted.

Justice Sotomayor: But she's graduated. Injunctive relief, she's not going to get. So what measure of damages will she get or will she be entitled to?

Justice Scalia: Her claim is not necessarily that she would have been -- would have been admitted, but that she was denied a fair chance in the admission lottery. Just as when a person is denied participation in the contracting lottery, he has suffered an injury. (OA, pp. 3-8)

Justice Scalia came to attorney Rein’s defense. Justice Scalia advanced the normalcy of White privilege by comparing Fisher’s denial to UT with race-conscious hiring practices in business contracting that the Court ruled unconstitutional because White contractors argued minority set-asides unfairly discriminated against them. In reality, the minority set-aside programs were implemented because White male businesses historically dominated the industry. In the 1990s when the Supreme Court ruled several non-higher education affirmative action programs unconstitutional, “innocent whiteness operated as a background assumption, signaling a return to the full reputational value of whiteness that is able to stand in moral equivalency to blackness and other forms of colored other-ness” (Cho, 2009, p.1615).

The use of the term “injury” in the oral argument contributes to the White racial innocence discourse and reinforces a post-racial ideology. In order for a case to reach the Court, there must be an injury claimed by the plaintiff. Justices and lawyers discuss this injury throughout the oral arguments. White racial innocence is first constructed by the foundational assumption that an injury exists. (Acholonu, 2013, p. 214)

In an exchange between Chief Justice Roberts and attorney Garre, Chief Justice Robert’s questions are an updated iteration of the normativity of Whiteness reflected in Bakke with the quota of 84 discourse. The dominance of White students in the higher education spaces in which few Students of Color are present was absent from the discourse. Due to the narrowness of the Court’s approaches to evaluate race issues, historical societal inequities are no longer acceptable as rationales for extending opportunities for Students of Color. Therefore, attorney Garre was unable to give a persuasive response because quotas, set-asides, and numerical goals have been ruled unconstitutional. “The current Supreme Court’s aversion to affirmative action is readily apparent. But the Court does not express its aversion directly. Rather, it speaks in terms of malleable doctrinal tests that divert attention from the Court’s hostility” (Spann, 2012, p. 48).

Chief Justice Roberts: What is that number? What is the critical mass of African Americans and Hispanics at the university that you are working toward?
Attorney Garre: Your Honor, we don't have one…

Chief Justice Roberts: So how are we supposed to tell whether this plan is narrowly tai-
tlored to that goal? (OA, pp. 39-40)

Chief Justice Roberts’ last question presents the Court as not knowing how to make a de-
cision about race as a consideration factor. The underlying belief in a post-racial society renders
the use of race as unfamiliar and cumbersome. “In this line of questioning, the Court is also a
victim as their judicial supervision is depicted as being disregarded by UT’s endless use of race-
conscious policies” (Acholonu, 2013, p. 211).

Fisher v. University of Texas (2016)

Crafting Abigail Fisher’s case as a deprivation of her rightful opportunity to earn a degree
from UT stemmed from the perspective that race conscious admissions policies are a “denial of
the promise of equal rights for all individuals, and that they in effect make the rights of people of
color more equal than those of white people” (Ansell, 1997, p. 114). More poignantly, “the simple
presence of race in a decision-making process that uses affirmative action confers an implied injury
on all white candidates” (Boddie, 2015, p. 319).

Justice Ginsburg: Attorney Rein…What is the relief you’re seeking? I take it not injunc-
tive since Ms. Fisher has graduated.

Attorney Rein: …Ms. Fisher has not been admitted, and that she has suffered the conse-
quences of non-admission, which include she went to an alternative university… (OA, p.
35-37)

Claims before any court must specifically request a remedy. Abigail Fisher graduated from
another institution with a degree and was employed. The fact that the Court allowed Fisher’s case
to come before it twice speaks volumes to the Court’s disturbing unsettled perspective on race-
conscious policies in higher education. Fisher demanded relief for the inconvenience of having to
graduate from an institution that she did not choose.

Justice Scalia promoted a mismatch theory rhetoric asserted by two authors, a law professor
and a journalist, who is also a lawyer. In a 2012 publication the authors alleged Students of Color
are mismatched with institutions, which results in their low graduation rates and compensation
(Kidder & Onwuachi-Willig, 2014).

Justice Scalia: There are—there are those who contend that it does not benefit African-
Americans to—to get them into the University of Texas where they do not do well, as
opposed to having them go to a less-advance school, a less—a slower-track school where
they do well. One of—one of the briefs pointed out that—that most of the—most of the
black scientists in this country don’t come from schools like the University of Texas…They
come from lesser schools where they do not feel that they’re—that they’re being pushed
ahead in—in classes that are too—too fast for them.
An irony in Justice Scalia’s mismatch theory rhetoric as well as a counter story is

Had Fisher been admitted to the University of Texas at Austin, she too would have been a “mismatched” student. As the University proclaimed in its Supreme Court brief, Abigail Fisher (who had an Academic Index score of 3.1), “would not have been admitted to the Fall 2008 freshman class even if she had received a ‘perfect’ [Personal Achievement Index (PAI)] score of 6” (and her actual PAI was in fact, lower than that). In fact, Ms. Fisher was also denied admission to UT Austin’s 2008 summer freshmen admissions program in which 168 African Americans and Latinos were denied admission with AI/PAI scores equal to or higher than Fisher’s (versus only a handful of African Americans or Latinos offered summer admission with lower AIs/PAIs than Fisher). (p. 936)

Justice Scalia’s mismatch rhetoric reflected how the privileging of Whiteness in higher education is masked by race neutral admissions policies as well as how “inequitable conditions are portrayed as natural or as the result of the actions of individual students of color, instead of implicating the racist structures and practices of these institutions” (Acholonu, 2013, p. 206).

For many of these critics [of race conscious admissions programs], their concerns are not so much about merit and consistency but rather about whom they view (whether consciously or unconsciously) as belonging and not belonging at selective institutions, about whom they presume as properly having a claim to seats at certain schools. (Kidder & Onwuachi-Willig, 2014, p. 936)

Attorneys for the universities, the federal government and the Supreme Court justices contributed to the normalcy of White privilege. The attention and advocacy efforts that have been strategically designed to dismantle racial remedies and bring to fruition the notion of racial equity are non-existent. “It is now clear that impressive arguments can be marshalled under the fourteenth amendment and the civil rights statutes either to uphold or to invalidate minority admissions programs” (Bell, 1979, p. 18). Bell’s observation from almost 40 years ago still rings true. In order to move higher education institutions as well as our society towards being more inclusive and social justice oriented, discourse to describe how equity is achieved especially when discussing access and admission for Students of Color must not be contingent upon legal maneuvers. “Utterly ignoring social questions about what race has power and advantages and which race denied entry for centuries into academia” (Bell, 1992, p. 369) must cease.

Conclusion

Candid declarations of inclusion and explaining how the legacies of most institutions of higher education require race-conscious admissions policies is warranted in order to combat the prevalence of the normalcy of White privilege. The selected excerpts from the race-conscious admissions oral arguments demonstrate how legal discourse continually recycles narratives that promote Students of Color deserving admission but not at the cost of Whites and if admitted, primarily for the purpose of sharing needed insight to prepare their White peers for a diverse workplace. Interest convergence rationales for admitting Students of Color do not move our society forward in addressing the deep-rooted racialized injustice that has yet to be fully rectified. Institutions of
higher education must make clear and unwavering commitments regarding their use of race-conscious admissions. They must also instruct attorneys representing their interests to do so in alignment with their decision for racial inclusion.

A major benefit to the race-conscious debate is the need for institutions to work towards becoming racially literate (Guinier, 2003). “A racially literate institution uses race as a diagnostic device, an analytical tool, and an instrument of process.” As a diagnostic or evidentiary device, race helps identify the underlying problems affecting higher education (pp. 201-202). Racial literacy encompasses an awareness that structures and policies that have not been dismantled in higher education sustain the normalcy of White privilege and perpetuates and (re)produces inequality.

What is important to keep in the forefront of all discussions regarding the law and race-conscious higher education admissions policy disputes is “with the power to define what so-called facts are and how they are conceived, shaped, and communicated” is the ability to maintain status quo and further stifle the voices of marginalized citizens” (p. 351). Legal rhetoric is a persuasive vehicle in its own right so to unveil the underlying hegemony of racism and White privilege in (re)producing power and dominance intentional critique is necessary.

A glimpse of racial literate advocacy before the Supreme Court can be seen in one of attorney Garre’s narrative in Fisher II in which he offered an analogy that emphasized the outlook of higher education if the Supreme Court ruled UT’s use of race as unconstitutional.

**Attorney Garre:** …And the Fifth Circuit found that without the consideration of race in the mix for those students, admissions would approach an all white enterprise…(Fisher II OA, p. 49).

While attorney Garre did not name the normalcy of White privilege as a key challenge to advancing higher education, stating what the absence of People of Color means- an all-White enterprise -is a step in the right direction for advocacy that exposes why equity continues to elude higher education.

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Neoliberalism in Higher Education: Reflections on Affirmative Action

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors reflect on more recent discourse on affirmative action to illustrate how neoliberal rationalities work in higher education. They propose that affirmative action was “saved” by neoliberal rationalities framing the issue in terms of outcomes. That is, affirmative action, historically and ostensibly addressing racial injustice, now appears to justify practices furthering global competition, and thus it offers a good example for understanding the contradictory ways that neoliberal projects seek to shape the conduct of both institutions of higher education and their individuals.

Keywords: neoliberalism, affirmative action, diversity, governmentality

In this paper, we reflect on the more recent discourse on affirmative action to illustrate how neoliberal rationalities work in higher education. We propose that affirmative action was “saved” by neoliberal rationalities framing the issue in terms of outcomes. That is, affirmative action, historically and ostensibly addressing racial injustice, now appears to justify practices furthering global competition, and thus it offers a good example for understanding the contradictory ways that neoliberal projects seek to shape the conduct of both institutions of higher education and their individuals. Before we pursue this argument, a few introductory words about affirmative action are in order.

Few topics are as controversial as affirmative action in the field of higher education, and this is so despite the fact that the Supreme Court ruled in 2016 in Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin (Fisher II) that institutions of higher education may use (a limited form of) affirmative action to further the educational benefits of diversity (Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, 2016). In this case, the Supreme Court upheld the University of Texas at Austin’s admissions policies, which entailed a mixture of the Texas “top-ten percent law” (giving applicants in the top-ten percent of their high school automatic admission into one of the state institutions), an “Academic Index” (SAT scores and high school GPA), and a “holistic metric of a candidate’s potential contribution to the University.” This holistic review resulted in a “Personal Achievement Index,” which attended to an applicant’s leadership, work experience, awards, community service, and “other special circumstances that give insight into a student’s background;” evidence of such special circumstances could include being raised in a single-parent household, speaking a home language other than English, socioeconomic status, and so on.

Fisher II has not resolved the matter by any means, and not just because its ruling is actually quite narrow, but also because the issue might still be political and moral, and as such, highly volatile and intractable. We know, for example, that this issue has been a prominent subject of political campaigns, policy debates, and state referenda. The danger to affirmative action does not
arise simply because of direct attacks on it, but because of the high-stakes testing regimes that actually leave many children behind and make affirmative action thinkable in the first place. And, of course, courts continue to hear cases challenging affirmative action programs in college and universities, as Fisher II illustrates.

Yet, having said that affirmative action involves moral questions, legal challenges to affirmative action in higher education, even accounting for recent victories, illustrate, paradoxically, that moral arguments, such as that affirmative action compensates for past wrongs (or, interestingly, that it constitutes a form of “reverse” discrimination), no longer justify (or reject) it. The University of Michigan in Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), for example, in order to defend itself against legal challenges to its admissions policies, side-stepped these moral arguments in favor of so-called scientific ones; it commissioned a number of leading researchers to verify empirically the importance of racial and ethnic diversity. We will discuss this case in greater detail later in this paper, but, briefly, the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School’s affirmative-action admissions policies, which amounted to an “individualized” review of each applicant. The importance of racial and ethnic diversity in higher education now was framed in terms of the educational benefits that arise from it, particularly those that prepare students for an increasingly multi-racial, global world. This was the argument that won out; it was affirmed in Fisher II; and we will argue in this paper that it is premised on neoliberal rationality.

To those on the political left, our argument that neoliberalism may have actually “saved” affirmative action might be read as problematic, since they often see neoliberalism as conservative and oppressive. To those on the political right, who often take on the mantle of individualism, which neoliberal projects often espouse, over and against collective values, our argument will read as incoherent, for affirmative action connotes “special” group interests. This paper will propose that a reading of neoliberalism via ideas of either individualism (for the right) or domination (for the left) misreads neoliberalism’s object (i.e., the creation of self-reliant, economically-minded individuals) and methods (which can include both liberating and dominating projects). Having said this, however, we will also argue that neoliberal projects must be contested, for they seek to govern via economism that defines the worth of individuals in very narrow ways.

In the next section, we explain briefly what we mean by neoliberalism, which often is asserted by those on the political left as the term that represents the effects of privatization, globalization, and other politico-economic forces undermining the nation state and creating severe inequality at a global scale. But what is “neo” about neoliberalism is not its effects, but its rationality. Following more recent views of neoliberalism as representing a myriad of governing practices, we will argue the “target” of neoliberal projects is not the state as such, as was the case with traditional liberal theories, but the individual, who will be reconstituted in ways that will empower her autonomy but also transform her ethical commitments to the social world around them. While neoliberal projects (and there are many, sometimes with contradictory goals) have clear and unquestionably authoritarian (and dominating) effects, their logic is that of self-empowerment, and thus they contain within them both oppressive and liberating tendencies.

Following our discussion of neoliberalism, we move to the issue of affirmative action, tracing how the rationalities associated with affirmative action been transformed from ones that fitted within traditional liberalism (e.g., liberty versus justice) into ones that now fit within neoliberal frameworks of “verifiable evidence,” “measurable outcomes,” “global competitiveness,” and other economic concepts. For this argument, we focus on the Grutter case, given its importance in giving imprimatur to the new logic of affirmative action as furthering educational outcomes. The
social consequences of this transformation in the affirmative action discourse have yet to play
themselves out, though we will suggest that this shift is problematic in terms of the kinds of ra-
tionalities that will come to define effective citizenship as economic efficiency, an argument which
is the basis of the final section of this paper.

Neoliberalism’s True Object

Early critiques of the effects of global capitalism on education worldwide attribute them to
“neoliberalism,” which is often characterized by those on the political left as an ideology underly-
ing the movement toward privatization and marketization in education and in other state-provided
services. For these critiques, the goal of neoliberal projects is to undermine the welfare state or
public goods (see, for example, Apple, 2001; McLaren, 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In
such critiques, the linking of neoliberalism with globalization and privatization allows those on
the political left to exalt ideas like democracy, the public, and the state, which are all conflated and
set against neoliberalism. Nelly Stromquist (2002), for example, argued with regard to the neolib-
eral projects characterizing global capitalism that “education is losing considerable ground in its
traditional social acceptance as a ‘common’ or ‘public good,’ a resource open to all as a human
right to be collectively shared” (p. 178). Neoliberal projects in education, so this goes, conflate
“democracy” with “markets,” and in a world characterized by diversity and social inequality, it is
dangerous to conflate a private good (marketization) with the public good (democracy) (Wells,

Neoliberal projects, however, are not solely intent on furthering economic practices that
undermine the welfare state. Indeed, the attacks on the welfare state attributed to neoliberalism
reflects a romantic attachment to the state. For example, Paul Spicker (2000) proposes, the welfare
state is characterized by collective action for social protection (p. 5). Yet this tension between
collective and individual interests (or state and market, public and private) does not need to invent
a neoliberalism to make it thinkable, for liberalism is characterized in large part by tensions be-
tween the state, the market, and the individual (see Foucault, 1981). There is something “new”
about neoliberalism, but its rejection of the state is not one of them. We follow a more recent
understanding of neoliberalism as less a set of agreed-upon practices than a term we now give to
certain principles and methods of rationalizing the exercise of government, with government un-
derstood as the activity of directing human conduct within a setting and with the instruments of
the state (see generally Gordon, 1991). Thus, what makes neoliberalism different from liberalism
is its governmentality (i.e., the rationalities of, and practices directed at, shaping conduct).

Thomas Lemke (2001), expanding upon Michael Foucault’s previously unpublished lec-
tures (See also Foucault, 2004/2008), points out that U.S. neoliberalism actually extends economic
rationality beyond the traditional economic sphere into the social sphere (p. 197), thus eviscerating
historical liberal distinctions between the market and the state, the economic and the social, the
private and the public, and the individual and the collective. Economic rationality becomes an all-
embracing logic for understanding, evaluating, and governing social life. In Gary Becker
(1976), for example, the social becomes the economic, and the economic framework becomes
social theory, with all the universality and all-encompassing logic that such a theory connotes. All
social life is deemed governed by the “rational choices” of entrepreneurial individuals who see
everything they do in terms of maximizing their “human capital.” Human capital refers to the
activities that influence future income, such as schooling, on-the-job training, continuing educa-
tion, self-help practices, the search for information on prices, as well as health care, migration, and
so on, and all these activities are defined as “investments” that will improve skills, knowledge, or health, and thereby raise incomes (Becker, 1993, p. 11).

The state as such is not so much undermined as it is given new functions. Its ability to intervene directly in the lives of individuals (i.e., its social welfare function) is constrained, to be sure, but it now becomes a facilitator of a slew of specialized private and quasi-public techniques for “conducting” the actions of individuals without being responsible for them (Rose, 1996, p. 56). The failure (or inadequacy, or inefficiency) of the state to play this role now elicits new forms of governing, in which responsibility for traditional state functions, such as schooling, for example, is shifted downward, to rationally-acting individuals and collectives (e.g., families, associations, etc.), and the rationalities of administration by these collectives will dedicate themselves to producing self-responsible individuals who are economically rational.

The individuals these neoliberal projects invent will bear the moral and political freedom to care for themselves but also the fiscal and political responsibility. To the extent that its objective is the self-responsibility of individuals, the actual target of the neoliberalism is the individual, not the state. Its undermining of the welfare state may be a necessary part of its objective. It must “free” the individual from his ties to such a state because these ties thwart its objective: to work on the individual to make him autonomous and self-responsible. This also means, of course, that individuals will be given greater “freedom” to pursue their entrepreneurial interests, but, consequently, they will bear all the fiscal, political, and moral responsibility for caring for themselves. The state can and should no longer insure them against the risks of their autonomy and freedom. Since individuals must care for themselves, their commitments will reflect this need to “invest” in themselves as much as they can, and everywhere they can, so that they can mitigate the consequences that come with their freedom or, at least, manage their risks. Their relationships with the state, with the other institutions that shaped their lives, and with other individuals, must now be transformed to match this new economic freedom they are now supposed to exercise (and which, by the way, they must come believe to be the only real kind of freedom there is).

Given neoliberalism’s logic of inventing self-responsible individuals, it is improper to focus only on the dominating aspects of neoliberal projects (see, for example, Brown, 2015); neoliberal projects contain within them the dual possibilities of domination (i.e., restricting freedom) and liberation (i.e., promoting freedom). Neoliberal projects, to be effective in advanced liberal societies, which are suspicious of state interventions, must attend to processes of self-government. Governing others entails trying to guide and shape their ideas and the actions they use to govern their own bodies and souls, and these must connect with their beliefs, capabilities, and motivations about social progress and citizenship. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) explains how individuals are transformed into particular kinds of citizens by technologies of citizenship, which now include all kinds of discourses, programs, and other non-state tactics aimed at making individuals politically active and capable of self-government (p. 4). Affirmative action, we will argue in the next section, is one of these kinds of technologies, for it is a way for individuals to see that their citizenship is increasingly tied to, and perhaps dependent on, the educational outcomes of diversity. Clearly, a logic like this has dominating tendencies, since it may undermine the ethical commitments individuals have to each other as a result of having been previously constituted as social beings whose autonomy must always be framed within such commitments (Bellah, 2000). But they may also involve “empowering” technologies that might free individuals from some of the oppressive rationalities that govern their lives (e.g., totalitarian states, religious orthodoxy, racial injustice.). These “empowering” technologies, therefore, are neither good nor bad per se; they are dangerous, for the
“will to empower contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 2).

It is this logic of seeking to empower individuals that make human capital theories so dangerous in education. The theories of “human capital” rationalize human activity as the “rational choices” of entrepreneurial individuals who see everything they do in terms of maximizing their self-investments (embodied in knowledge and skills) in order to maximize their economic capital. Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (1977) certainly were correct when they argued that human capital theories appeal to ideological (and thus false) pro-capitalist sentiments that define the worker as a holder of capital (as embodied in his skills and knowledge) and grants him the capacity to invest in himself (p. 13). Yet the idea of human capital does more than create capitalists of us all. Human capital is part of the processes of neoliberalism’s reinvention of social life as economic: First, by making all behavior subject to a cost/benefit analysis (behavior is transferred into quantifiable “human capital”); second, by establishing “rational choice” as the description of a desired reality, a reality in which meaningful existence requires producing and enhancing one’s self-investments; and third, by requiring material investment in education, not just from the state but from the individual. The logic of human capital is a crucial part of the art of neoliberal governing, and this logic is what saved affirmative action, an argument we turn to next.

**Grutter’s Affirmative Action**

Affirmative action is controversial because traditionally it has been framed as posing a conflict between two important liberal values: (1) all individuals deserve an equal opportunity to achieve their goals, and (2) hard work and merit—not race, gender, religion, or any other condition over which individuals have no control—should determine which individuals succeed (see, for example, Crosby & VanDeVeer, 2000; D’Souza & Edley, 1996; Eden and Ryan, 1999; Fried, 1999). These traditional arguments for and against affirmative action fitted well within liberal political reason, which has always been concerned with moral questions about justice versus liberty, merit versus equality, individualism versus collectivism, and so on (see Sandel, 1984). But as such, they are irresolvable questions, and as such they have given meaning to the ways in which affirmative action has been *invented* in the political arena and in the legal cases in the past, one side of the dilemma gaining privilege, but only provisionally. This changed when the University of Michigan was sued for its admissions policies, a litigation that culminated in two Supreme Court decisions in 2003 (*Gratz v. Bollinger*; *Grutter v. Bollinger*). Rather than pursue the traditional liberal arguments associated with the defense of affirmative action, the University of Michigan pursued a social-science strategy to convince the Supreme Court that the educational benefits of a diverse student body were (1) compelling enough to justify taking race into account in its admissions policies and (2) verifiable with empirical data.

Briefly, the University was sued in two separate cases over the affirmative-action policies in its law school (*Grutter*) and undergraduate programs (*Gratz*). The Supreme Court heard both cases simultaneously and determined that furthering the educational benefits was a compelling interest. But while the law school accomplished those interests in a legal manner (by conducting an individualized review of each applicant), the undergraduate college did not because it simply awarded points for race. In this paper, however, we read this litigation, not for the legal principles it espouses, but for the political meanings it offers. We are particularly interested in how the University justified its policies because it eschewed traditional liberal questions. As we indicated before, the university mustered extensive evidence of the educational benefits of diversity (see
Bowen & Bok, 1998, for an example of such evidence). This strategy proved successful, since the Supreme Court itself cited this evidence approvingly in this case and later in *Fisher II*.

The introductory paragraph of a University’s report issued in preparation for the litigation, *The Compelling Need for Diversity in Higher Education*, defines what we are calling a social-science strategy:

The last Supreme Court decision addressing the use of race in admissions to institutions of higher education, *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California*, affirmed that the role of diversity in colleges and universities is both essential and compelling. Since *Bakke*, opponents and proponents have wrestled with ideology and theory, but have never had the benefit of a comprehensive theoretical framework that has been tested by reliable empirical data. The University of Michigan has drawn on several of the nation’s leading, and most respected, researchers and scholars, to develop such a framework and verify its legitimacy with empirical proof. The evidence submitted by these leaders in the fields of history, sociology, education, economics, psychology, and law, confirms *Bakke*’s holding and establishes the continuing imperative for diversity—including racial and ethnic diversity—in higher education. (as cited in Baez, 1999, p. 287)

The argument that one can use empirical data to transcend the ideological and theoretical work associated with affirmative action, work premised on traditional liberalism’s narratives, suggest that something different occurred here. This strategy sought to transcend moral questions about justice and equality, and in this way, it very much fitted into neoliberalism’s dispensing of moral questions, thus reframing those questions as economic ones. In this case, the empirical evidence of outcomes transforms what had been irresolvable moral questions into ones of measurable outcomes and economic efficiency.

In the *Grutter* case, the university was sued for its law school policies, which used an “individualized” review of each applicant and favorably considered race with a goal of achieving a “critical mass” of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and other backgrounds. The University made the argument that the law school’s mission was (1) to produce highly skilled and effective lawyers who link professional training to a concern with solving social problems, like racial ineq- uity, and (2) to produce graduates who have “strong likelihood of succeeding in the practice of law and contributing in diverse ways to the well-being of others” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 314). Through a diverse student body, the law school sought to ensure that that students understood the role of race in society, as well as how to “work more effectively and more sensitively” in a world that “is and will be multi-racial,” and to instill mutual respect and “sympathetic engagement with the experiences of other people that are basic to the mature and responsible practice of law” (Initial Brief of the Appellant-Petitioner, 2002, p. 4). In a majority opinion by Justice O’Connor, the Supreme Court noted that the benefits of diversity were substantial, including “cross-racial understanding” and “the breaking down of racial stereotypes.” Furthermore, “numerous studies show that student body diversity promotes learning outcomes,” and “better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 321).

The Court went on to say that these
benefits are not theoretical but real, as major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints…We have repeatedly acknowledged the overriding importance of preparing students for work and citizenship, describing education as pivotal to “sustaining our political and cultural heritage” with a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of society. This Court has long recognized that “education…is the very foundation of good citizenship.” (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003, pp. 333-334)

This notion that diversity in higher education was essential to ensuring useful skills in working with others of diverse backgrounds, especially in the workplace, was echoed by a number of supporters of the University’s policies, who filed amicus briefs supporting the continued use of affirmative action. Here are some examples of these arguments:

The experience of the AFL-CIO teaches that the unique opportunities to interact with people from other races and ethnic groups on a university campus—at the threshold of the workplace—that are fostered by the admissions policies at issue in this case, will have substantial, positive impact on students, making them better citizens in our democracy as well as more productive members of society. (Brief Amicus Curiae of American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organizations In Support of Respondents, 2002, p. 2)

Amici need talented college graduates, minority and non-minority, who have been educated in an environment that reflects the nation’s diversity. These graduates will enter amici’s workforces and become the managers of the future. (Brief of Amici Curiae Media Companies in Support of Respondents, 2002, p. 2)

The existence of racial and ethnic diversity in institutions of higher education is vital to amici’s efforts to hire and maintain a diverse workforce, and to employ individuals of all backgrounds who have been educated and trained in a diverse environment. As explained in this brief, such a workforce is important to amici’s continued success in the global marketplace. Amici have devoted substantial financial and human resources to create and maintain a diverse workforce. These extensive efforts are part of the very fabric of amici’s cultures, are implemented and overseen by senior managers, and are supported at the highest levels. (Brief for Amici Curiae 65 Leading American Businesses In Support of Respondents, 2002, p. 1)

Accordingly, one key component of ExxonMobil’s ongoing strategy involves recruiting employees from premier colleges and universities, on a global basis, that offer a broad, well-educated, and heterogeneous talent pool…A diverse workforce is essential to the success of global companies like ExxonMobil, and student body diversity at colleges and universities, like the University of Michigan, is critical to ensuring that companies can meet their needs for workforce diversity. (Brief of Exxon Mobil Corporation As Amicus Curiae In Support of Neither Party, 2002, p. 2)
General Motors depends upon the University of Michigan and similarly selective academic institutions to prepare students for employment—to teach them the skills required to succeed and lead in the global marketplace. The quality of the education these students receive profoundly affects the ability of General Motors, and indeed all major American corporations, to compete. In General Motors’ experience, only a well educated, diverse work force, comprising people who have learned to work productively and creatively with individuals from a multitude of races and ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, can maintain America’s competitiveness in the increasingly diverse and interconnected world economy. (Brief of General Motors Corporation as Amicus Curiae In Support For Respondents, 2002, p. 1)

Diversity is basic to higher education’s main purposes: to enable students to lead “the examined life”; to ready them to maintain the robust democracy in which we live; and to prepare them to function in the national and global economy. (Brief of Amici Curiae American Council on Education and 52 Other Higher Education Organizations in Support of Respondents, 2002, p. 3)

Our reasons for providing these quotes is to show how the logic of supporting affirmative action has changed. This logic cannot be read in terms of the traditional liberal principles we discussed at the start of this section (i.e., in terms of justice versus liberty, equality versus merit, and so on). Pitting notions of individual liberties against social equality is superficial to the extent that it argues that the actions of the University, its supporters, and the Court might be seen as indicative of a (renewed?) push for racial equality. Justice and equality are concepts of traditional liberalism, and they do not rely upon “empirical data” to give them coherence. These narratives are moral in nature; their logic is one of moral reasoning.

But reading these arguments as reflective of neoliberal rationalities allows us to see things differently. We can now see what diversity projects, such as affirmative action, rationalize in the governance and self-governance of individuals. Neoliberalism, at least in the ways we have been reiterating it throughout this paper, converts social life into an overriding economic rationality, and its main target is to invent autonomous, economically-rational individuals who will understand themselves in terms of self-investments. Targeting education \textit{writ large} has always been important for neoliberal projects because focusing on education to accomplish their goals does not require use of state force, which is inefficient and improper under the liberal imaginary; in education, these projects focus on ideologies and pedagogies, which are very effective at attaching themselves to the rationalities of individuals’ self-government—the ways they affect their own bodies and souls. To be effective as such, however, educational systems must be restructured to prepare individuals for the global world by changing their own behavior to become less dependent on state resources and more “collaborative” and “flexible,” emphasizing team work, entrepreneurship, and shared decision making.

One can see how affirmative action now becomes necessary under this logic. For it is from institutions of higher education (especially the prestigious ones) that future workers and leaders will come, and so these workers and leaders must be able to function and to manage within an increasingly diverse world. Affirmative action then becomes a rationality for governing institutions of higher education, and “diversity” becomes one for governing individuals within those...
institutions. These individuals will become subject to a social administration geared toward creating in material terms the logic of that rationality. So, “diversity” can now become a technology for furthering this economic rationality, to make it “real,” so that admissions, pedagogy, and all the things associated with collegiate life (e.g., freshman experiences, student programming, etc.) will direct students’ behavior toward having contacts with individuals of diverse backgrounds. But these contacts are relevant only because they allow students to develop skills that will generate capital for them afterward, particularly in the “global workplace.” It is appropriate under neoliberalism, therefore, to have the state intervene in institutional behavior to guarantee affirmative action, for the benefits of such diversity is essential to ensuring self-reliance (e.g., only those able to function effectively in an increasingly diverse world will be successful) and prosperity at an individual level. The benefits of diversity, in this sense, become other kinds of human capital, itself a logic of governance, and thus one that carries within it the twin possibilities of domination and liberation (we will conclude this paper with an argument about the pitfalls of such economism).

Affirmative action, then, seems no longer simply a modern example of the liberal contradictions about whether or not it is just to remedy past discrimination or to focus on collective rights over and against the individual’s; it is a strategy for governing individuals and the university itself, for it ensures that educated students are those who can function effectively and sensitively in a multi-racial world, as well as furthering a pedagogy that will further that imperative. And this is particularly important at prestigious universities, since they are key distributors of social capital:

A handful of these schools accounts for 25 of the 100 United States Senators, 74 United States Courts of Appeals judges, and nearly 200 of the more than 600 United States District Court judges. In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity. All members of our heterogeneous society must have confidence in the openness and integrity of the educational institutions that provide this training. (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 332)

To further the neoliberal agenda, therefore, the most important institutions must be made the vehicle for the invention of the entrepreneurial individual. This is problematic, for this logic ensures the continuing oligarchy that is created and justified by these institutions, and it tends to give all this a moral imperative, since, as we said, this discourse can be read via a logic of justice and equality, masking its other kinds of rationalities. We must be leery of the kinds of things these institutions do, and the ways they rationalize continuing what they do.

Another interesting aspect of the *Grutter* case, and one reflecting neoliberalism’s conflation of social and economic questions, was that the Court made note of the fact that the law school’s policy did not restrict the types of diversity that were eligible for consideration in admissions. The policy was premised on admitting a “critical mass” of students from diverse backgrounds, but it did not define “diversity solely in terms of race and ethnicity,” nor was it “insensitive to the competition among all students for admission to the Law School” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 316). The whole logic of assigning points for particular social categories like race to candidates for admissions in the *Gratz* case, and to focusing so much on the idea of a “critical mass” in *Grutter*, signifies that the quasi-quantitative models of transforming social life into economic logic are in effect here. Moreover, the term “diversity,” a nomenclature that has stood for race and ethnicity, for recalling a particularly horrific past (i.e., legacies of colonialism and slavery), and for suggesting a particular utopian future (in which “people are judged by the content of their character, not...
the color of their skin,” as the Reverend Martin Luther King has said), now becomes akin to having “lived or traveled widely abroad,” to being “fluent in several languages,” to overcoming “personal adversity and family hardship,” to “having exceptional records of extensive community service,” and to having had “successful careers in other fields” (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003, p. 338). In typical neoliberal fashion, race is reduced to yet another quantifiable unit of economic measurement, and this strips it of its ties to the past, as well as to what it suggests for the future. Perhaps moving beyond this is a good thing, but it does not come without consequences for how we might reframe social ties.

Stripping these terms of what they connote of the past and of the future will lead us to beg the questions that have haunted the U.S. for centuries and continue to do so. Indeed, this history can actually be discounted, given a specific unit in time:

It has been 25 years since Justice Powell first approved the use of race to further an interest in student body diversity in the context of public higher education. Since that time, the number of minority applicants with high grades and test scores has indeed increased. We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today. (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003, p. 343)

Race and racism thus simply become other “factors,” quantifiable and measurable (indeed, in the Gratz case it warranted 20 points). The fact that that race and racism can be made simple products of time, as well as simple quantifiable factors among others, suggests that the rationalities that governed our behaviors and directed our desires are undergoing radical change, and our commitments to each other, to our institutions, and to ourselves can also be changed. So the quip we tend to hear in our classes when issues of race are discussed, such as “that was in the past,” and “when are we going to get past this,” make a certain kind of sense, because we can think of racism in simple units of time and quantity, and the moral commitments that we can make to deal with this is also measurable in time and in quantity. This neoliberal rationality for understanding diversity, then, is something to wonder about, for its implications are much greater than whether the University of Michigan can admit more racial and ethnic minorities.

In summary, the University of Michigan did not defend its policies with traditional arguments about past discrimination or social injustice, thus dispensing with the moral questions that characterized liberalism. One should be leery of reading this case as one that can be made thinkable within traditional liberalism. We expose new rationalities of governing when we read this issue via a reading of neoliberalism, which has transformed moral arguments into economic ones. But our point here is not to condemn neoliberalism and exalt traditional liberalism, for the latter’s tensions always kept affirmative action under constant threat. Our critique is intended to show how rationalities for governing work in higher education, even with issues like affirmative action. Now, to the extent neoliberal rationalities can be said to have saved affirmative action, we want to say that this has been an empowering strategy. To the extent that this has re-shaped the kinds of commitments that we can make to each other, we would have us think of this as a very dangerous strategy, a point with which we conclude this paper.

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The Pitfalls of Economism

We would like to stress again here that rather than think of neoliberalism as inherently bad, we should think of it as dangerous. And so it is in this vein that we briefly make our last point. To the extent that scholars and researchers bring in economic concepts like human capital into their analyses, even if intended to further democratic goals, such as supporting affirmative action or other practices for remedying racial inequality, they inadvertently “put us in danger,” if you will. Economic logic is dominated by neoliberalism, which has, paradoxically, denied the idea that there is a difference between economic logic and something else. So economic theories, given how powerful economic discourse is in shaping reality in Western cultures, should not be allowed to become so easily translatable into other fields, for with such translation comes with political effects (see Korvitz & Korvitz, 1999). To the extent that scholars and practitioners in education fail to see these effects in, say, their explicit incorporations of things such as human capital in their analyses (Perna, 2004), or by referencing those who do (Coleman, 1988), they may become complicit in a radical transformation of the rationalities for governing, which may do little to further social equity. For human capital is a technology of neoliberal projects, and while neoliberal projects can further individual mobility, as we saw in the case of affirmative action, they are not directed toward social goals because neoliberalism denies a difference between the individual and the social. All that concerns these projects is the kind of freedom that is thinkable within economic rationality, and such a narrow logic only limits democratic possibilities, not furthers them.

So, as we hoped we illustrated with the case of affirmative action, the easy conversion of moral concepts into economic ones, such as human capital, come with potential consequences. For one, economic discourse reduces everything to quantifiable simplicities (e.g., “race” becomes simply another quantifiable measure of an educational outcome). More important, the theories of human capital promoted by neoliberal projects are more than just theories; they have practical effects in social life, which is now rapidly understanding itself as the actions of rational, economically-minded, self-responsible individuals seeking to maximize their investments. Since individuals will have to care for themselves, their social and political commitments will reflect this need to “invest” in themselves (e.g., they will engage with others different from themselves only if they see those others are furthering their economic interests). This logic thus has serious consequences for social and political life, in which altruism, commitments, relationships—everything—will make no sense outside of an overriding economic rationality. The idea of human capital, then, makes neoclassical economists of all of us, economists who will not be able to understand that there may be social domains which cannot—and should not—be reduced to economic logic. Our definitions of ourselves—of our humanity, itself—is the stake in this discourse of human capital, and so we might want to be leery of bringing it so blindly, so uncritically into the educational realm.

Thus, with regard to higher education, one must ask how ostensibly liberating practices become aligned with neoliberal objectives, and what the consequences of that alignment entail. With regard to the practices associated with diversity, such as affirmative action, we might look into how they become aligned with neoliberal strategies of citizenship (e.g., how do we link diversity to the economy?). For such strategies will direct themselves to the relationships students form with each other, their motivations for attending colleges and universities, as well as their aspirations for their futures.

We believe that neoliberal projects seek to create particularly narrow economic visions of what counts as valuable citizenship, but we also think these practices can be countered, and indeed,
they already are being countered. Students do seek to initiate other ways of governing themselves, and while some of these ways may be problematic to us, leading us to counter them in turn (e.g., such as student movements toward religious fundamentalism), we must see them as ways in which students seek to counter the rationalities being enacted on them from above. Diversity projects also can offer students new ways of thinking about citizenship, or to question existing ones, and to see where the students take that. But, all our practices, even the so-called empowering ones, are also governing ones, and so we share with Nikolas Rose (1999) a “profound unease about the values that pervade our times…and a suspicious attention to the multitude of petty humiliations and degradations carried out in the name of our best interest” (p. 60). So, the point of our critique is not to ask us to put ourselves in the service of those who purport to govern better, but to offer resources to those who have been constituted as subjects of government by others and who are entitled, following Rose, to “contest the practices that govern them in the name of their freedom” (p. 60).

To conclude this polemic, neoliberalism has not proven itself to permit the kind of self-reflection that comes with the intense self-criticism over the tensions that characterize liberalism. Yet, liberalism itself involves arts of governing, which seek to control how individuals conduct their lives and to ensure that there is no self-reflection about that. The difference between liberalism and neoliberalism, however, is that the former’s rationalities were always in conflict. Because of this, there always was a small space for imagining things differently, as Wendy Brown (2015) suggested. Neoliberalism seeks to dispense with all contradictions via an overriding economic rationality. To the extent neoliberalism reconstitutes social life as solely, and entirely economic, we lose our ability to reflect upon ourselves except with such logic—even when we are considering what had appeared to be deeply moral dilemmas, such as affirmative action. Rather than blindly bringing in economic concepts into our work, therefore, and rather than putting forth diversity projects premised on such logic, we must examine the productive functions of knowledge, the ways in which knowledge shapes perceptions of the world and individual subjectivities, as well as the ways that knowledge works to make certain things “thinkable and practicable” (Rose, 1999, p. xiii). We thus end with a call to have us imagine different ways of rationalizing social life, and, to begin, we should refuse the economic rationalizations of education that are so pervasive today, even though the imperatives of late capitalism appear to compel them.

References


Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, 579 U.S. ___ (2016)


The Making of the Indebted Student

Ryan Evely Gildersleeve

Abstract

The goals of this paper are two-fold: 1) map the subjectivation of students as they emerge from the entanglements of higher education policy and research, particularly related to higher education costs, affordability, and value, and 2) cultivate a counter-posture for social justice workers in the academy to work toward assembling. I situate these goals within the contemporary context of neoliberal higher education. I pursue these goals by drawing extensively from philosophers engaging in new materialist (DeLanda, 2006; Barad, 2007) and posthumanist (Braidotti, 2012; Esposito, 2008) thought. I borrow liberally from the work of Maurizio Lazzarato, specifically his books, The Making of the Indebted Man (2012) and Governing by Debt (2015). Effectively, I read Lazzarato’s work into and through the contemporary scholarship on higher education, in order to theorize the genealogy of a new subjectivity emergent from American higher education: the indebted student.

Keywords: debt, college student, immaterial labor

Introduction

The American college student in the twenty-first century is a student of debt. Rather, today’s college student is a debtor. Even further, students in American higher education today are only made known as they are indebted. They exist as the indebted student.

Such dramatic statements might find their basis of truth in the record-levels of student loan debt circulating through the American economy (Gartner & Schiltz, 2005). Or, perhaps, such bold largess could stem from exaggerated interpretations of the credit card industry’s presence on college campuses (Norvilitis & Santa Maria, 2002). Either approach could easily make fodder for a populist op-ed in one of America’s leading magazines or newspapers (see Lambert, 2015). My point in this essay is quite different. I mean to outline how the American college student—as a subjective onto-epistemological possibility (e.g., identity)—should best be understood as “the indebted student” for all intents and purposes pertaining to political, social, and cultural analyses thereof.

Most research in the study of higher education treats students as autonomous agents contending with social pressures and discourses of race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, and educational attainment/achievement, amongst others. Researchers and practitioners alike generally refer to such difference as social identities (Garvey, 2014; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Such a conceptualization of students and identity stems from a decidedly liberal humanist philosophical foundation (Bloom, 1998; Lather, 1995) in which an autonomous, stable, and cohesive identity (or self) can be made knowable. Such a foundation expects the ontological expression of the human to be centered as the sole proprietor of agency and the epistemological expression of the self to be
grounded in discursive productions of a verifiable and reliable truth, albeit perhaps partial or incomplete in some critical paradigms. Further, the human-centered, truth-knowing subject (e.g., a first-generation college student), might encounter intersecting differences from a centered norm (Abes, et al, 2007). For example, the first-generation college student might also be of mixed ethnic/racial heritage and lesbian. The layering of these experiences constructs somewhat discrete, yet overlapping social identities.

I depart from this tradition in two significant ways. First, I examine students from a flattened, object-oriented ontology (Connolly, 2013; Lewis, 1995), wherein notions of agency are not exclusively found within the human species, but rather a more environmental co-constitution of any given object (including humankind and other things) is assumed. Second, I excavate student subjectivity as unstable and dynamic epistemological expressions (i.e., poststructural)—rather than fixed or developing identities. That is to say that students are in a constant state of becoming and are never finished, complete, or true/real in the (post)positivist sense of the terms. There is no essence of experience reified as identity. Rather, students in American higher education today are entangled as assemblages of socio-political and economic conditions (discursive and material) that produce a subjective positioning, as an object, in relation to other objects. The subject-object dichotomy disintegrates. Further, I aim to explain how these assemblages might best become recognizable positionings through the creditor-debtor relationship of late capitalism and the global economy.

To be clear, I contend the subjectivation of students is made possible only via the debt economy, as the radically neoliberal version of late capitalism has become the ubiquitous epistemic technology of contemporary academe. That is to say, one cannot be “known” outside of neoliberal ideology in contemporary American higher education. Such a socio-political-economic regime has overtaken the epistemic possibility for crafting and producing selves as subjects and subjects as selves. This unwavering (even if unwanted) commitment to the neoliberal regime produces the indebted student.

Debt, in this regard, includes but also expands beyond the common association with money. Debt, as I will discuss further, works as a governmentality that produces subjectivities at the level of the population. Debt is the relationship through which bodies become known and recognizable. Debt is the power relation that produces people, especially students.

The goals of this project are two-fold: 1) map the subjectivation of students as they emerge from the entanglements of higher education practice, policy, and research, particularly related to neoliberal higher education, and 2) outline potential consequences and ramifications for such a subjective positioning. I situate these goals within the contemporary context of neoliberal higher education (see Canella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). I pursue these goals by drawing from philosophers engaging in the object-oriented ontologies of new materialism (Barad, 2007; Connolly, 2013; DeLanda, 2006). My primary mode of inquiry is that of post-qualitative critique (Lather & St. Pierre, 2015; St. Pierre, 2016; Ulmer, 2015). I borrow liberally from the work of Maurizio Lazzarato, specifically his books, The Making of the Indebted Man (2012) and Governing by Debt (2015). Effectively, I read Lazzarato’s work into and through the contemporary scholarship on neoliberal higher education, in order to theorize an emergent subjectivity: the indebted student.
Neoliberal Higher Education, Forms of Life, and the American College Student

The contemporary condition of US higher education cannot be understood divorced from the neoliberal condition of late capitalist globalization. Neoliberalism, in brief, can be understood as a particularized governmentality of things focused on rendering reality using technologies of hyper-surveillance, hyper-individualism, economic determinations of productivity, and competitive entrepreneurialism (Foucault, 2008). Put more simply, neoliberalism is the application of market-based economics to the broader social realm, including social institutions like colleges and universities. The technologies of neoliberalism work collectively to sustain the prominence of the market as the regulative principle of society. The gross affective consequence of neoliberalism on higher education is the subordination of higher education to the market – and more specifically, to capital.

Numerous researchers have demonstrated the neoliberal regime’s stranglehold on higher education (Koro-Ljungberg & Loytonen, 2016; Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2016; Bunds & Giardina, 2017; Gildersleeve, 2016). Their critiques range from the ways it has changed the organization of faculty work, to the weakening of academic freedom, to the commodification of knowledge, each of which contribute to the dehumanization of the faculty and students by reducing these roles to economic subjectivation. That is, faculty and students can only be known as subjects in economic terms, largely based on their value in capitalist enterprise, but also based on their personal engagement with enterprise-as-subjects. In Foucauldian (2008) terms we would call this subjectivation, *homo economicus*—the self-enterprising individual.

In new materialist terms, faculty and students are produced as economic-becomings and/or becoming-economies (Gildersleeve, forthcoming; Gildersleeve & Sifuentez, forthcoming). The faculty and the student body become mutable via the technologies of neoliberalism to serve the interests of the neoliberal academy, rather than to express the freedom of the knowledge imperative of higher education (Gildersleeve, 2016). Such becomings can take form and shape along various contours of economic activity, each assembling along different lines of flight, many of which might never actually materialize into recognizable practices. For example, a faculty member might work diligently toward technology transfer initiatives, and a student might make a donation to the student philanthropy fund. These are two obvious examples of capitalist practice in academia. The student, in donating to her university philanthropy fund expresses herself as an economic-becoming—an object of the economy. She makes a monetary donation in exchange for the experience of her education. Her donation marks her economic vitality as a member of the consumer class—those who purchase and pay for their experiences. In that same action, the student expresses herself as a becoming-economy—an object for the economy. Her donation positions her as a valued alumnus, one who begets certain privileges and opportunities. She herself becomes an economic unit for the university to count, build interest from, and beget more capital.

But the point of this essay is to elucidate how neoliberal capitalist practice emplaces the student as a becoming-economy and an economic-becoming in a debtor relationship to the institution, indeed to recognition in the broader environment. In order to make sense of this shift from *homo economicus* to the economic-becoming and becoming-economy, particularly along the lines of flight that lead to the materialization of the indebted student, I briefly discuss how new materialist and posthuman philosophy helps configure robust notions of life—forms of life, to be exact—and how these forms of life make the indebted student possible.
In the mainstream higher education literature, scholars fixate on social identities that ontologically assume a liberal human subject—an authoritative, autonomous, knowable being that exerts influence over while also being influenced by its environment. Such a subject is a human-centered ontology that separates the human out from the environment and reifies dichotomies of subject/object, self/other, human/nature, human/machine, etc. New materialist and posthumanist philosophies adopt a non-anthropocentric ontology, wherein the human subject becomes known symbolically, materially, discursively, through the entanglement of the body as being of its environment, rather than merely part of the environmental context. Human beings might be conceived as less-autonomous, less-authoritative over a “self” and “other.” Rather, the human emerges as an entangled becoming (or being), in assemblage with myriad other potentialities. This notion of the assemblage will be discussed at greater length later in the essay.

In relation to my current interest, the non-anthropocentric ontologies of new materialism and posthumanism afford the conceptualization of differential forms of life, forms of existence, outside of the monolithic liberal human subject. Roberto Esposito (2008) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) provide a useful heuristic breakdown of the forms of life that materialize in such an object-oriented ontology. They outline life across three planes of existence:

1. Zoe, which is life itself—the forces we identify as the living acting forces of any given life form.
2. Bios, which is the biologized type of life (e.g., homo sapien).
3. Anthropos, which is the social concept that operationalized the homo sapien into “the human.”

At stake in thinking the American college student differently, perhaps as the indebted student, is the third plane of existence. In new materialism and posthumanism, Anthropos, is an ontological impossibility, because it requires the autonomy and subject-object dichotomy that simply does not empirically exist. The humankind cannot valorize itself apart from the environment. Yet, innumerable other forms of life might become from the homo sapien bios. Each entangled and emergent of their environment. These are processes of subjectivation that lead to the becoming-economies and economic-becomings referenced earlier.

Such subjectivation is what Lazzarato (2012) claims the economy, under neoliberal capitalism, has subsumed. In fact, in his analysis, the two are inextricably linked: “what one defines as ‘economy’ would be quite simply impossible without the production and control of subjectivity and its forms of life” (p. 33). We cannot have neoliberal capitalism, the ubiquitous modus operandus of American higher education in the twenty-first century, without its power to subject the human into the economic-becoming and becoming-economy. As Lazzarato shared, “The production of subjectivity, of forms of life, of forms of existence, is not part of a superstructure, but rather of an ‘economic’ infrastructure” (p. 34). The homo sapien bios emerges as an economic-becoming when the debt economy of neoliberalism is valorized into the social relationship generated by debt; in which case, the human is made real and plausible insomuch as it contributes to the economy via production/consumption. Simultaneously, the homo sapien bios emerges as a becoming-economy, made real and plausible insomuch as it can be the site of economic activity itself—an enterprising, competitive economy of the self—emergent from the entanglements of the debtor-creditor relationship. “Moreover, in the current economy, the production of subjectivity reveals itself to be the
primary and most important form of production, the ‘commodity’ that goes into the production of all other commodities” (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 34).

**Debt (and how to understand it)**

In a most basic understanding, debt is a relationship. Someone takes thing A, something they need but do not yet have, in order to get thing B, something else they need but cannot have without first securing thing A. Most commonly today, we associate this relationship with money, banks, and individuals—loans. Home loans, car loans, payday advance loans, and of course, student loans, are all examples of instruments that operationalize the debt relationship. A kindergarten teacher wants a newly constructed house (thing A) but does not have the skills, tools, and equipment to build it himself nor the capital to buy it outright (thing B); he can take out a mortgage from his credit union. A landscaper wants a truck of her own to haul equipment from job site to job site (thing A), but does not have the liquid cash (thing B) on hand to purchase one on her own; she can take on an auto loan from her local bank. A teenage daughter wants to go to college (thing A), but her family cannot afford tuition (thing B); she can take out a student loan from the federal government. Loans such as these are typical examples of how debt relationships are reified today. The loan is the artifact that brings the debt and the debt relationship into existence.

However, **debt**, is more than just an agreement between the credit union and the kindergarten teacher, the bank and the landscaper, or the federal government and the student. Debt is more than just a relationship between a creditor and a debtor. Debt is how we control ourselves, and others. Debt is how we know ourselves, and others. Debt is how we become someone, or someone else. Debt is everywhere. Debt is power. In less abstract terms, debt is the basis for the forms of life we know as human subjects—in college, we call some of these people, “students.”

Maurizio Lazzarato is an Italian philosopher and sociologist working in Paris who studies labor and post-socialist movements. Among other achievements, Lazzarato coined the term **immaterial labor** (1997), understood broadly as affective and cognitive commodities—labor outside the traditional understanding of commodity-producing activity (e.g., manufacturing). Examples of immaterial labor might include crowdsourcing, the production of online avatars, or completing electronic surveys.

Students everyday practices might fit nicely into a category of immaterial labor. Students, particularly at U.S. universities, perform immaterial labor on a daily basis; labor that gets commodified by the institution in ways that set-up a debt exchange between the student and the university. For example, students regularly complete satisfaction, climate, and program assessment surveys generated by administrators at colleges and universities. Filling out surveys produces data that might later be used by the institution for a host of purposes, means, and outcomes. Without these data, programs can be threatened and services might be cut. Or, changes might never be made (e.g., changes to make the campus more inclusive). If students want to have a say in constructing the college or university in ways that meets their needs, they **must** perform such labor. They are indebted to the institution to complete these surveys.

In the following sections, I situate debt and immaterial labor into new materialist and post-qualitative frameworks. Afterward, I offer a new materialist and post-qualitative discussion (i.e., critique) in which I read Lazzarato’s work on debt into the generalized knowledge about students in US higher education.
Debt and New Materialism

A growing number of scholars have eschewed the traditional (post)positivist stance of educational research and begun to engage in what has broadly been termed new materialist philosophy (see for example, Kuntz, 2015; Gildersleeve, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Ulmer, 2015; Eaton, 2017). New materialism is an object-oriented philosophy that recognizes humans as but one force of influence in the making of the world, but one that is inter- and intra-connected to broader environmental objects or things (Connolly, 2013). The new materialism takes matter seriously, rather than treating material reality (things and such) as inert and less-than-humans. As an object-oriented ontology, it is decidedly non-anthropocentric. Rather, the human subject emerges as an assemblage of/from/within an environment. Lazzarato’s notions of debt operate within and without these circles. The notion of assemblage is explored more below.

Assemblage Theory

Assemblage theory operates from a monist ontology that transcends the classic dualisms of structure/agency, human/non-human, subject/object. DeLanda, (2006) outlines three relational features of the assemblage. The first signifies a system and the ways that elements function as both content and forms of expression. For instance, communication is not just an expression but also constitutes quasi realities (Fox & Alldred, 2015). The second feature acknowledges the forces of deterritorialization/reterritorialization; any situation is never static and always draws towards something else as its components merge into new becomings (Beighton, 2013). The territories of dominant discourse are therefore moveable, malleable, changeable, yet remain knowable in stabilizing ways, even as new assemblages de-stabilize their power to protect the population of the given territory. Here, territory is not necessarily physical, but rather ephemeral, social, discursive, and material.

The third feature is the assemblage of materiality: insights and impressions are material components that should be understood as significant parts. Bodies are no longer seen as occupying demarcated spaces, but rather all bodies and other materials are relational. Bodies have ontological status, and they are produced though their relationships with other bodies, things, and ideas (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Assemblages occur around different action and events that are often chaotic networks of connections always in flux. They constantly re-assemble in different ways (Potts, 2004). Such assemblages occur on a variety of different and differential social levels.

In assemblage theory, a “subject” does not exist, but rather it is an affect of becoming, which expresses the changes and capacities of an entity. The change can be physical, psychosocial, emotional, or social (Fox & Alldred, 2015). A becoming can alter more than one capacity, representing a social production that is non-linear, but rather a production of multiplicities (e.g., social, material, emotional). Additionally, assemblages function as territories that have been produced by the affects between relations (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Assemblage theory challenges binaries by explicitly stating that results can have parallel outcomes making contradictory events equally possible. For example, the social institution of higher education can serve to mitigate social inequality while also serving to exacerbate it. Rather than having to ‘choose’ to support or resist, assemblage theory problematizes such a choice by acknowledging the tensions and the multiple dimensions of any produced situation—of any becoming entity or process. Since assemblages constantly change.
and reconfigure, the use of territories can be a representation of how lives, societies, and history continue along processes of becoming.

**Immaterial Labor**

In the neoliberal condition, wherein the economy expands ever further into the commodification of things, thoughts, and ideas, work/labor become reconstituted. Whereas labor was once dominated by the production of goods and services (e.g., manufacturing or waiting tables), in the neoliberal condition, anything and everything is up for commodification. Indeed, it becomes the goal and responsibility of the state and state actors (e.g., higher education), not simply to deregulate markets, but to create and generate markets. In contemporary globalization, these new markets are often called the “knowledge economy” or the “economy of ideas.” Immaterial labor, in a basic understanding, produces the informational and cultural context of the commodity. These contexts include the cybernetics and computer control of production (i.e., informational), and the activities that define and fix standards, fashions, norms, and opinion (i.e., cultural).

Classic examples of immaterial labor include any and all service-economy performances, such as the front desk worker at a hotel or the receptionist at a company. However, these examples still rely on a wage-system of work/labor subjectivation. Lazzarato contends that immaterial labor in the neoliberal condition goes beyond the mind/body dichotomous definition of labor. Rather, immaterial labor is any activity that produces informative and/or cultural contexts of the commodified environment (Lazzarato, n.d.). Examples of Lazzarato’s more expansive notion of immaterial labor might include providing recommendations for a new restaurant, completing a satisfaction survey after ending a service-call with a company, or hitting the “like” button on a social media post. These activities produce new information and help establish the cultural significance of material and non-material commodities, such as restaurants, customer service, and trending fads or fashions that might become new commodities like a binge-worthy streaming television show.

Consequently, Lazzarato (n.d.) has theorized the shift in labor as a new “mass intellectual-ity” (p. 2) generated from the capitalist production of the knowledge economy and the self-valorization of immaterial labor. Mass intellectuality dissolves the binaries between muscle/mind labor activities. Rather, the participation in immaterial labor, en masse, in society, reshapes all persons into potential sources of information and culture for the becoming-commodity. This reorganizes the relationships between the capitalist (i.e., the boss), the worker (i.e., the employee), and the consumer (i.e., everyday people buying things), wherein the activities that once defined the worker vs the consumer become entangled and indecipherable from one another. Immaterial labor produces a social relationship between the capitalist (i.e. elites/ruling classes/government/social institutions) and the worker/consumer such that only if the worker/consumer’s activities transform them into these new economic-subjects does the labor have value. This departs radically from the former model of work/labor wherein the capitalist gave direct orders and the worker followed them. The capitalist must now “find an unmediated way of establishing command over subjectivity itself; the prescription and definition of tasks transforms into a prescription of subjectivities” (Lazzarato, n.d., p. 7). Yet, the command over subjectivity itself must remain somewhat veiled, so as not to supplant the notions of freedom promised by neoliberal capitalism in democracy. Such veils often come in the forms of expression that reify consumer choices with freedom and individual rights to expression as freedoms secured by the neoliberal economic-political organization.

Immaterial labor’s relationship to the debt economy takes shape as one of the myriad technologies for reifying the debt owed to institutions for the sake of subjectivation. As I hope to
illustrate, students engage in immaterial labor as part of their daily practice that makes them students in American higher education. Their immaterial labor is in part, an expression of the creditor-debtor relationship between them and the institution of higher education.

**Debt and Post-qualitative Research in the Study of US Higher Education**

The new materialisms, and its attendant concepts such as assemblage, becoming, immaterial labor, and debt, pose multiple challenges to the traditional modes of inquiry in higher education. Typically, studies of US higher education are comprised of more technical and administrative content, drawing on post-positivist methodologies and rarely employ a philosophical framing nor often framed in social theory (Pasque, Carducci, Gildersleeve, & Kuntz 2011; Petrovic, 2017). In order to take assemblage, immaterial labor, and debt seriously, the traditional tools of inquiry must be reconsidered. A growing number of methodologists have begun to engage in such work and continue to generate new conceptualizations of the tools of inquiry. Broadly, this work falls within a movement recognized as “post-qualitative inquiry” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). The post-qualitative movement disrupts the interpretive paradigm and argues for a newly empirical analysis that recognizes the influence of the material in its confluence and collaboration with the discursive.

Lisa Mazzei (2013) has reconfigured the qualitative interview into an interview without organs, wherein the narrative exchange becomes the unit of analysis rather than any reliable or verifiable conveyance of facts or information. Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2013) has theorized a mangled form of data analysis, wherein the material-discursive relations of spatial influences matter as much as what might actually be said or noted in a transcript or fieldnote. Jasmine Ulmer (2015) suggests that plastic can help analyze and explain how educational policy materializes, particularly in recognition of plastic’s malleable yet sturdy forms. Maggie MacLure (2013) seeks to elevate the status of sense-making rather than meaning-making in social science, in recognition of the affective dimensions to social reality. Aaron Kuntz (2015) argues for an ethic of inquiry in which researchers must take more risks in their practices and processes in order to speak truthfully and engage publicly and pedagogically in truth-telling.

Meanwhile, a few researchers focused on higher education have sought to apply post-qualitative commitments to thinking anew canonical concepts in the study of higher education. I, along with colleague Brenda Sifuentes, have theorized a becoming-organization based on theories of assemblage (2016), wherein colleges and universities can be productively understood through the discursive contestation and material struggles their campuses produce. Paul Eaton (2017) is re-working how differences within and across the student body are recognized and produced. Gerardo Blanco-Ramirez (2014; 2015) argued for a synthetic understanding of how institutional identity materializes across international borders and global information flows.

In order to analyze the subjectivation of the student, via debt, I draw from these post-qualitative insights. Rather than seek to employ specific tools developed by the post-qualitative movement thus far, I fall back on St. Pierre’s (2016) assertion that researchers should not rush to practice in the post-qualitative inquiry. That is, researchers need not find practical application of the post-qualitative commitments as of yet, for post-qualitative researches might very well benefit from and need to take form as philosophy prior to becoming (social) science.
The Making of the Indebted Student

Debt as the Basis of Social Life

Exchange capitalism is lauded by its supporters as an inherently equalizing economic model, one in which each individual has an equal opportunity to enter into a relationship that each member of the exchange finds suitable. Yet, histories of exchange capitalism reveal that such a relationship has never been equal (Obstfeld, Shambaugh, Taylor, 2006). As exchange capitalism, rooted in the production of goods and services (read: Marx’s (1986) analysis in Capital) has given way to inventions such as financial securitization, the classic notion of capitalism must now be specified as finance capitalism. Finance is now recognized as a field in which economists have belabored analyses of internal instruments (e.g., securities), the logics of traders (i.e., speculation), and the relationship between finance and human nature (e.g., policy regulations and the mastery of greed). However, as Lazzarato (2012) points out, finance is a power relation, and “debt is finance from the point of view of the debtors who have to repay it” (p. 24). Our entire field of social relations—economically organized—is based upon agreements and instruments to take on debt in order to live. As alluded above, we must be debtors to be humans.

Lazzarato (2012) concludes that one significant consequence of relying on debt as the basis for social relations is, “it means conceiving economy and society on the basis of an asymmetry of power and not on that of a commercial exchange that implies and presupposes equality” (p. 33). Applied to students and colleges/universities, this means that even as students become situated as consumers and increasingly express consumerist attitudes toward higher education (see Saunders, 2010), the student is never actually on equal footing with the institution of higher education writ large (i.e., the social institution of higher education), and most likely not even with individual colleges/universities. Rather, the institution takes on the role of the capitalist, and the student as worker. This worker subject position is exemplified by the producer/consumer activities that students engage as part of their education. Previous analyses of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoads, 2004) and the corporatization of the university (Giroux, 2002) can easily support positioning the institution of higher education into the capitalist posture. But little research has sought to push further against finance capitalism’s (i.e., the debt economy) production of the student as anything beyond consumer.

Yet, higher education is not free. And rarely can students purchase their education outright. And even when such opportunity presents itself, that purchasing power only extends into the ability to pay tuition, whereas colleges and universities in the US context expect far more than tuition payments in exchange for the educational environment and experience they promise their students. American higher education expects participation in the life of the campus, whether physical (e.g., the traditional public research universities and/or small private liberal arts colleges) or virtual (e.g., University of Phoenix). The life—the zoe and bios—of any given campus includes participation in orientation, classroom discussions, alumni networking, and carrying on the banner of your education into your employment. Thus, college and universities extend the opportunity for an education from their institutions on credit—as a debt—expressed through the enrollment deposit, tuition payment, registration forms completed by students. In exchange for the higher education provided by colleges and universities, students then are expected to make regular payments in multiple forms of labor to their creditor—their expected future alma mater. The basis of social life on college campuses is the creditor-debtor relation between the institution and students.
Debt and Subjectivity

Another significant consequence of the debt society, according to Lazzarato (2012), is that, “...debt means immediately making the economy subjective, since debt is an economic relation which, in order to exist, implies the molding and control of subjectivity such that ‘labor’ becomes indistinguishable from ‘work on the self’” (p. 33). Here, Lazzarato writes in reference to Foucault’s (2008) notions of *homo economicus*, a form of life that is simultaneously borne of the economy and birthing the economy. Work on the self is the seemingly inherent task of making oneself viable to the economy (Becker, Ewald, & Harcourt, 2012): bettering oneself through education or training (e.g., earning a college degree), learning the social mores to get along and get ahead at work (e.g., working through lunch or buying drinks at happy hour), dressing the right way for the professional field one enters (e.g., wearing a hoodie in Silicon Valley or a dark suit in Washington, D.C.). Doing a good job at work and doing a good job at working on oneself become one in the same.

Applied to students, consider the situation of the university website. Campus websites are generally filled with photographs of undergraduate life on campus: studying in the library, walking across the quad, exercising in the fitness center, listening intently in a classroom, or engaged in a laboratory experiment. Each of these actions could conceivably fit in either category: work on the self or labor. Each action supports the effort of the individual to improve her or his body for the economy (learning, being physically fit, appearing attractive in public). Yet, each action also serves as immaterial labor. The student needs to be seen studying, exercising, listening, and experimenting in order for the institution to generate web traffic that can later yield more students, more philanthropic donations, more public support for the university. It has become a common practice of colleges and universities in the US to include a general consent form for the use of one’s image in the student handbook. Students generally must opt-out rather than opt-in to allowing the use of their image—the image of their performance of the immaterial labor of being a student—in the commercialization and marketing of the institution. Students, by virtue of the subjectivity, become indebted to the institution for such immaterial labor—labor indistinguishable from daily life.

Pervasive Debt

Lazzarato (2012) points out that “neoliberalism has pushed for the integration of monetary, banking, and financial systems by using techniques revelatory of its aim of making the creditor-debtor relationship a centerpiece of politics” (p. 23). Debt, rather than finance, rules the late capitalist global economy. According to Lazzarato (2012):

The debtor is “free,” but his actions, his behavior, are confined to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into. The same is true as much for the individual as for a population or social group. You are free insofar as you assume the way of life (consumption, work, public spending, taxes, etc.) compatible with reimbursement. (p. 31)

Debt, is most often expressed as the freedom to consume based on credit, but credit is simply the way that neoliberalism ensnares the individual into a debtor-creditor relationship. These are subjective consequences in that the only way to be in neoliberal institutions is to be in exchange of debt/credit.
Students take on debt in order to pursue higher education. Some take it on in more straightforward forms, such as student loans. Beyond the strictly monetary notions of debt as expressed through the student loan industry, all students become indebted to their institution. Students’ education operates as a line of credit. Credit that can be used to access the goods and services of the institution (e.g., classes, professors, colloquia, libraries, technology, laboratories, symposia, curricula, etc.). Yet, credit that must be reimbursed, with ever expanding interest. Students’ labor before, during, and after collegiate activities is expected of them, as the institution relies upon it in exchange for the line of credit that gets expressed through enrollment, campus activities, the life of the institution, and the value of the degree bestowed upon the student.

Indeed, the indebted student endures beyond graduation day and begins prior to admissions. Consider the economic practices of admission officers. Recruiters must be able to count the bodies (i.e., prospective students) and the touchpoints they produce with those bodies. Every college fair, postcard, instant messaging session, phone call, and campus visit produces a new economic unit for the measurement of the institution’s success. Participating in these activities is incumbent upon prospective students; these activities are in some ways part of the application for the line of credit that is the educational experience of college.

Debt as Governmentality

According to Lazzarato (2015), this debtor-creditor relationship becomes the foundation of all subjectivity in neoliberal conditions. Debt becomes responsible for the apparatus of measurement and evaluation that express the neoliberal technics of surveillance and individualism, but debt goes further and becomes responsible for the capture of all social activity. These operations are made plausible via the machines (or assemblages) that beget production in finance capitalism.

As a governmentality, debt then regulates the subjective relationship of students in the environment—of students in the material-discursive nature/culture-society—in and out of higher education. Post-college, students continue to perform immaterial labor for the institution. Listing the name of the college on a resume, attending alumni events, maintaining social media platforms that signify the alma mater, each of these activities tacitly generates economic units for the institution to count, be counted by, and count on the debt owed to it by the student. There also are more direct ways that students continue to pay on the debt of their educations, such as student loan payments and charitable gifts to the alumni annual fund. These monetary payments might not even go directly to the creditor (the university), but rather to the broader material and discursive assemblage of the social institution of higher education. They are payments for the line of credit that the education purchased by the student encumbered. Treating the education (i.e., the degree) as a line of credit keeps the student indebted to higher education in perpetuity, thus, subjectivation becomes the omni-present becoming. It remains a constant in the assemblages generated by the college educated classes of U.S. society, forever linking them to the debt economy of the neoliberal governmentality.

Methodological Significance

Recognizing these contours of the indebted student as a fundamental condition of neoliberal higher education provides new methodological opportunities for studying college students and the broader institution of higher education. In particular, the use of immaterial labor as a concept for explaining how students’ daily lives contribute to the broader economy of higher education
and simultaneously transform them into actual economies themselves opens a new line of inquiry in the study of higher education. The post-qualitative turn in social inquiry provides new opportunities for thinking “the student” differently, and possibly opening up new ways to consider equity, diversity, and social justice— as well as the effects of postsecondary education on student bodies. The indebted student is a subjectivity tied to neoliberal higher education and far from the autonomous authoritative subject that most higher education research assumes walks the paths of US colleges and universities. Methodologically, it offers an ontologically open opportunity for examining the role of tertiary education in US democracy.

Educational Significance

The indebted student is a student of neoliberal higher education, and therefore researchers must interrogate the effects of such a subjectivity. How does the creditor-debtor relationship shape learning? How does the indebted student further enhance the neoliberal institution’s interest? How might the production of the indebted student reconfigure democratic goals of higher education? Social justice in and through higher education might need to be reconfigured as well, recognizing that the immaterial labor performed by students across differences (e.g., race, class, gender) might look different and have different materializations as well as material consequences. The materialization of race, class, and gender through the subjectivation of the indebted student certainly deserves attention as scholars, administrators, and support staff wrestle with the relationship engendered between the student and the institution. Future research and practical reflection should engage with this creditor-debtor relationship and examine how the subjects produced through it (i.e., the indebted student) might be disguised or disguising unintended consequences that might very well be constitutive of the line of credit (i.e., the educational environment) that colleges and universities provide.

References


Nomadic Subjectivity: Movement in Contemporary Student Development Theory

Laura Elizabeth Smithers & Paul William Eaton

Abstract

This essay opens space for movement in higher education–student affairs by using post-structural philosophy as a counterweight to balance the corpus of student development theories that create and inscribe in/dividualized subjectivity onto students. Taking up Jones and Stewart’s (2016) structuring of waves in student development theorizing, we unpack régimes of truth that undergird the profession of college student educators: discipline/control (a doubled biopower that centers the whole student), and dividuation (a fracturing of the whole student into component parts). We extend dividuation to include an adherence to representationalism through method in perpetuating and inscribing the student as in/dividual (neoliberal subjectivity). We take up Rosi Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity—a relational subjectivity—as a counterbalance to the in/dividualizing subjectivities of current student development theorizing. In doing so, we advance queered third wave theorizing, provoking movement and necessary ethical questions for college student educators: what does it mean to give up commonplace notions such as student, development, identity, and method? What possibilities for practice(s) and futurities in higher education–student affairs open by embracing movement?

Keywords: Student development, identity, neoliberalism, dividual, nomadism

We are intermezzo—in the middle. The provocations of this paper have been germinating for us over several years now. We read~think~live with Deleuze. Ahmed. Guattari. Weheliye. Bergson. Grosz. Braidotti Braidotti Braidotti in our becoming: “repetition as the eternal return of difference, not of sameness...a qualitative leap of perspective” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 225). Rosi Braidotti (2011b) suggests one might irrupt notions of beginning by recognizing collective historical moment(s) and geographic location(s). We do not write or think linearly; we locate this paper through various régimes of truth in student development theory. Ideas for challenging the normative conceptualizations of identity and development in the student affairs literature have been germinating for some time—we are not the first. Are we in 2017? Are we on the page, in the text, in France, the United States, or where we met, in Chicago at the 2015 American Educational Research Association meeting? Our entanglement here opened a line of flight that moved us to our present space-time.

Our goal here is to present the possibilities of theoretical~philosophical exploration as an opening up of indeterminate spaces for students and for movement in the field of higher education–student affairs. We understand philosophy to be, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari

1. The use of ~ instead of - as a connecting punctuation denotes fluidity, and is increasingly used by post-qualitative scholars (e.g. Sellers, 2013).
(1991/1994), the creation of concepts, an action which “in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist” (p. 108). If theories explain the present, philosophy creates the future. We are committed to both. This commitment structures this work; we begin with a re-theorizing of the present of student development theory, and introduce the concept of the in/dividual student. From this foundation, we follow the work of Clark/Keefe (2014) in bringing the concept of nomadic subjectivity to the field.

The alternative(s) we offer through philosophical thinking does not replace traditional student development theorizing, but challenges stasis and the concomitant issues that arise from a method-driven, Fordist and commodity-oriented set of theories and models. In creating movement through philosophical thinking, we disrupt that which has become commonplace in our discourse and practice: identity, development, theory, and method. We do so, again, not to discredit the importance of such concepts, but to think through how sedimenting student development theorizing invented the in/dividualized student, and how such an unbalanced reliance on *dividuation* serves advanced neoliberal capitalist states at the start of the twenty-first century.

We explore issues in higher education through philosophy as a means to think outside of what quantitative and traditional humanistic qualitative social science methods, dominant in the field, might prescribe (St. Pierre, 2011; Wells, Kolek, Williams, & Saunders, 2015). Our current piece intervenes in student development theory, a corner of the field which, despite its emphasis on theorizing, still finds itself enmeshed in method (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Student development theory arrived at through methodological controls has greatly contributed to our understanding and structuring of the college student experience. However, method has also perpetuated false notions of control, (over)determination, stasis, and a hierarchizing of knowledge production we see as increasingly difficult to maintain in the twenty-first century. Thus, while methodologically informed student development theorizing has and will continue to hold importance for college student educators, we seek to rebalance the field’s efforts towards potentiality, the indeterminate, movement, and acknowledgment of other ways of knowing~being~becoming emblematic of un-rootedness. Philosophical thinking, and the indeterminancy that it represents, opens up possibilities for our work as college student educators to exceed the world as currently or ever wholly representable.

As we finalize(d) drafting, editing, and re-organizing this article, the world grapples with the tension between the determinate and indeterminate. This is the generative space of the possibility of different futures, both positive and negative. Nationalist movements in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Philippines, and elsewhere, premised on determinate identities, harken back to centuries which, according to chronological logic, we left behind. In our nation-state of the (dis)United States, the “election” of Donald Trump to the Presidency has fanned the flames of this particularly anxiety-ridden tension. Do we, individually and collectively, embrace the determining force that is identity and its concomitant inclusions and exclusions? Or do we shift our ways of thinking~being~knowing to include differently constructed concerns cutting and folding among social identifiers? Moreover, as our social world changes—through demography, the opening of social acceptance to those outside cisgender heterosexuality, the election of the first Black United States president, the Whitelash from that election (Jones, 2016), the queering of rigid social identifiers, new waves of global migration, and shifting climates—what new possibilities exist for reimagining the subject? In this moment, we find ourselves confronting the limitations of theorizations in college student development theory that, alone, are incapable of coping with the complexities of our time.

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The above mapping of our present offers a provocation for those working with college students, including student affairs practitioners, college student educators, faculty, and researchers. We engage with possibilities for new ways of theorizing—philosophizing the role of college environments in dialogues and assemblages of identity and subjectivity. What possibilities emerge when we mark the frame of identity as incomplete, as well as the mark of a society of control when it is our governing focus? Put differently, in what ways is contemporary student development theory a function of a society of control? Our project here extends the thinking of scholars such as Abes and Kasch (2007) and Jones and Stewart (2016), who have wrestled with similar questions about student development as a mechanism of control. We use the concept of nomadic subjectivity to create new movement(s) in the practice and thinking of college environments as space(s) of potentiality and becoming.

We come to this space with experience as practitioners in the field, as scholars engaging in philosophically informed research, as researchers engaging questions about impacts of institutional structures and technologies on college student experiences. We write as people who hold both majoritized and minoritized identities, and as embodied, (dis)assembling (non)human becomings ourselves, living through the tumultuous start of the twenty-first century, which we would categorize as the chaotic and radical unfolding of the world that has always existed. In this moment, we write indeterminacy, or nomadic subjectivity, into the student development literature as a means to create the conditions of possibility of a different student affairs, undergraduate education, and world beyond “development,” a world that embraces movement, potentiality, and becoming through nomadism.

**Subjectivity in Student Development Theory**

To shift our perception of changes, movements, and engagements with college students in the assemblage we call postsecondary–higher education from student development, including identity development, toward becomings is to defamiliarize, or deterritorialize, oneself from a vision of the subject rooted in identity (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 88-89; Jones & Stewart, 2016). We undertake this defamiliarization through our writing–reading–thinking–conversing, blurring any boundary between theory and practice, “writing as if [identity is] already gone, or thinking beyond the bounded self, [as] the ultimate gesture of defamiliarization” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 137). The determined, or bounded, theorizations we aim to think beyond are those that are student-centered and identity-centered. Together, these concepts mark assemblages of power–knowledge in place since the beginning of the student personnel movement. Extending Jones and Stewart’s (2016) useful articulation of the waves of student development theorizing, we explicitly demarcate these waves by their different régimes of truth: what assemblage of power–knowledge structures what is understood as true within each wave?

Régimes of truth are grids of intelligibility that both structure our social worlds and our existence as subjects within them into what becomes common sense (Foucault, 2000). Our current régime of truth, hinted at earlier, is one that maintains enormous social, environmental, political, and economic inequities. It also gives a language of identity that can be of great use to minoritized subjects. How might we resolve this tension? To take the work of sociologists, as well as post-structural, indigenous, queer, and feminist materialist theorists (Ahmed, 2006; Braidotti, 2013; Barad, 2007; Deleuze, 1969/1994; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Foucault, 1978/1990; 2. We consider the terms biopolitics (Foucault, 1978/1990), neoliberalism (Foucault, 1978/2010), and societies of control (Deleuze, 1992) as analogous (cf. Nail, 2016).
Weheliye, 2014) seriously is to recognize that there is no outside of these régimes and their concomitant subjections. More accurately, to be outside of a régime of truth is to either be inside another such system of subjection or to be outside of sense-making altogether. We do not propose the making of another régime of truth, or system of subjection; we propose a continued queering of the boundaries (Clark/Keefe, 2014; Kasch, Jones, & Abes, 2013) of our current régime as a means by which we may hold sense-making radically open, and in doing so, hold the potentials of students, staff, and systems open as well. Our hope is that this centering of nomadism, or the indeterminate, or movement, helps students, practitioners, theorists, and researchers create the conditions of possibility for new systems we cannot yet imagine, but which must come for our collective survival. We map the territories of régimes of truth in the span of student development theory below as a means to frame an alternative(s) for student development theory, one that places individual and *dividual* subjects as steps along the path in creating *what might be*.

**First Wave Theories: Student-Centered Subjectivity**

In the first régime of truth in student development theory (hereafter referred to as the first wave, in keeping with Jones and Stewart’s [2016] terminology), concern for the whole student emerged—this is the *raison d’etre* of student affairs. Student-centered work became a system of power–knowledge: universities concerned themselves anew with students as an individual unit of analysis, in large part because of new knowledge and technologies surrounding the measurement of masses of students and the student *body*. Student mortality was among the first of these mass concerns that led to the treatment of students as individuals (Lloyd-Jones & Smith, 1938; Preinkert, 1940/2005). Such concerns led to studies on what colleges might do to intervene and promote student development. For example, *Where Colleges Fail* (Sanford, 1967) was a look at institutional impacts on student bodies that gave us one of our first student development theories: challenge and support, a theory aimed at intervening on the individual student. This individual and individualized student is the creation of the first wave’s assemblage of power–knowledge: discipline and control.

*Assemblage of power–knowledge: discipline and control*

First wave student development theories are situated within a régime of truth largely analogous to Foucault’s biopower. We refer to biopower specifically in the manner Foucault (1978/1990) describes in *The Will to Know*: a doubled biopower, consisting of both disciplinary force (an anatomo-politics of the body) as well as control (a bio-politics of the population). Discipline is the internalization of subjection such that bodies perform the movements reinforced by the system while attributing such movements, in part or whole, to individual choice. Forces of control operate at the level of populations to create categories and boundaries, including the designation of normal and abnormal, or developed and un/underdeveloped (Foucault, 1977/1995; 1978/1990). First wave theories spin between these two axes. Control is implicated in the study of student mortality as the first definition of a population-wide problem in higher education in need of solution. Discipline provided a solution within the individualized, “developed” student.

With these two axes of discipline and control at work, the first wave both constructs an individualized subject through discipline of the body, and norms this individualized subject to a population. These two forces combined, as applied to student development, create the individualized student at the center of the first wave. This individual student is known both through discipline
(student personnel practitioners putting student development theory to work) as well as through their relationship to others in student populations (the tracking of development is an exercise in itself of benchmarking a student to a population norm). Both axes are integral to the creation and maintenance of the individualized student.

First wave theorizing: the bounded cognizing individual

Rooted in psychological empiricism, foundational theories that shape(d) the field also imbibed--embedded--created organizing assemblages that lead to today’s individual subject of student development theory. At the dawn of student development theory, the field of college student affairs educators--practitioners, and simultaneously colleges and universities, organized around a particular philosophical point of view, which coincides with what we shall designate as the personnel point of view, may well further modify the curricular program, methods of instruction, and the extracurricular program of the institution in order to place emphasis upon the individual student and his all-round development rather than upon his intellectual training alone...It would underlie all the aspects of the total program of student personnel work.

(Lloyd-Jones & Smith, 1938, p. 19)

In practice, the field of student personnel was founded on an idea of student development that pursued the creation and maintenance of a radically individualized college student.

Concern for the “whole student” (Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 18) centers individualization in the work of college student educators. First wave theories embed individual rational choice as a teleological, normative, and desired outcome of the college student experience. In early theories of lifespan, cognitive and moral or ethical development (Erikson, 1959/1980; Kohlberg, as cited in Patton et al., 2016; Perry, 1968), for example, fully developed students come to possess an individual epistemological worldview by shifting their thinking away from externally and dualistically imposed ways of knowing toward internally formulated and relativistic or contextually contingent ways of knowing (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In other words, a fully developed college student possesses their knowledge and development as an individual. The knowledge base used to norm development is determined by studies of populations (Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perry, 1968; Sanford, 1967), and it is assumed that development is to move along the normal path the population takes. This knowledge becomes possessed through practices of discipline. Under this régime of truth, advisors and student services staff are trained to reinforce the characteristics of normally developing students in their work with all students. To be a properly developed student is to internalize these norms and undertake the actions desired by the system while believing these choices of actions to be your own.

In and through norming knowledge creation and individualizing knowledge possession, colleges and universities inscribe an individual subjectivity onto students. Choices students make appear to fulfill personal interest, and transgressions are seen as individual moral, cognitive, or ethical failings for which colleges and universities can and do hold people responsible. The standard student conduct verdict of found responsible is entirely aligned with this notion of a radically individualized subject. The whole student is the individualized subject—the figure of students moving forward in their development by individually and rationally pursuing desires, making decisions in their personal self-interest, and taking responsibility for these decisions.
Practices of colleges and universities continue to inscribe this individualized subjectivity on the student. Such practices include the aforementioned work of administrative units such as student judicial offices and policing structures in holding students responsible for behavior considered abnormal, or the work of disciplining positions such as advisors and residence directors. This is also the work of disciplinary structures such as academic majors or career centers, which center individual knowledge and individual vocational production, respectively. Current movements to think academic majors and career centers together (e.g. Koproske, 2017) are premised on the figure of an individual student pursuing their own self-interest who will select an academic major or profession based on their need to take responsibility for their individual self, and who comes to this decision based on their own epistemological (cognitive) development.

Colleges and universities’ commitment to producing whole, normed and disciplined, individualized students, as evidenced by first wave theorizing and foundational documents such as The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937), also produced the lines of flight that would usher in second wave theorizing. The creation of a universally normed and disciplined individual within a racist, sexist, homo/transphobic, xenophobic, ableist, and nationalist society creates points of tension with members of communities who are at best not represented within the vision of a normal “whole” student. The recognition of communities along racial, ethnic, gender, ability, sexual, religious, geographic, socioeconomic, national, continental, and many other lines shifts focus to recognizing difference. This produced a norming and homogenizing of these multiple and distinct dividual communities rather than disciplining a universal “whole” individual. Whereas the régime of truth in the first wave was a combination of discipline and control, second wave theorizing deemphasizes disciplinary power and lives primarily within a régime of truth of an emphasized control.

Second Wave Theories: The Dividual Subject

In the second wave of student development theory (Jones & Stewart, 2016), students become dividuals, bounded and measurable subjects of control who are defined as, for example, their grade point averages, their first-time full-time cohort, and their demographic identity markers. Masses of students, or student bodies, are now data (Deleuze, 1992). The dividual in student development theory is expressed in a wide range of theories, from Cass’s (1979) Model of Homosexual Identity Development (a transformational theory for both of your authors during our master’s programs) to the R-MMDI (Jones and Abes, 2013). The dividual is an innovation of second-wave theories still present today. The dividual [student] is the creation of the second wave’s governing assemblage of power-knowledge: control.

Assemblage of power-knowledge: control

The second wave is marked by the rise of control and the relative falling back of discipline. Translated into the general functions of student personnel positions, this makes little sense. Have advisors and residence directors, those historically charged with the maintenance of the whole student, been replaced here with institutional research or multicultural student union folks, those who work almost exclusively with dividuated students? To say that discipline has fallen back is not to say the professional positions traditionally associated with it have dropped in numbers—it is to say that those positions are increasingly and centrally oriented towards control. This point is more readily seen in the shift of student development theories detailed below. Societies of control
divide the individual person of our previous regime into *dividuals*, bodies known and controlled now through their parts (Deleuze, 1992). *Dividuals* are, for example, citizens, noncitizens, in-state, out-of-state, international, the race/ethnicity codes of an institution’s student information system, a GPA, class standing, percent of degree earned, a risk level. Identity as experienced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century United States is a construction of our control society and is expressed through *dividuality*.

We can now return to the shift in terms of student personnel positions. The positions of advisor and residence director clearly still exist. However, their job functions are increasingly *dividual-facing*, or data-facing. This includes not only specific outreach and programming for historically excluded and erased students, but also data-driven approaches that orient professionals to serve *dividuals* such as GPA or membership in a first-time full-time cohort. The shift in assemblage of power–knowledge between the first and second waves is not a shift in the importance of identity, but rather a shift of the level on which students construct identity (Abes, 2016; Jones and Abes, 2013; Torres, Jones, and Renn, 2009).

## Control and neoliberalism

*Dividualization* makes populations into discrete packets of data, be those packets in the form of identities, the fields of student information systems, participation counts in high-impact practices, and monetary value under capitalism. In a society of control, the system which centers (*dividuated*) identity is also the system that centers (*dividuated*) flows of capital. Thus, in a capitalist system and through the interchangeability which dividualization provides, identity development makes one recognizable as a neoliberal subject. In today’s world, capitalism as aided by the modern state structures our recognition of others; in today’s world, capitalism is a difference making machine. In the same way that identity development theories function to differentiate students from a single student body and recategorize them into communities along social and familial lines, capitalism functions to differentiate subjects and objects of capital, and then recategorize them in its own image, the image of market value. Capitalism thus differentiates us from each other and the world, and enrolls us as subjects of capitalism. Within control and capitalism, bounded subjectivity and identity are many interchangeable things, including images of capital. Whether the source of an identity label is from within a community or from the outside is immaterial; the identity label itself still operates within neoliberalism, our current entanglement of capitalism and the state.

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3. One example of this tension concludes Torres, Jones, and Renn’s (2009) discussion of current and future work in the field of college student identity development: “It is impossible to predict precisely what direction identity development theory will take, but it seems likely that the productive tension between understanding the whole student and understanding what identities constitute that whole will stimulate new ways of understanding students and their development” (p. 593).

4. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1972/2009): “For as we have seen, capitalism indeed has as its limit the decoded flows of desiring-production, but it never stops repelling them by binding them in an axiomatic that takes the place of the codes. Capitalism is inseparable from the movement of deterritorialization, but this movement is exorcised through factitious and artificial reterritorializations. Capitalism is constructed on the ruins of the territorial and the despotic, the mythic and the tragic representations, but it reestablishes them in its own service and in another form, as images of capital” (p. 303).

5. Capitalism “does not thereby escape the world of representation. It merely performs a vast conversion of this world, by attributing to it the new form of an infinite subjective representation” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2009, p. 303).
Second wave theorizing: the division of identity

Second wave theorizing is best categorized as social identity theorizing, or as the fracturing of the whole into component parts. This fracturing of the student (person~human) into component parts is ushered in by rational, scientific, empirical, epistemological approaches to being, and solidified in contemporary times within societies of control. Thus, although second wave theorizing might be termed more sociological or constructivist (Jones & Stewart, 2016) in nature, it shares with the first wave an investment in bounded identity.

Early theories of the second wave in particular still evidence psychological roots of first wave theorizing. For example, early racial identity development theories, such as Cross' (1978) theory of psychological nigrescence and Helms’ (1992) model of white racial identity development, center an individual’s psychological adjustment to and epistemological positioning of race. Even though these theories recognize race as a social construct, they theorize students who have an interest in rationally coming to understand their racial identities, how their racial identities influence their lived experiences, and how through such understandings they might and can take responsibility for directing their actions in a racialized society and world. For White students (Helms, 1992), this means coming to know one has a race, and taking responsibility for their perpetuation of racism through systems of privilege. For Black students (Cross, 1978), this means coming to understand one’s racial identity, overcoming potential internalized racism, and integrating one’s racial identity as one component part of their identity. Both of these early second wave theories followed linear, teleological paths—and a fully developed person operated, moved, and cognized the world from an integrated perspective. This is the case for most social identity theories—racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual (Patton et al., 2016). Integration means that one went through the psychological processes necessary to “possess” their various identities and still operate in society—in theory getting the better of barriers and/or opportunities imposed on the individual by societal structural oppression or privilege. The end point of identity integration in the second wave does not, however, produce a single whole student. These early works of the second wave theorize the developed student both as an integrated whole individual as well as a divided individual. The part remains within the whole, and in fact the part shifts to become the focus of the theory, a shift from the first wave’s focus on the whole.

Second wave theorizing in the United States follows the peak of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, feminist movements, and the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to the realities that much first wave theorizing was predicated on research conducted with mostly white, affluent, and male students, second wave theorizing introduced the voices and perspectives of minoritized and underrepresented communities to the field of higher education—student affairs. The addition of these perspectives, theories, and voices was aimed at creating more inclusive and just educational environments, and it made many practitioners and researchers with majoritized identities aware of other ontological and epistemological engagements on college campuses.

Yet, there are limitations to the narrative of giving voice (Mazzei & Jackson, 2008) inherent to second wave theorizing. First, the concept of giving voice remains rooted in oppressive power structures; namely, that minoritized and underrepresented voices need permission to speak. The idea that students need such permission within our academic spaces positions students within a hierarchical power structure, where dominant perspectives remain preeminent. As Jones and Stewart (2016) aptly discuss, second wave theorizing, through its almost exclusive focus on minoritized or underrepresented identities, left largely unexamined privileged identities—be that...
whiteness, heterosexuality, maleness, cisgenderness, socioeconomic affluence, religious privilege, and other privileged identities.

Second, by retaining adherence to a bounded identity—before, the disciplined and normed whole individual student, now, the normed dividual student—many social identity theories continue to perpetuate sameness, homogeneity, conformity, and discourses of normativity. Thus, although there is an implicit set of assumptions in theories of the dividual that identities such as race, gender, sexuality, and religion are socially constructed, these theories continue to perpetuate a bounded construction of these dividual identities. This is carried out not only through theorizing, but also in practice. Professional organizations such as ACPA and NASPA have codified such normativity and bounded dividuality through recent competency-based initiatives (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

As a result of these limitations, second wave theorizing inscribes a now dividual subjectivity onto students. For example, in discussing their book advancing reconceptualizations of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), Jones and Abes (2013) articulate a presumption of “the presence of multiple social identities; that is, each individual possesses social identities, such as race, social class, gender, and sexuality, whether or not these identities are personally meaningful” (p. xxi, emphasis added). This is a statement of dividuality, of a model of “different control mechanisms [which] are inseparable variations, forming a system of variable geometry” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 4). The variable geometry of the original MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) is visualized in its self-description as an atom, a collection of inseparable variations of (electron-like) identities rotating around a (nucleus-like) CORE individual self. In our view, this places the MMDI, as well as the R-MMDI as it leaves this part of the model untouched, within the tail end of second wave theorizing. Even within the articulated social constructivist perspective of many second wave theorists, the language of individualization dominates the discourse.

Theoretically, the second wave retains the vestiges of control while sunsetting the influence of discipline. In more typical student development language, the second wave retains the vestiges of normed and bounded subjects while reducing the influence of the whole (presumed cishet white able-bodied male) individual. In many ways, second wave theories are an incomplete resolution of fights for visibility for marginalized peoples within the existing assemblages of the university. The second wave’s conformity to hegemonic normative (dividual) discourses limit its potential for movement within and across difference. Second wave theorizing became enmeshed within the university not only through cultural centers and identity disciplinary structures, but also in-and-through student affairs educators (Patton et al., 2016). The university and nation-state benefitted from this co-optation of second wave theorizing through the inscription of particular notions of identity onto students (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012).

Chief among these interests was the perpetuation of bounded dividualism. As stated previously, social constructivist perspectives, while beginning conversations about the impacts of sociological, historical, institutional, and context-specific impacts on identity, still center the dividual. Such centering places an onus of responsibility for psychological adjustment to oppression, or recognition of privilege and its impact, on in/dividualized Oppressed and privileged subjects.

6. The phrase in/dividualized student refers to the dividual subject of control, a subject generally narrated as an individual target of student-centered practice (Smithers, 2017a). In present-day practice, the university holds students individually responsible while engaging and recognizing them as dividuals. This is the work of neoliberalism when this practice intersects with capital. Colleges and universities hold students individually responsible for their actions and interests; however, institutions generally work with data points, not individual students. For example, time to degree, financial aid and Pell eligibility, and employment prospects are all data points used to control students toward ends of institutional non-accountability in service of neoliberal capitalist states.
There are significant limitations to this line of thinking. First, such an approach releases educational institutions from truly altering, disrupting, or deconstructing hegemonic systems that keep oppression and privilege in place. Secondly, institutions turn students into fungible data points; human diversity turns people into collections of consumable identities. Colleges and universities utilize the language of diversity as a non-performative commitment, and in doing so consume diversity while failing to practice diversity, leaving oppressive power structures unscathed (Ahmed, 2012).

Our argument here extends Sara Ahmed’s (2012) discussion of these forces to second wave student development theorizing. Because these theories do not push outside the bounded in/dividualized student, and precisely because they center dividual patterns of learning or cognizing about culture and identity as mostly linear, normative processes, these theories reinscribe in/dividual subjectivity. According to George Kuh (1993), “the crystallization of these diverse aspects of personality functioning into a sense of identity is one of the most important outcomes of college” (p. 281). The notion that one would leave college with a fully formed, relatively crystallized identity is so foundational to the work of higher education–student affairs professionals that it goes almost completely unchallenged; or, as Ahmed (2012) suggests, it fades into the background. This idea of stable and static identity, which begins in first wave theorizing and extends into the social identity theories of second wave theorizing, serves the oppressive power structures of both higher education and the neoliberal nation-state by bounding difference.

Third Wave Theories: The Search for What Comes Next

Jones and Stewart (2016) place us today within the third wave of student development theory, a wave marked by the emergence of critical and poststructural theories. We agree with this naming of the break between waves, and propose a slightly different marker for the next wave: a shift in the assemblage of power–knowledge that governs it. We do not yet recognize the presence of such a shift, but believe that critical and poststructural theories carry the possibility of bringing such a shift about. At present, we know of two examples of work outside of Abes (2016) that push the boundaries of the in/dividual subject: the Q-MMDI (Kasch, Jones, and Abes, 2013), and Clark/Keefe’s (2014) appeal to nomadism in student development theory. Both of these works beg the following question: how might we create the conditions of possibility for a new assemblage of power–knowledge in student development theory?

Assemblage of power–knowledge: how might we push past control?

Two sides of the same coin are in need of exploration. On one side, what is to be gained by pushing student development theory beyond control? On the other side, what is to be gained by pushing student development theory beyond the dividual subject? Within societies of control, we develop in/dividual identities as members of groups. The distinction here is important—identity work under control is a practice undertaken by dividualized bodies, not a practice undertaken by any other conception of in/dividual (for example, shifting and folding affinity groups that form and reform). Even in theories of identity development that include the social, the development of (simple or complex) dividual identities are at the core (Abes, 2016; Jones & Abes, 2013). Identity theories that do not critique the in/dividualized human at the core of their analysis are limited in their capacity to theorize radical and shifting forms of relationality (Jones and Stewart, 2016).
Identity development theories thus provide a partial good, and stand to benefit from more engagement and entanglement with critical and poststructural theories that queer notions of identity. In the third wave, the assemblage of power–knowledge at this point remains control, and its subject remains the *dividual*. The novelty of the third wave is its commitment to queering this assemblage. The power–knowledge structure that will come to define the third wave in the future remains an open question.

**Third wave theorizing: loosening stasis, embracing movement**

It is in the third wave (Jones & Stewart, 2016) of student development theorizing that issues raised within the second wave—particularly the lack of attention paid to the role of environmental context and the perpetuation of normative discourses of identity stability—begin to be challenged. We see in third wave theorizing the potential for shifting student development theory away from reinscribing in/dividual subjectivity onto college students, although we argue that present third wave theories have not dislodged theorizing from control. For example, Jones and Stewart (2016) discuss how poststructural and critical theories challenge conceptualizations of identity as static, potentially disrupting the notion of development altogether. Further, third wave theorists “prioritize attending to the ways that identity classifications (of race, sexuality, gender, disability) reproduce and normalize inequitable power relationships between dominant and marginalized groups in society” (Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 22). In this critique there is recognition that simply acknowledging minority or underrepresented identity groups always perpetuates a hierarchy rooted in dominance; in other words, dominant groups with power are always reasserted as dominant, and such centering often perpetuates only one type of power—that which critical poststructuralists from Foucault to Braidotti call *potestas*.

In higher education–student affairs theorizing, we see poststructural and critical theory discourses being employed to challenge institutional power dynamics and begin shifting conversations away from student responsibility toward greater institutional accountability for deconstructing inequitable power structures that limit or constrain students (*potestas*). Jones and Abes (2013), along with their co-contributors Stephen John Quaye and David Kasch, take up this project by applying, conceptualizing, and theorizing how the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (R-MMDI) might be altered when entangled with intersectionality theory, critical race theory, and queer theory—all critical, poststructural approaches. We place the R-MMDI, with its focus on (complex configurations of) bounded identities, in the second wave. We place the extensions of the R-MMDI through intersectionality, critical race theory, and queer theory in the third wave.

In a move to resuture multiple theories of identity which were fractured and split during second wave theorizing, Jones and McEwen (2000) articulated the original Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. As discussed earlier, the MMDI utilizes the atom as visual metaphor, granting students a CORE identity as nucleus and various (*dividual*) social identities circulating one’s core. This visual image has continued through two reconceptualizations of the original model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013). In each of these reconceptualizations we see the increasing integration of poststructural and critical theories. Perhaps the biggest shift in the reconceptualized models is the R-MMDI’s (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) addition of a filter to the original Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, meant to account for the shifting of power dynamics across a variety of institutional, personal, and societal contexts (including home, school, nation, and historical period). Thus, even with its increasing complexity, the original
MMDI and its core reconceptualizations continue to center the *dividual* as the subject of analysis and the subject produced through analysis.

While there are various iterations and imaginings of visual models within Jones and Abes (2013) text, we draw here on the Queered Model, developed by David Kasch, alongside Susan Jones and Elisa Abes. Of the three critical theoretical frameworks in Jones and Abes (2013), we take up the Queered Model because it makes the strongest move to disrupt the boundaries between the *dividual* identities centered in the R-MMDI. However, this model retains some central notions of first and second wave theories. As explained by the authors,

> Queer development in this model revolves around the degree to which *individual students* are able to manage the *individual elements* represented within the model and thereby direct their influence on the larger heteronormative context. In other words, the *more developed* the individual student is the more that student will be able to *manage* the motion and movement of individual elements in the model—*directing* how and the degree to which each element influences other elements. (Kasch, Jones, & Abes, 2013, p. 210, emphasis added)

In this model, two particularly problematic notions continue to be perpetuated: the individual student and the notion of development. It remains the responsibility of the student to manage their environment. This comes despite the language of “intrasectioality” (Kasch, Jones, & Abes, 2013, p. 209), which advances a Baradian (2007) understanding of matter and meaning as constantly in flux, motion, and creation. The perpetuation of notions such as a student being *more developed* leading to a greater ability to *direct* individual elements of action within environments that are statically heteronormative once again reinscribes *dividual* subjectivity onto the student. In pushing solely *dividual* human agency, even the queered Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity fails to account for a world of constantly shifting dynamic relations. Kasch, Jones, & Abes (2013) even account for part of this problematic, asking readers to forgive the visual modeling developed for the text, which transgresses queer theory’s emphasis on remaining unrepresentable, in favor of “utility” (p. 204). We agree, and read this as further evidence of the control society reasserting its dominance on the boundaries of thinking outside the *dividualized* subject.

That said, the queered Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity becomes a movement for us. We seek to ride the language of the Q-MMDI—such as *becoming*, *desire*, and *performativity*—into space(s) beyond development, stasis, control, and representation. We seek to push these notions even further, recognizing that continued focus on the *dividualized* student, or even the human as unit of measure, continues to exert upon our research agendas, pysches, and institutional structures an unnecessarily limiting cut (Barad, 2007). We can create movement and resonance in our practice by continuing to take up other ways of thinking that move us beyond representations and epistemologies. Movement is ontological, encompassing human and non-human elements, forces, and continual shifts of the cosmos. It recognizes everything in a constant state of *becoming*.

The various reconceptualized Models of Multiple Identity usher the field of higher education–student affairs toward a different mode of conceptualizing college and university environments, our work, and our ethical responsibilities. As we ride this third wave that emerges from Kasch, Jones, and Abes (2013), we seek to propose further disruptions and perturbations to the conversation by taking up Braidotti’s (2011b) figure of *nomadic subjectivity*. We do not do this with the aim of creating a new representative model, or assemblage of power~knowledge, for as Deleuze (1968/1994) reminds us,
It is not enough...to propose a new representation of movement; representation is already mediation. Rather, it is a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind. (p. 8)

In Braidotti’s work (2011a, 2011b, 2013) we find language for releasing our imaginative wondering toward new possibilities for post-control and post-identitarian becoming. We see the potential of nomadic subjectivity to create the conditions of possibility for a student development theory beyond societies of control, individual subjects, and development altogether.

A Break with Bounded Identity

In order to produce new futures outside of the recognition of individual identity (and the nationalism, oppression, and exorbitant wealth disparities it produces today), we seek to defamiliarize ourselves with identity and unlearn development as outcomes or goals of the student experience in college. We seek to think beyond the bounded self and bounded identities of the individual college student. We must embrace the paradoxical demands of centering and decentering students in our work. In this new focus, what changes “is not merely the terminology or metaphorical representation of the subjects but the very structure of subjectivity, the social relations and social imaginary that support it” (Braidotti, 2011a, p. 8). Rather than substitute or multiply the configurations of identity under discussion, we shift the focus of the field itself towards becoming through an embrace of nomadic subjectivity: “an image of the subject in terms of a nonunitary and multilayered vision, as a dynamic and changing entity” (Braidotti, 2011a, p. 5). This shift serves as a productive break with second wave identity theorizing: previous theorizations enact the individual student as a bounded subject. Our theorization joins that of Clark/Keefe (2014) to enact the student as a “vision of the thinking and knowing subject as not-one, but rather as being split over and over again in a rainbow of yet uncoded and ever so beautiful possibilities” (Braidotti, 2011a, p. 150).

We need to unlearn student development theory as it is in order to think of what it might be. Unlearning calls on us to shake things up, to shake it off, to philosophize with a hammer, to take a leap of faith into the abyss of non-knowledge; it calls on us to let go, to fail, to fail again, for better or worse...the question of unlearning worries your clean categorizations, takes you out of your comfort zone, beyond your limit. (Dunne, 2016, pp. 13-14)

Unlearning student development theory does not mean we (r)eject the important insights and perspectives it offers, but asks us to critically examine the cuts (Barad, 2007) and structuring proclivities (Eaton & Hendry, 2017) it places on our practice, our imagination, and envisioning of student affairs educators’ ethical responsibility to college students. We propose an unlearning of student development theory in order to pursue what possibilities might exist in an escape of student development theory as it is. In “taking a hammer” to student development theory, we might invite momentary movement(s) (potentia as opposed to potestas), disrupting the neoliberal order so dominant in early twenty-first century educational environments, particularly colleges and universities. One way to think about philosophy, as Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2011) argues, is to see what
might be produced or made possible. In taking up Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity, we offer a different way of thinking about what higher education–student affairs educators might work with.

**Nomadic Subjectivity: Movement through Boundaries**

Nomadism assembles as a possibility for subject positioning through a confluence of factors indicative of present times. As part of Braidotti’s larger project against methodological rigidity, essentialism, and universalism through cartographic mapping, she frames nomadic subjectivity as arising amidst the dislocations ushered in by advanced capitalist structures, proliferating technologies, and limitations of psychological theorizing on our understanding of identity: “we live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization, and nomadization. And these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation, precisely because they are zigzagging, not linear and process oriented, not concept driven” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 217).

One great limitation of theorizing on identity and subjectivity from psychological and post-structural perspectives is the negative indexing and constraints that are imposed on possibilities for human (and non-human) becoming. Nomadic subjectivity is rooted in an ethical imperative of movement—shifting our teleological narratives of control and stasis, which Braidotti labels *potestas*—toward recognizing ethical relationality in shifting ecological, cosmological, and technological spaces. Doing so releases *potentia* of the world. Releasing *potentia* imbues the world with political possibilities.

Rather than consigning ourselves to particular subject or identity positions, nomadic subjectivity affords new opportunities for opening the world to radically different political structures. Politics, often seen as a human endeavor, now unfolds to include non-human elements. Nomadic subjectivity opens a posthuman world, recognizing the relational connectivity between humans, other species, technologies, geographic spaces, chronological and aionic time, which all must be accounted for in understanding the situated perspective of engaging subjectivity. Such entanglement shifts discussions away from solely human (anthropomorphic) perspectives. Further, this disrupts notions of individual subjectivity, ushering in relational subjectivity. Thinking relationally—and not only in terms of human–human relations (social constructivism)—shifts conversations in such a way that make possible a world not focused on the controlled in/dividuated subject, but rather centering the potential of each present moment’s unfolding—*becoming*.

**Post-identity**

The centrality of movement in nomadic subjectivity arises from Braidotti’s theorizing with feminist, postcolonial, anti-racist, and technology scholars seeking to challenge dominant normative theorizing of the twentieth century. Part of what makes Braidotti’s (2011a, 2011b, 2013) argument provocative for college student educators is introduction of the term post-identitarian. For Braidotti, identity is indexed to the ego-centric, rational, self-interested, and bounded individual human subject, an argument in alignment with our mapping of the in/dividualized student that has emerged as central to the work of college student educators through the three waves of student development theorizing. Braidotti ties the perpetuation of identity as our sole focus and consideration in the social sciences as entangled with many of the most pressing issues of our day. Her text *The Posthuman* (Braidotti, 2013), for example, takes up discussion of not only ongoing societal oppression related to bounded social identities such as race, class, and gender, but also how...
these oppressive structures influence issues such as climate change, surveillance, policing, violence, death, genetic engineering, and technological advancement.

Braidotti (2013) is careful to articulate that while she advocates a shift toward nomadic subjectivity, we cannot completely ignore or jettison the role of bounded social identities in contemporary society. The “reconstruction of something we call ‘humanity’ must not be allowed to flatten out or dismiss all the power differentials that are still enacted and operationalized through the axes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization” (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 87-88). Sometimes we need identity, some level of stasis, in order to think about movement. Advocating for a post-identitarian politics is a critique of the limitations that identity and developmental theory places on the cosmos by creating rigidity (potestas). Braidotti (2011b) argues that

ideas of identity as multiple, mobile, and nomadic are by now the most accurate way to describe our historical condition. It is also the case, however, that they cause waves of collective cultural and political anxiety. In such a context I want to defend the thesis that there is much to be gained by adopting a nonunitary and multilayered vision of identity. (p. 254)

This is why Braidotti (2011b) refers to her theory of nomadic subjectivity and becoming as “anti-developmental” (p. 34) and argues for the “capacity to be both grounded and to flow and thus to transcend the very variables—class, race, sex, gender, age, disability—that structure us” (p. 25). Post-identitarian becoming is a both-and argument: we need both identity and movement.

**Nomadic subjectivity (or becoming)**

This multilayered vision of escaping identity through flows and movement is nomadic subjectivity, and it most closely aligns with thinking in third wave student development theorizing aligned with queer theory (Kasch, Jones, & Abes, 2013); yet, we feel nomadic subjectivity (including as presented by Clark/Keefe, 2014) does more than the Q-MMDI (Kasch, Jones, & Abes, 2013) by rejecting and resisting the call for representational models. In pushing against the limitations of identity discourses, Braidotti calls for us to take up the language of relational subjectivity. Discussions of subjectivity are less present in higher education~student affairs, even though discussions of subjectivity have a rather robust history in the social sciences and education research (Hendry, 1998; Lather, 1994; St. Pierre, 2004). Nomadic subjects seek to differ “from [themselves] as much and as often as possible” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 33). Critical to Braidotti’s (2013) overall argument is the reduction of the in/dividual bounded subject to the limit of its elimination; this means altogether disrupting the centering of the human. If all is relational, and if the world is in constant negotiation in a radical unfolding of only momentary intelligibility (Barad, 2007), then the very concept of identity comes tumbling down. This disruption of the bounded in/dividual human subject is particularly important in pushing back or limiting in/dividual(ism), which we will discuss in further detail below, and ultimately is crucial in the discourse of higher education~student affairs which continues to inscribe such subjectivity onto students.

What Braidotti ultimately calls for in embracing post-identitarian becoming is not representations, but figurations. Figurations are “ways of expressing different situated subject positions” that “defy established modes of theoretical representation” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 14). Such thinking upends many of our approaches to higher education~student affairs precisely because in
emphasizing process over product, nonlinearity over linearity, and radical entanglement in a shifting and contingent world⁷ over individual elements with measurable characteristics, we are forced to give up control, prediction, and outcomes. However, it is precisely this provocation that makes Braidotti’s notion of nomadic subjectivity appealing as it challenges the controlling, norming, and in/individual(izing) order(s) and assemblage(s) of modern college and university environments.

Figurations are based on cartographies of one’s subject position(s)—locating oneself geopolitically and within time (both present, and time from a nonlinear perspective—accounting for the simultaneity of past–present–future); and as means of providing “alternative...representation for these locations in terms of power as restrictive (potestas) but also empowering or affirmative (potentia)” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 216). How might we use the notion of figuration in higher education~student affairs? To begin, while figurations certainly assume an “individual” must account for their positioning in terms of identity, power, and geographic location, the notion of figuration does not actually stop or center on the “individual” subject. Rather, one must simultaneously look outside oneself—through historical memory and narrative, for example—to create notions of conceptual personae (Braidotti, 2011b)—which we would argue is akin to notions of performativity advanced in queer theory. In so doing, the “individual” is decentered as the “subject” of analysis. Thus, the notion of an in/individual student becomes an impossibility—to think, to measure, and to control.

Second, figurations take up notions of both potestas and potentia simultaneously. Thus, emphasis is on relationality and the continual unfolding of space–time; or, to put it differently, figurations are a process ontology, rather than a product epistemology. Much of first, second, and third wave student development theorizing centers “production” of a knowing, cognizing, and measurable person or student—this is the in/individual mapped through the waves earlier in this paper. Nomadism, with its emphasis on movement and relationality, emphasizes the ongoing alterity of the world’s unfolding. Thus, the world is only momentarily intelligible, to utilize Baradian (2007) language. As a result, we cannot “develop” an in/individualized student, because in so doing we place restrictions on what may unfold. Nomadism challenges us to give up the quest for such control, which also imbibes the present with radical political potential. Further, it beckons college student educators to remember their own becoming, to be present, and to be comfortable with what we call in-betweenness or the intermezzo (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987): the space between universal, essentialist notions of self (potestas), and potential(s) for ongoing difference (potentia and performativity).

We argue that embracing nomadic subjectivity means higher education~student affairs educators must take up challenging discussions about that which has receded into the background of our practice(s). Certainly this means discussions of the concepts of student, development, and identity, as we have already argued. However, it also means challenging commonplace notions of the twenty-first century academy, such as learning, outcomes, method, functional areas, competencies, academic disciplines, career readiness, teacher, student, and perhaps most importantly—a centering of the human as the focus or sole entity of knowing. The three waves of student development theorizing have so solidified these concepts into our collective consciousness that to question their ethicality is akin to heresy. Yet, we recognize such movement is necessary if we are to imagine (and possibly survive) the dehumanizing and destructive breaks these concepts have inscribed onto the world, breaks that are now visible in the language of advanced neoliberal capitalism.

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Advanced capitalism

Braidotti opens her book *Nomadic Theory* by insisting that our current era, which she refers to as advanced capitalism, has succeeded in commodifying everything—including the human. This commodification includes “the marketing of pluralistic differences and the commodification of the existence, the culture, the discourses of ‘others,’ for the purposes of consumerism” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 25). Such consumptive activity is at least partially predicated and indexed on notions of stability and identity. For example, for one to consume another’s cultural identity, there must be static notions of culture that can be marketed, packaged, and assessed in value. These consumptive activities work on all human subjects, and allow those in particular identity categories to consume the cultural goods and products of the “other.” Simultaneously, those who may identify with a particular cultural identity background also become consumers of their own culture. Identity becomes packaged as dividuated and thus as a consumable—not only something one cognizes internally, or which is imposed from outside the bounded body through structuring of society, place, history, and time—but also that which one actively consumes—for example, through music, art, literature, cinema, clothing, and other material commodification processes. This commodification breeds conformity and sameness. This remains true within our context of contemporary American higher education. Advanced capitalism and neoliberalism impose commodification and consumption on all aspects of university life (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017).

Technology

Technology is also central to Braidotti’s conception of nomadic subjectivity. Taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/1987) concept of *becoming-machine*, Braidotti (2013) advances two lines of flight: centering human relationality to technology as having shifted to a new cyborg reality, and discussing possibilities of nomadic subjectivity across technologies. Each of these lines of flight is rooted in radical relationality as well as Braidotti’s insistence that processes of nomadic subjectification rely on cartographically recognizing the ethical relationship between human and more-than-human entities.

For both humans and machines in a technological age, this means unleashing the potential for new subject positions that arise when we tap into energy fields and forces that alter and disrupt the space~time~memory matrix that has guided thinking since at least the time of Descartes (1637/1996). Cartesian thinking split subjectivity from a lived process of situated positionalities to a split of mind, body, and experience; the age of Enlightenment solidified reason, linearity, and logocentric representationalism in the social imaginary.

For starters, most humans often do not recognize the impacts of technologies on the body itself. Increasingly, technologies infiltrate our genetic structures and biological bodies, shifting and opening new ways for our bodies to operate. Braidotti traces these shifts beyond the mere confines of technological appendages to the body, such as prosthetics, pushing down even to the molecular level. Electronic pulses and force fields, not visually or sensorily captured by most humans, can and do alter our bodily functioning and the limits of what our bodies can do.

Braidotti also advances the notion that agency exists beyond the human, including in the machine. Although humans often believe we create machines that we control, Braidotti (2013) argues that machines and technologies move and shift, creating their own emergent nomadic sub-

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8. In alignment with other feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway (1985/2016).
jectivity. This line of thinking is particularly relevant—not because it anthropomorphizes technologies—but rather by opening processes of nomadic subjectivity beyond the ego-indexed human, we move through an age of the posthuman. Machinic becoming recognizes that machines and technologies also engage in relationship with humans, with other machines, and more-than-human forces, and that these relationships alter the functioning and becoming of the machine. Thus, much like we must and should cartographically map human relations and processes of subjectification (Biesta, 2014), the same might be considered when taking up discussions of machines and technologies.

Digital technologies, in particular, have offered new modes of accessing a nomadic subjectivity. Social media, for instance, has ushered in new potential for one to shift space-time continua by “dislocat[ing] the relationship between the local and the global and thus complicat[ing] the idea of multilocality” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 256). How does one cartographically position oneself in cybernetic space(s)? In digital space(s), one becomes disembodied, traveling through fiber-optic cables, internet and computer servers, and across various technological devices (computers, phones, tablets). Relationality and subjectivity are not controlled by human agency across distributed digital ecologies; rather, our subjectivity is a constantly unfolding relationality beyond our immediate control as human users. Subjectivity is reliant on digital networks, technological infrastructures, electric grids, material objects, human and non-human agencies all entangling and unfolding in space–time continuums where we may not be physically present.

This is one space where our students live and it is one emerging arena where we are greatly challenged in holding on to outmoded notions of identity that have long undergirded the work of higher education–student affairs. In distributed social media ecologies, we do not retain our individuality, our body, or even our consciousness. We become nomadic—even if we choose not to be physically nomadic. This means that digital technologies such as social media and digital networks afford us one possible avenue of movement—a means by which we can envision and enact radical new notions of nomadic subjectivity. This reality has been anxiety producing for many practitioners and educators in higher education (Mangan, 2016; Roll, 2017). There has been continued attempts to stifle movement toward nomadic subjectivity by reasserting a control mentality within digital spaces, in particular. For example, much of the recent discourse and research around the role of digital technologies and the self has focused on how college student educators might teach, assist, or “develop” students and professionals’ habits, practices, self-representations and individualized “brands” (Ahlquist, 2016; Brown, 2016; Linder, in press; Qualman, 2011). While such discussions are important, they continue to assert the individual as the unit of analysis, re-impose normative constructs into digital spaces, often fail to account for the rapid shifting of technological spaces, and often lack accountability for the agency of technologies in creating particular subject and identity positions.

While digital technologies certainly present a radical new possibility for movement and nomadic subjectivity, the nexus of technology and advanced capitalism also exponentially enhances the danger of in/dividual subjectivity reassembling, reasserting, and reterritorializing the human subject. The language of “branding,” the objectification of the human subject into a pack-ageable commodity serving market principles of production, efficiency, and cost-saving; even the language of digital identity or digitized development (Brown, 2016) all seek to (re)impose control logics of capitalist markets. These logics are predicated on perpetuating sameness, and as Braidotti (2011b) reminds us: “it is important to resist the uncritical reproduction of Sameness” (p. 244).
Movement: Dislodging In/dividual Subjectivity

What we see in Braidotti’s (2011b) theoretical conceptualizations of nomadic subjectivity, *becoming*, and figurations are possibilities to extend the third wave of student development theorizing discussed earlier. This extension of the third wave, importantly, also disrupts the inscription of the in/dividual, neoliberal subject in college environments. This will require a radical rethinking of our responsibilities as college student educators.

To begin, nomadic subjectivity disrupts the language(s) and representational logics of developmental discourses. As a result, there is a shift away from focus on the bounded in/dividual subject as the center of the educational (college or university) process. If our aim is not to (re)produce the bounded subject, what becomes the objective of education? We argue that the process-oriented nature of nomadic subjectivity emphasizes a more ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) approach to education. Under nomadism, education becomes less concerned with an outcomes oriented approach, in/dividual student achievement, rigid measurement, or development. Rather, education becomes more focused on relational entanglements—both with other human *becomings* in the assemblage of an academic environment, as well as with non-human others (such as animals, plants, material objects, technological instrumentation, and forces unseen). College becomes less about producing a disciplined and controlled in/dividual subject in service to the nation-state and capital enterprises, and more about releasing movement. Again, we do not seek a replacement of in/dividualism with nomadism, or in other words of the first and second wave with the third wave; we seek a rebalancing.

Embracing nomadic subjectivity and *becoming* also disrupts the troubling legacies of rational choice and personal interest. Braidotti (2011b) clearly articulates the problematics associated with our continued adherence to Cartesian rationality—for example, by emphasizing our failure to pay sufficient attention to the body, the senses, or other vibrant forces beyond rational detection. For Braidotti, these are spirituality and death, or in the realm of postsecondary–higher education, this would include liberal education and learning (Smithers, 2017b). In the college or university environment, challenging the hegemonic power of rationality (re)opens spaces for new inquiries in living.

Nomadic subjectivity and *becoming* challenges us to think outside the bounded body, particularly in terms of choices we make that may advance personal interests to the detriment of our entanglement with other bodies and matter. For us, this notion of moving beyond self ushers in space for students to experience the world from more communal and integrated perspectives. Further, it challenges the very notion of individual human agency. The focus of nomadism shifts from the student and rational choices to processual relationships across contexts that momentarily shift our emergence. This is not at all a focus on our individual emergence, but rather the emergence of assemblages of possibility through constantly shifting, moving, and unfolding intra-actions (Barad, 2007).

Thus, nomadic subjectivity gives us the tools to radically rethink politics, or relationality. The project of shifting toward nomadic subjectivity is overtly political, and in the vein of Braidotti (2011b) we seek to move beyond the negatively indexed politics of identity rooted in simply providing space for one to conform, or to survive oppressive power structures, or to emerge as a consumable product in service to advanced capitalist modes of production. This is why Braidotti (2011b) emphasizes potential—the harnessing of ethical relations toward ends of *becoming* as different from oneself as often as possible. Such rethinking of politics in terms of potential, the
creative force of power which is often underemphasized in much poststructural thinking, “engender[s] possible futures” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 96). Nomadic becoming centers such potential, and can best be described as both a hopeful and spiritual act. Braidotti (2011b) herself discusses this spiritual component by expressing how nomadic subjectivity encourages us not to think in terms of within/without established categories, but rather as encounters with anomalous and unfamiliar forces, drives, yearnings, or sensations. A sort of spiritual and sensorial stretching of the boundaries of what one’s body can do. (p. 96)

Nomadic subjectivity ushers in hopeful actions, carried out through small everyday micropractices, often unrecognizable in terms of agency, and completely unpredictable, unmeasurable, or unrepresentable.

Nomadic subjectivity asks us to embrace movement. Avoid stasis. Give up control. Become open to the radical possibilities and potentiæ of the world. It asks us to make the bold attempt of unlearning our controlling proclivities in higher education–student affairs. It is, in short, a different way of thinking about our responsibility to educational environments by being open to the radical possibility that every place, thing, and intra-action is an educational environment. In asserting subjectivity as an always contingent unfolding, nomadic subjectivity asks us to move outside the boundaries of in/dividualized identity politics and toward an assertion of radical relationality. This hopeful, spiritual vision is one approach that might unleash the creative potential of a world—and of colleges and universities—currently mired in the restrictive power structures of control, of the neoliberal nation state, and of advanced capitalism.

The Intermezzo

Our combined years of working in higher education–student affairs; the rapid technological shifts ushered in during the early years of our career; our movement among post-qualitative non-traditional methodologists and critical theorists (Hames-Garcia, 2011; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017) and philosophers across space–time continuums; our cutting across multiple academic disciplines; familiarity with the challenges currently facing college student affairs educators; observations of the continual tilting of colleges and universities toward an embrace of the neoliberal agenda (Giroux, 2014). These and so many other forces have ushered and pulled us toward recognizing our own intermezzo: the middle; the space between.

We see this paper as an assemblage, an arrangement of the perturbations that guide us in our thinking about a higher education–student affairs profession that appears to us as riding a wave toward a future under control. A profession that appears increasingly committed to advancing and (re)producing the in/dividualized human subject in support of advanced neoliberal capitalism, and in support of the neoliberal state. A profession that in many ways appear(s) to be doing so for its own supposed survival, and in so doing, undermines criticality and the potential for radically different futures rooted in relationality, rather than in/dividualism.

We are untroubled—for we do not believe in predictability. However, we recognize that “established mental habits, images, and terminology railroad us back toward established ways of thinking about ourselves” (Braidotti, 2011b, p. 263). In this assemblage, we provide evidence of the perpetuation of this cycle in higher education–student affairs theory, research, and practice.
through our mapping of how the three waves of student development theorizing have created and continue to perpetuate notions of the in/dividual.

En route to releasing the *potentia* of the world, we begin critical interrogations of how our language, theory, and approaches to research reify neoliberalism through creating students as in/dividually knowable and fractured into consumable parts. We mapped the associated assemblages of power/knowledge, doubled biopower and control, in relation to the three waves of college student development theory, making the claim that college student affairs educators and our foundational theories are implicated in the (re)production of neoliberalism and its related dividiuum of identity, development, theory, and method. Finally, we recognized that the third wave of this theorizing offers us cracks in dominant thinking. These cracks do not go far enough, as even the current efforts of the field perpetuate the language and structuring of in/dividual subjectivity, representational logics, and method as means of achieving such ends. We offered nomadic subjectivity as one philosophical argument that may extend the cracks of third-wave theorizing. We offered movement as a means of rebalancing the assemblage of postsecondary~higher education.

Our questions remain—in this middle space we always inhabit—can we think~theorize~philosophize our way out of the stranglehold of advanced capitalism, method, bounded in/dividual subjectivity in college and university environments? Our practice? Our students’ very subjectivities? There is no answer here, only musing. In Braidotti, we feel the possibility for a more process-oriented, hopeful, and challenging ethico-onto-epistemological set of engagements with a world we recognize as increasingly fractured, constraining, and restrictive. What becomes possible when college student affairs educators embrace nomadic subjectivity and *becoming* in our work? Will we release the potential of our collective futures? In this final question, we recognize that the many waves of student development theorizing continue to provide important insights, including the ever-shifting and disrupting third wave. We offer this extended discussion of nomadic subjectivity as a provocation, knowing it to be a position we as a field can never reach, nonetheless remaining passionately committed to its continual movement.

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Higher Education and the Government of Things

Aaron M. Kuntz

Abstract

Relational thinking within our contemporary moment simultaneously risks challenging and reinscribing governing norms, including the management of things. As such, resistive orientations to conventional inequities must necessarily extend from a stance of radical relationally, one that develops a more robust engagement with materialism than typically seen in the field of higher education. Thus, I call for a speculative stance on inquiry that foregrounds the potential for miscalculation to intervene within the standardized governance of those material relations that grant us our visibility within the normative order.

Keywords: materialism, governmentality, things, relationality, biopower, reification, dividual, thingification, educational research, milieu, higher education

In this article, I engage the relational means of knowing and becoming that are often aligned with current manifestations of the critical materialist and posthuman perspectives in order to better interrogate the governing effects of higher education and educational inquiry. I do so by layering these contemporary theoretical orientations with what Lemke (2014) termed Foucault’s “government of things.” There remains a productive overlap regarding the relational logic and radical materialism that informs these perspectives, especially when applied to an ongoing critique of our contemporary moment; one that is striking for its emergent and entangled processes of governing.

This overlap is especially important for critical engagements with the inter-related areas of higher education (as both a field of study and a milieu through which processes of governing occur) and educational research (as, itself, a field of study as well as a governing technology). As such, through this article I offer a mapping of relational logic, radical materialism, and the implications of their development within governing traditions. I then use this cartography to consider points of intervention that might interrupt normalizing processes within higher education.

Specifically, I offer in this article a particular reading of governing, one that succeeds through turning humans, relations—all matter—into calculations: a quantification of things that include affective states. This contemporary context encourages an anti-materialist ethical positioning that severs activities from bodies and asserts logics of preemption as necessary and normal. Importantly, reductive representations of relational analyses, perhaps intended to critique anti-materialism, run the risk of accelerating this very process, resulting in making all things more governable. This is most often seen in research that begins with claims regarding the theoretical need to engage fragmented and multiple subjectivities in place of the traditional humanist subject, only to revert to the assumptions of humanism in subsequent discussion. In such circumstance, to invoke relational logic is to simultaneously operate according to and in resistance of normalizing processes. Such apparent contradiction requires specific and imaginative engagement, practices that point to future possibilities that have yet to take hold. Thus, in this article I make three claims: 1) relational logic and materialism are not new—nor are they inherently resistive—and are often
invoked as justification for governing practices; 2) thinking relationally within a posthuman orientation to material things potentially challenges the governing norm of our contemporary moment; 3) the entangled fields of higher education and inquiry serve as a useful context through which to understand and enact governing and resistive processes.

Pivotal to my analysis is the ease with which contemporary notions of governing pull from extrac
tive circumstances, absenting bodies and places in the rush to produce abstracted things that are governable. In particular, higher education has historically played a pivotal role in this government of things, engaging as it does in “thingification”—a governing process that, it should be noted, remains distinct from more traditional emphases on reification. Operating according to similar logic, conventional forms of educational research enact the modulation, the “self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other,” that sustains contemporary logic formations of control through education (Deleuze 1992, p. 4). It does so as a technology that makes normalizing relations necessary and inevitable. Thus it is that higher education generally, and educational research more specifically, lose their critical potential, colluding in the manufacturing of practices and logic formations that endure within the very processes they portend to interrogate.

Organizationally, the first part of this article differentiates between two notions of thingification: 1) stems from the neoMarxist engagement with reification as an analytical tool; and 2) situates thingification as a governing process, an extension of governability and biopower. Here, my argument (not new, perhaps) is that the latter sense of thingification is most engaged with our contemporary moment and, thus, provides productive possibilities for intervention and change. At the same time, both notions of thingification depend on conventional forms of relational logic and materiality in order to enact governing processes. As such, resistive practices must extend from a different relational logic and a more robust sense of materialism else they accelerate the very processes they are invoked to disrupt. As an example of this normalizing tendency, the second part of this article considers higher education as ensconced in the government of things (a process of thingification that draws from and extends governability and biopower) and asks how one might productively intervene in such circumstances in ways that challenge the extractive and preemptive logics of our contemporary time.

Part I: Reification & The Liberal Subject, or, How Processes of Reification Depend on the Liberal Humanist Subject for Articulation and Extension

From the traditional Marxist perspective, reification, of course, involves the re-articulation of social relations as a commodified association among objects. In this process, the subjects of social relations are rendered as passive objects, while commodified objects are treated as imbued with active capacity. Because reified objects articulate independently of the individual relations

1. In my book, The Responsible Methodologist, I reference this process as stemming from a logic of extraction (Kuntz, 2015).
2. The analytical use of reification has been in dispute among Marxist theorists for some time. While some champion reification as a useful term for critical analyses, others, such as Althusser (1969), criticize its unnecessarily general analytical function when particular and specific engagements are necessary: “The whole, fashionable, theory of ‘reification’ depends on a projection of the theory of alienation...An ideology of reification that sees ‘things’ everywhere in human relations confuses in this category ‘thing’ (a category more foreign to Marx cannot be imagined) every social relation, conceived according to the model of a money-thing ideology.” (p. 230, n. 7). Wherever one lands in terms of its use-value, reification has continued (fashionably) as a critical term for writers who invoke Marxism, particularly within the field of education. And yet it is not always used carefully, or with deliberate intention (hence, my critique that follows).
they now represent, reification extends as a process of alienation, a violent separation of the individual subject from the objectified world. Sangeeta Kamat (2002) aptly writes of reification as the,

freeze-drying of social relations into things…A sort of sucking dry the body politic of its juices, its fibre, emptying it of its history, so that it can harmlessly circulate in the form of a thing. Anyone can then pick it off the shelf and know it as the same thing, for its contents have been labeled, as particular qualities of the social body (much as the contents of a cereal box are labeled). (p. 84)

Importantly, though social relations are emptied of any animating quality, they nonetheless “circulate in the form of a thing.” That is, reified things are not fully static—they still move and are in-relation. Thus it is that reified things extend their relation, external to that which they relate; paradoxically, they move and yet relate as static, unchanging things.4

Pivotal to their relational value, these reified objects-in-relation are imbued with standardized timeless meaning—individuals can only adapt to the reified, they cannot change them (hence the object-as-active, subject-as-passive inherent relation of reification). An example of this may be seen in responses to “the economy” as individuals strive to gain the skills and abilities recognized by the ever-changing and ever-determining global economy of inevitability. The economy is situated as a thing to which others must react; a thing that “naturally” determines the worth and value of one’s work—one’s productive capacity as a worker. And, of course, reification also has affective import as inventions like the Dow Jones Average have been granted affective capacity: it’s rising and falling are said to represent the “mood of the nation.” And, yet, all we can do, it seems, is respond: the Dow rises, and newspapers report positive correlations with consumer confidence in the economy; depression is coordinated by its significant drop in point value.5

As another example, within higher education one might recognize how faculty consider academia—or even a more specific field of study itself—as external to themselves. In this sense, the academy acts, as Gramsci (1971) describes it, as “a kind of autonomous divinity, which does not think with any concrete brain but still thinks, which does not move with specific human legs, but still moves” (p. 187, n. 83). Thus it is that “the field” is granted similar agential capacity as “the economy”—faculty seek a productive relation to their field, shifting their practices accordingly (consider, for example, the number of grant workshops or assessment trainings faculty attend to better engage a brainless and legless field that, nonetheless, “still thinks” and “still moves”).

And yet, it remains important to recognize how processes of reification depend on and maintain select visions of the humanist liberal subject, if even one that remains necessarily passive. This particular vision extends the mythos of the liberal subject and the values and characteristics

3. Notice also how reification requires an external relation—objects external to subjects (and vice versa). This relation-between is dramatically different from conceptions of relations-within—objects and subjects constituted within phenomena—a point to which I return in Part II of this article.

4. I note this because simplistic renditions of reification often imagine reified objects as fixed or fully stable. Like commodities within capital, such objects still circulate, yet do so as discreet and unchanging things. Such things are inert, in the doubled sense of the term—remaining the same even while in motion.

5. Indeed, whenever the Dow rises to a new record it is celebrated in the media: “Dow breaks 16,000! Is 17,000 next?” Conversely, whenever the Dow drops significantly it is treated as a symptom of socio-economic malaise. Thus it is that the Dow is given both revelatory and agential powers: it can reveal the affective state of the nation and it can impact that state via its trajectory. In this way, the Dow manifests as an affective technology of the economy.
that follow such positioning. Returning to Sangeeta Kamat’s work for a moment, we might recognize how the reification process opens “an ideal space for the assertion of liberal values” (p. 155) through which individuals might strive to align themselves with the needs of Gramsci’s “autonomous divinity” which, in turn, seems to own a rationality unto itself. Thus it is that processes of reification inevitably reinscribe the specter of the liberal subject, determining a path towards self—never collective—advancement alienated from any productive relation to work. In this way, conceptualizations of reification are seductive; they make space for the normalized liberal subject that captures our cultural imagination.

Thus it is that the liberal humanist subject is, in part, born through reification and the subsequently problematic values of individuation are upheld as a standard to which one must subscribe. As a consequence, in order to critique and intervene within the normalizing process of reification/alienation, one must at the same time critique the production of the liberal humanist subject (the very logic that makes the subject possible, a thing). Further still, theoretical critiques that fall back to a (seemingly inevitable) reproduction of the humanist subject (as a utopian goal, perhaps, or driving force for social justice) pave the way for a return of the governed, reified/alienated self.

As an example, consider the implications of contemporary work in educational scholarship that seemingly plays fast and loose with the differences between being and becoming (the latter a term that has seemingly proliferated in some circles due to the materialist turn offered by new or critical materialism). Such work often begins with determined explications of subjective or relational becomings as emblematic of open-ended, fluid, and ongoing multiplicities that entangle to produce an unfinished series of subjectivities. Here, matter, intensities, affects, etc. remain necessarily incomplete in their relation and thus point to a yet-to-be-determined future of possibility. Unfortunately, the premise of such a critical start is lost in such cases when the author reverts in later analyses to inadvertent assertions of being—as though the verb “to be” could stand in as a synonym for “to become.” More than a critique of word choice, my point here is that much of the philosophical assumptions of new or critical materialism (not to mention continental philosophy or poststructural theory) begin with a sustained critique of “being” and the humanist subject that extends from this loaded verb. Thus it is that perhaps well-intended engagements with relational materialism fall victim to the seductions of the humanist subject—becoming slips to being without much notice at all.6

All too often theoretical engagements with governing processes of reification necessarily invoke the liberal subject as a counter to this brand of thingification, not recognizing that reification depends on the very notion of the discreet, containable, subject for its extension. In short, our critical engagements must simultaneously make impossible governing practices via reification/alienation and the production of the liberal humanist subject. As such, new processes of subjectivity are necessary—particularly those that extend from a relational perspective on the world. We must consider newly relational possibilities in order to make possible newly productive means of challenging our thingification. The question remains, however, if such formations are possible within the dominating scheme of reification; perhaps alternative visions of thingification are necessary for radical social change.

As an extended example, consider for a moment the Academic Analytics movement that has taken up residency at many universities. For the purposes of this article, Academic Analytics

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6. Please keep in mind that I began articulating this concern with simplistic takes on new or critical materialism. For powerfully nuanced work that does not do this, I highly recommend the scholarship of Rosi Braidotti (2013; 2011), a scholar who has had great impact on me of late.

Kuntz—Higher Education
is both a cultural movement within higher education and a business (one that profits from the
cultural analytical movement it represents). As a technology, Academic Analytics affords the op-
opportunity to examine faculty production at multiple levels—across colleges, departments, or even
at the individual level. Faculty are given a “z-score” that is devised through a combination of
publication values: how much one has published, where, citation counts, impact factors, and more.
In general, a z-score is meant to represent how many standard deviations something is from the
mean—it is a confected representation of difference within a standardized and legitimized context.
Each faculty’s z-score is devised through comparison against a population of other faculty both
within the university and across the country based on rank and years in rank (for example, an
Associate Professor who has been at rank for four years will be compared to other Associate Pro-
fessors who have been at rank for four years). Within my university, faculty will soon receive a
star rating based on their respective comparative value—with five stars being an outstanding score.
As you move up in rank (from Assistant, to Associate, to Full Professor) your ranking and star-
power is adjusted accordingly.

This context is, of course, rife with the objectified relations inherent in processes of reifi-
cation. In order to manufacture a z-score, one needs both a normalized population with like values
(the mean against which data points are valued) and a representationally conflated series of attrib-
utes that are common to that population (the publication values discussed above). Thus, there exists
in this scenario a series of relational values (the distance between one’s data point and the mean,
or the standard deviation) that stand-in for one’s work as a faculty member; these are the related
objects through which faculty are known. Thus, one could be one’s objectified z-score, subjected
to an equation that gives select weights to one’s quantifiable research outputs (one is, in this in-
stance, the distance between oneself and the populated mean of one’s peers). One could be a seem-
ingly more qualitative star-rating; how one’s productivity is categorized within one’s institution
(how long before stars are then given colors in addition to numbers?: “Oh, you’re only a five star?
I’m a five gold star. Better luck next year.”). One could be the number of publications in peer-
reviewed journals in a particular year (the very data that make comparison possible). One is,
of course, institutionally recognized as all of those things, the tangled mass of z-scores, star ratings,
and individualized publication records that come together in one’s thingification; that is, one’s
objectified relation. Effectively, relational variables are frozen as objectified things—reified ob-
jects to which the (passive and subjected) faculty member must orient and respond.7

More specifically, given the process of reification, these relations are necessarily objecti-
ified and, in their relation, active—one is subjected to the relational claims of the z-score, star
rating, and publication record; they simultaneously stand-in for and act upon the faculty subject.
Within such circumstance of determined subjecthood (what one is), what is one to become (what
one has yet to be—the unknown future that the analytics movement seeks to predict or even preempt)? That is, how does one’s fixed representations impact what one has yet to be? This is an
issue that will be addressed in part two of this article.

In the end, from the traditional neoMarxist perspective, faculty identity is simultaneously
one of reification and alienation. I own not my work, for my work is more than me. I own not any
star-rating or z-score—they are the objectified extension of me; they represent me and they are
comparatively more than me. They stand in for and point to relations that exceed me as a faculty

7. Though perhaps beyond the scope of this article, this interpretation of the z-score actually breaks the hold of
representational thinking: it is not simply that the z-score stands in, or represents, the faculty member: within the
machine of higher education one is the score and its relations. In this sense, what was once representational becomes
literal; metaphor fails to hold. I examine this more completely in my forthcoming book, Relational Resistances.
subject. As a metaphor-inducing machine, this process of reification is cast within representational thinking (hence its reliance on the humanist subject for meaning making) and this makes possible a host of practices and further representations. As such, my work and my ratings stand in external relation to me; representative of me but decidedly not me. Of course, the “crisis of representation” (Marcus & Fischer 1999) in cultural theory and inquiry demonstrated the dangerous limits of representational thinking: representations inevitably fail to fully capture or contain that which they seek to represent; life is always already excessive. Thus it is that thingification in the reified sense is built on two limiting assumptions—the humanist subject and the mythos of representationalism. Certainly, academia is replete with research strategies aimed at creating more complete representations\textsuperscript{8}—inquiry as the technological companion to reification.

In some ways, the Academic Analytics movement feels like the Michelin Guide to Restaurants—wherein stars are given to restaurants that can, in turn, make or break an establishment based on whether they receive a one, two, or three star rating. As a gloss, traditionally, one star means that a restaurant is worth stopping in to while on one’s travels. A three-star rating is meant to designate those restaurants worth going out of one’s way for—so delightful that they are worth a trip unto themselves. Of course, this might be applied to faculty as well: these one star faculty are worth the odd visit, but it’s the three star faculty that are worth a side-trip away from one’s journey through the program of study. More ominously, the movement up the star-rating system brings with it recognition and economic stability; decline calls to question the very faculty’s subjecthood. Of course, The Michelin Guide is entirely qualitative—inspectors visit restaurants in person in order to understand its function, observing and eating multiple times before a star is awarded—so perhaps the comparison is not fully apt. At the same time, though Michelin Guides do not rely on z-scores, they do invoke a relational and representational logic that similarly enables the Academic Analytics movement. (Hence, it is not simply the method, but the logic that informs the method to which we might turn our critical eyes.)

Further, there is a familiar resistive quality among some restaurateurs whose actions align somewhat with faculty who seek to opt out of or otherwise disrupt these measuring processes. As an elitist technology, not all restaurants are considered worthy of inclusion in the Michelin Guide, so it is understood as a great honor to be considered for inclusion. Yet with recognition comes affective components of stress and expectation. Indeed, some well-known chefs have been said to have committed suicide due to their placement within the Michelin Guide.\textsuperscript{9} Consequently, some restaurant owners refuse star ratings because they bring undo expectations to their establishments—patrons come to expect too much; the food has become more than the restaurant. Representation exceeds material context. As a consequence, some restaurants request to not be assigned a star or, if they must, to be assigned the lowest star possible. This might be read as designing a strategic miscalculation; intervention through opting out or intentionally misrepresenting one’s relation. A similar claim might be made of faculty work: we might step outside the objectification of our work, returning the alienated star presentation as a proxy for our activities. The lazy, slow professor (a book of a similar title has developed a devoted following within the academy [Berg & Seeber, 2016]). And yet, importantly, to do so is to invoke much privilege; the privilege of slow

\textsuperscript{8} To observe this, one need only look to those standardized textbooks that populate many qualitative research syllabi. These texts are replete with strategies (of interviewing, observing, coding data, etc.) for generating more robust representations. If these texts are any indication, representational thinking is, indeed, alive and well in education and the social sciences. This despite the work of contemporary theorists to dismantle representational thinking, or, at least, put it into crisis.

\textsuperscript{9} I thank the editor for drawing me to this point.
resistance in a time of hyper-calculation, the processing speed of the statistic outpaces even the
determinedly slow resistive response.\textsuperscript{10} If you opt out of contributing to the calculating machine
you risk not existing within higher education at all or, perhaps worse, enduring new calculations
you had not imagined.

All of this analysis of the analytics movement (whether of the Academic or Michelin variety) corresponds with the relational logic of representationalism and reification. Yet, though perhaps descriptively poignant, I do not believe that the neoMarxist enthusiasm for reification (and its theoretically-conjoined twin, fetishization) is entirely helpful given our contemporary moment. We are immersed in intra-active\textsuperscript{11} contexts that do not adhere to the subject-object distinction from which reification finds its descriptive meaning. That is, we are relationally different. We are different things. The necessary assumption of the humanist subject and representational logic bind analyses of reification to an unhelpful place of stasis. And yet it is the seductive quality of the reified relation-humanist subject correspondence that seemingly propels much contemporary theory to play out this scenario ad infinitum. Thus, I next turn to a similar process of thingification that more usefully draws from circumstances of governmentality and biopower to provide avenues for productive intervention within higher education as a field or even a milieu.

Much work in contemporary educational theory has sought to counter the problematics of the liberal humanist subject through a shift to a relational understanding of the world, one that decenters humans from the analytical fore in favor of a newly materialist orientation towards knowing and being. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a thorough treatment of these perspectives, I do want to pause and recognize that all perspectives on the world—whether intentionally positioned as critical or not—are dangerous in particular ways.\textsuperscript{12} Totalizing theories are, one hopes, a thing of the past and, as such, phenomena inevitably exceed the theories or philosophies that seek to engage/create them. This is particularly true for theoretical engagements that perhaps fall back to recreate the very things they seek to critique.

As noted earlier, simplistic renditions of relational thinking—often generated in educational research—conflate notions of being with becoming. As a result, processes of generation (becoming something that has yet to be) lose their open-ended value, becoming victims of closure (an historicized desire for the discreet subject). Thus it is that unnecessarily reductive treatments of relational materiality graft the tenets of posthumanism or critically new materialism onto the liberal subject. In this way, relational logics are utilized to perhaps liberate some human subject to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} A somewhat amusing aside stems from an inadvertent mix-up involving the most recent iteration of The Michelin Guide. It seems that the editors confused two similarly named restaurants in France—one a roadside bistro with a part time cook and working class clientele; the other a decidedly upper class restaurant with two dining rooms and a terrace. Of course, the star was meant for the latter but mistakenly given to the former; a case of misrepresentation. Though the error was quickly fixed, the result had numerous material effects as a number of readers went out of their way to find the roadside bistro, overwhelming the owner with calls and requests. For more on this mishap, see NY-Times Michelin Star Mix-Up Throws a Working-Class Bistro Into a Media Storm by Hannah Olivennes Feb. 20, 2017.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} More and more utilized in critically materialist inquiry projects, the prefix “intra” signals “within” and represents a refusal to understand discreet entities external to one another (as is represented by the notion of “inter”). Such shifts in language necessarily disrupt the easy slippage into conventional formations of the contained subject even as they point to phenomena as produced within the moment of inquiry, never existing \textit{a priori} to the research practices that describe them.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Foucault (1983) has a well-worn quote on this: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger” (p. 231-232 Dreyfus & Rabinow).
\end{itemize}
become...yet another (though seemingly “more free”) subject. Indeed, this might be a useful example for how intra-relational projects become, themselves, accomplices to normalization; governance through the seduction of the subject.

Thus it is that we should pause a bit before we rush in to embrace the relational-thinking of, say Karen Barad (2007; 2003), else we produce a caricature of Baradian or Deleuzian (1995; 1992) or DeleuzioGuattarian (1988; 1972) philosophy; one that perhaps unwittingly aligns such relationality with the art of being normatively governed and thereby loses the radical possibilities for which such perspectives are often invoked. That is, there seems to be a movement within simplistic renderings of critical or new materialism to consider theorizations of entanglement, intra-action, and affect (to name but a few) as inherently freeing, or at least differently productive, for the resistive individual. And the term individual is intentional here as these simplistic usages of relational theory often quickly devolve into a perhaps-unintentional re-assertion of the liberal subject (now situated in newly material contexts) and/or a relationally absent and thereby apolitical personhood (that you have your affects and I have mine). The danger, of course, is that these very relations, though perhaps newly configured, make one all the more governable.

**Part II: Relational Things, or, Thingification without the Specter of the Liberal Humanist Subject**

With such concerns in mind, I want to turn to what I hope is a grounding context of faculty work and educational research as a series of governing practices developed through higher education. The latter is not so much a discipline (as its faculty and practitioners perhaps wish it to be) but more in line with a milieu; a term that denotes the operating contexts necessary for engaging the government of things. I read such governing contexts outside the reductive relation of reification and the liberal subject, examining instead the more dynamic—and subtly dangerous—process of thingification as it extends from more actively-relational governmental processes. There is here an alignment between my rendering of Foucault’s thingification as a process of governing and the DeleuzioGuattarian articulation of autopoietic systems, or, the ability of relational systems to enact self-change. As such, autopoietic systems cannot be “analyzed down” to some fundamental element. Instead, they must be understood through mapping the relations that construct the (self-changing) system. In this way, one might draw a close kinship between Foucault’s notion of the milieu and the protean process of autopoietic systems.

Instead of the object-subject distinction inherent in neoMarxist notions of reification, Lemke (2014) asserts that things in Foucault’s “government of things” are not frozen entities extracted from contextualized meaning—they do not stand outside, or apart from, relations they are meant to represent—but rather extend as things-in-relation that include human and non-human entities and processes.13 Such things resist the easy claims of representational logic, exceeding through their very relations the grasp of full representation, and do not require the mythos of the liberal subject from which to claim value. Importantly, the production of things-in-relation makes

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13. Notice here the difference between reified things (circulating, frozen objects) and this notion of things as always in-relation, produced through an ongoing and ever-present entanglement of relations. The former circulates discreet, formed object-things. The latter emphasizes relational things created via circulation—never fully-formed yet becoming-things; things produced by/within their very relations.
all things, for Foucault, eminently governable and, to the focus of this article, differently governable than the alienated subject that is the product of social reification. Indeed, Foucaultian thingification might be shown to make all things—all actions, relations, and practices—more completely governable (not just as alienated subjects). This orientation may also point to alternatively resistive practices so that we might learn “how not to be governed like that” (Foucault, 2014, p. 293); acts of disobedience. Further, given the relational framework foregrounded in Foucault’s sense of governmentality (or Deleuze’s notion of the control society referenced above), it remains important to note that resistive practices cannot extend from the mythos of the liberal subject. That is, those who seek alternatives to the normalized status quo cannot begin by pointing to or re-creating a discreet agential subject. Indeed, to do so would fall into the trap of invoking static externalized relations; a tendency I earlier critiqued as a manifestation of neoMarxism and analyses of reification.

As Lemke (2014) notes, Foucault’s later writings on biopower emphasize a relational approach to knowing and becoming that aligns rather well with those espoused by new/critical materialisms, a theoretical orientation that has come to the fore these past few years. Moving beyond stark divisions of subjects and objects, where the former has agency over the latter, Foucault asserts that “agential power originates in relations between humans and non-human entities” through the relational environment of the milieu (Lemke, 2014, p. 8). In discussing a “government of things,” Foucault (2007) defines things as “humans in their relationship with things like customs, habits, ways of acting, and thinking” as well as “things like accidents, misfortunes, famine, epidemics, and death” (p. 96). Things, then, are relationally bound; things occur at productive intersections and there is thus a density to them that bears mapping. This, of course, is a radically different thingification than the objectified-subject and subjectified-object that extends from the aforementioned reification-fetishization binary of old. Namely, one is not alienated from, one is (or is becoming), the relation. Put in terms of my example of Academic Analytics, one is not represented by or alienated from, one is (or becomes), the analytic. Representational thinking gives way to the literal materiality of the immanent-now.

Thus, when Foucault (2007) writes, “to govern means to govern things,” (p. 97) we need not read this as reducing all things towards a governable stasis. Instead, there is an important element here where governing means to turn humans, relations, matter, into things that are calculable—a quantification of relations that include affective states—sensations, fears, interests, etc. And yet, we often understand our affective states as exceeding calculus—as more natural than other processes. Affective encounters are perhaps romanticized as echoes of an ungoverned truth, in need of regulation in order to make them more comprehensible. As an example, conventional qualitative researchers often seek to dismiss affective engagements as beyond the grasp of data—external noise that interferes with the production of necessary meaning. More anti-foundational approaches to inquiry (as exemplified by the newly critical materialist turn) seek ways to encounter the affective as productively excessive—its incomprehensibility rendered as its most engaging qualities. Returning to the example of the Academic Analytics movement, it remains important to

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14. What follows extends from Foucault’s (2014) notion of governmentality, or governance through the normalization of populations. Foucault’s notion of governmentality draws together an assemblage of institutions, processes, practices, procedures, and calculations that collude to target population, resulting in governable subjects. A strong technique of governmentality is that of security—the means by which we are motivated to be governed in the name of security. A full treatment of governmentality—and its distinction from disciplinary power formations—is beyond the scope of this article.

15. For a consideration of methodologies that engage the immediate-now, see Guyotte & Kuntz (in press). Becoming openly faithful: Qualitative pedagogy and paradigmatic slippage. International Review of Qualitative Research.
recognize that the affective response—of joy, say, when informed that one’s citation counts have increased, or dread at the prospect of losing ground in the analytical ranking system—to such calculations is not external to them. Such affections are developed within the very relations that make them possible—they remain intimately material even as they exceed representation within the normalized analytical system.

A Foucauldian reading of such excess—the productive noise that disrupts the easy production of static data—returns to a relational orientation; one that recognizes that relational effects inevitably extend beyond the reach of calculation. This extends from Foucault’s recognition that “agential power originates in relations” (Lemke 2014, p. 10) and calls to question the easy bifurcation of subjects from objects, individual from social process, humans from nonhumans (or humans from matter, to borrow from the new materialists). Indeed, such distinctions might be seen as both an instrument and effect of governing; establishing and enacting the very boundaries that maintain normative function. Designating these boundaries and reinscribing the very logic that makes them visible and commonsensical is consequently a very political act. Thus it is that conventional research practices, themselves invoked to promote epistemological and ontological boundaries, take on the burden of the political. Researchers are not afforded the privilege of standing outside the political realm; they are intimately implicated because their acts—and the logics they manifest—have a hand in the creation of the political (and the effects therein). From such designations and relations, one important effect is the production of not the alienated liberal subject (as the neoMarxists would have it) but dividuals, a relational creation that is pivotal to contemporary forms of governing.

What, then, finally is the difference between traditional engagements with reification and the government of things? To begin, the former assumes a subject that is then representationally replaced by commodified objects, resulting in alienation, a dehumanizing relation that is overcome by a return to the cohesive subject—a unification, of sorts that extends from dialectical moves towards synthesis. The latter, a government of things, recognizes relations not as extensions of some humanist center, but as entangled intersections. These intersections are relationally known and experienced through the very production of the dividual. In this way, the dividual exists on epistemological and ontological (even onto-epistemological) levels. Here, relational difference productively makes possible something that has yet to be; an extension of more dialogic orientations to meaning.

The Dividual

In distinction from normalized representations of the individual as a discreet, nonreducible liberal subject (or self), Deleuze (1992) developed the notion of the dividual, an endlessly divisible human, subjected to an infinite array of normalizing data representations. The dividual is thus simultaneously known individually (as a unique and immediate intersection of multiple data points) and collectively (the bits and pieces of data that inform a larger sense of a normalized population). The dividual is both/and—simultaneously individualized and massified—and, as such, all the more governable. Deleuze considered the dividual as a primary function of a control society (itself a break from the disciplinary society articulated in the early writings of Foucault) and I want here to consider the term as a necessary element of the government of things.

As Lazzarato (2014) terms it, the dividual is “infinitely divisible,” “decomposable into partial and modular subjectivities and into multiple pre-individual vectors of subjectivation” (p. 195). As my faculty career arcs through tenure my faculty-data deems me merit-us (worthy of merit
pay), promotable (from Assistant, to Associate, to Full Professor), and employable. My data are pieced together with other data to produce reports for the department, the college, the university—I contribute to data-points of productivity that rationalize my position collectively—as such, through the analytical machine, I am individualized and collectivized simultaneously; folded unto myself within and without the cloud of collectivity. I plug-into, am plugged-into, the subjectivizing machine. Out of the academic analytics machine, the faculty dividual is born.

The production of the dividual extends as a government of things—the thingification of relational possibility and probability—and releases any epistemological reliance on the liberal subject to maintain the normalized status quo. The dividual is to be managed, relationally understood as a collective publics: “a circulation of ways of doing things, ways of being, opinion addressed to an audience” (Clough, 2010, p. 634). Thus it is that the collectively-relational value of the dividual-as-publics make possible governance on onto-epistemological levels (the entanglement of knowing with being). Whereas governance from the perspective of reification hinged on epistemological controls (a la representationalism), a relational government of things blurs the distinction between knowing and becoming, integrating governing effects into all elements of life, including the affective. In this way, the governing state, as Clough (2010) notes, is no longer primarily engaged with elements of law but, instead, becomes organized around administrative function (of all elements of data, including the administration of affective states). Faculty work, like that of the traditional researcher, becomes one of administrivia. Indeed, educational inquiry plays no small part in this phenomenon of governmentality.

And, of course, the dividual is imminently governable, manipulable. In this way, analytics, as a technology of governmentality, “incites the individual to establish an environment that forces him[her]…to react in one way instead of another” (Lazzarato 2015, p. 11). I adjust, create, an environment that makes my dividuation all the more remarkable and engrossing. No longer external to or created before the governmental context, my activities contribute to the context through which I am individualized and generatively massified. I become with/as governing relations; governing through thingification.

It remains important to distinguish this process of thingification from that of the production of reified things. The dividual actively contributes to the individualizing and massifying data-relations that generate the context for knowing and being a dividual; the dividual becomes/is the data and data relations that make it knowable and governable. There is no passive subject to juxtapose with an externally active object. There exist here an active and constructing series of relations within phenomena. This, then, is an intra-active process, one situated as important to the work of new materialists, particularly those who emphasize the work of Karen Barad (2007) in their theorizations. However, though much of the new materialists who examine research practices point to the productive power of such relations-within, here it must be noted that intra-action makes possible the governed dividual even as it opens renewed possibility for resistance. The dividual in intra-action with the very forces and relations that make its governance possible; both/and. In this

16. It remains important to note that this reorientation of faculty work to all things administrative occurs not solely because there exists more administrative work than in the past (though that may be) but because the very nature of faculty existence has altered such that administrative activity is an extension of faculty practice. In this way, the phenomenon of faculty work both reflects and creates the governing practices of the day (altering to take account of and engage with normalizing assumptions about what faculty can and should do).

17. Not to belabor the point, but what once was an external relation (interrelation) has become an always-internal relation (intrarelation) with phenomena. Phenomena are thus understood as becoming-events, including those researchers who seek to cast them as an object of study. For more on this qualitative shift, particularly as it relates to the notion of inquiry, see Barad (2007).
way, governing as the creation and extension of the dividual is all the more encompassing than practices that are a vestige of disciplinary power. The government of things manifests on ontological and epistemological levels—not just how things are thought to be, but how things become in material relation, is the focus of such thingification. Of course, the multiple formations of such governing relations, though seemingly overwhelming in their ubiquity, open-up extended opportunities for moments of misgovernance, or resistance.

Further, it would be a mistake to characterize the dividual—and the relations that produce the dividual-as-thing—as amaterial (or immaterial to processes of governing). In actuality, these relations are profoundly material, extending as they do from actions, flows, intensities, etc. that manifest in what has traditionally been known as the material world. This remains the very point of data, relations, etc. as not bound by representationalism—they are generatively material. As such, in order to effectively engage within the production of the dividual (and its effects) we need newly productive disruptions to the logic of preemption, an orientation within the world that plays a significant role in the government of things and is particularly encountered in higher education and educational inquiry.

Pre-emptive Logic (as Material)

Though perhaps at first glance commonsensical, preemptive logic bears unpacking as a governing force. To begin, preemption requires a predictive component (what might come to be) based on an analysis of the past (what was) that comes to bear on present practice (the immediate now). This collapse of the past with the future in the present simultaneously makes possible and extends the dividual—creating the historical data necessary to predict what might be and the identity that is to receive the intervention. Further, logics of preemption rely on an affective anxiety felt at the level of population that creates the rationale for such intervention. Thus it is that the logic of preemption engages both the relational logic necessary for the dividual and an affective capacity towards normalization.18

Further, recall the onset of preemptive logic alluded to above in the shift from being (what one is, a subjecthood) towards becoming (what one might be, a possibility), first noted in processes of reification. Simply, preemptive logic refuses notions of becoming (and their open-ended, incalculable futures) in favor of casting back to identity (what one is calculated to be); becoming truncated into being. Often, preemptive logic manifests through the calculation of risk and security as understood within the normalizing qualities of population. It is thus through this process that population generatively intersects with time, making possible future engagements based on statistical renderings of the past.

The relationally temporal quality of population (modulating as it does with immediate/immanent material relations) presents events as aleatory, or accidental, yet perhaps accepted simply because they could not be foreseen. Thus it is that the very notion of security anticipates some disruptive effect (after all, were all things to continue without the possibility for change, we would

18. As an aside, herein lies an example of the dangers inherent in simplistic renditions of new materialism or posthuman theory—in a race to emphasize processes of becoming as unfinished, incomplete, and just beyond the critical gaze, one risks overlooking the preemptive logic that governs such a phenomenon: resulting policies and practices (similarly unfinished) calculate us into existence in particular ways. Simply pointing to an incomplete, relational situatedness is not, by itself, freeing.
not think to question our security). Practices of security seek to stabilize otherwise disruptive modulations to the circulations of population, working to enhance circulating relations that safeguard normalized order; the way things are or should be. Thus it is that security is a conservative move that anticipates risk—seeking to restore an ordered system even as it presumes that such order can never fully sustain. In relation, preemptive logic, population, and security manifest the assumption that uncertainty must be governed or regulated back to coherency—dealt with and normalized.

As such, uncertainty plays an important role in processes of governmentality wherein governance is driven by the threat of material changes to the status quo. Though it is perhaps all-too-easy to recognize the many ways in which our daily practices of living are to a large part influenced by concerns for security and risk, I want to layer this notion with the production of the dividual in order to understand its articulation within higher education. This remains important as the logic that informs Academic Analytics extends from the predominant way in which we culturally conceive of threat, imagine its resolution towards some degree of certainty, and foreclose possibilities for becoming otherwise. In many ways, then, the intersection of security, population, and preemptive logic becomes a driving force for accepted visions of reality and, thus, an important form of governing. The governing relations of thingification consequently manifest through a preemptive logic of intercepting and managing those relations that have yet-to-be, yet might still become.

Indeed, to engage with questions of uncertainty means one has to produce things that may be managed; relations that produce and sustain an affect of security. Thus it is that Morrissey (2013) writes, “planning for uncertainty means that populations [and their productions]…must be coded, ascribed value and quantified” (p. 799). One cannot engage uncertainty at the micro level of population without generating a series of statistical “truths” that define that population. That is, population cannot exist as an amorphous entity—it must be statistically known, rendered, and governed. This is strikingly apparent in higher education, given the increase in a management culture “that seeks to enable, regulate and ultimately govern the contemporary academic culture” (p. 799). This culture activates security mechanisms seeking to manifest some desired (and quantifiable) end and does so through the preemption of possible futures.

Importantly, governance through a logic of preemption does not seek to operate on a necessary binary of normal-deviant (with the expectation that governing seeks to intervene and preempt the manifestation of the deviant). Instead, as Clough (2010) notes, “governance is less interested in the distinction between the normal and the abnormal but in a comparison of normalities” (p. 633; emphasis added). Thus it is that the normalization of populations occurs through self-referential and relational processes; normalization feeds itself and does not need an opposite for its existence—it needs no representational certainty. As a seemingly benign example, the field of education generally—and educational research more specifically—is replete with “promising practices”: activities that are shown to be normatively generative, producing effects that work to extend (and govern) select contexts—the process of normalization continues without the referent of the abnormal or deviant (in this case, perhaps, the promise-less practices).

Part of this comparison of normalities extends from logics of preemption as a governing force aiming to not distinctly intervene (and thereby change course to something else) but to, as Deleuze (1992) notes, engage in control through modulation. Like a radio wave, processes of normalization flow, bending and changing in form, until aligned into a normalized pattern to produce something, a recognized/able frequency. In similar fashion, dividuals—and the populations of which they are a part—modulate, becoming “undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network” (Deleuze, 1992; p. 6). The dividual in/as network, modulating to produce normalized effects. Returning to the example of Academic Analytics, such relations serve more than a representative
function (representing who I am in relation to what I did the previous year)—they are used to preempt future activities, to warn of my failure to live my faculty existence in productive and otherwise normatively useful ways. Analytics have both a simultaneously descriptive and predictive function—they become the cause for and the extension of the logic of preemption.

Turning our attention to higher education, we might follow the work of Morrissey (2013) to recognize university academics as what Foucault terms a “target population”—the intersection of multiple processes, practices, and, importantly, calculations that, through the density of their relation, outline the performing academic subject. Importantly, the faculty member, as dividual, is never complete, has never fully become a discreet thing. Always in perpetual modulation with/in the milieu of higher education, the faculty dividual exists through “a universal form of deformation” where “one is never finished with anything”; perpetual training is the modulating norm (Deleuze, 1992; p. 5). Recall my earlier example regarding the endless grant workshops and assessment trainings faculty endure to better engage their reified field of study. In that instance, the passive faculty member responded to the active field. Read without the binds of reification, the faculty individual and field-milieu modulate; control and governance through the normalizing flows of self-creation (the one is/as the other); mutual administrivia. This is the production of the “self-deforming cast” that Deleuze notes is an extension of the control society. Importantly, this incessantly driven system of modulation-control is an example of its autopoeistic formation—a becoming machine of governance.

And yet such relations come to be within a context, a milieu, that grants select meaning and configuration to them. As an educational researcher, I come to understand data as always partial, never objective, and exceedingly political. These analytics never exist in abstraction, absent the meaning-generation of the milieu. Thus, in this last section I would like to focus in on the production of higher education as a particular milieu through which thingification extends as becoming governance/governable.

The Faculty Dividual

Given the production of the dividual, normalizing relations of population, and preemptive logics, what is made calculable by the mutually sustaining logics of conventional higher education? What affective states extend with such calculus? I think it important to recognize the many ways in which faculty are produced as governable things and research (or even teaching) is established as a technology for such technocratic generation. Consider for a moment the contemporary move towards clinical and/or adjunct faculty in place of tenure-track lines. This, of course, is well documented within the literature in higher education. What remains of interest is the particularization of faculty activity that goes hand-in-hand with such movement. Most often, clinical or adjunct faculty are hired for a particular function—typically, teaching—that divides up traditional faculty practices; the productive relation of teaching and research is severed. Such non-tenure track faculty are thus recognized for their quantifiable outputs—the FTE’s they generate or degrees of student satisfaction, for example. This presentation of select faculty value allows for comparison across larger segments—a quantification of faculty work. The result is a reduction of previously intellectual activity to calculated/calculable procedure. Faculty work is segmented, relations among faculty activities severed. Faculty, and their work, as things.

Perhaps more importantly, there remain material consequences for such divisions. Indeed, one need only look to the space of colleges and universities for such outcomes—what makes a
clinical faculty member, as such? A required teaching load? A lack of visibility on university committees? Placement in often-windowless offices (if an office is even a possibility)? Select university norms that are different than mine as a tenured faculty member? Perhaps even an individual’s avowal: Yes, I am that: I am clinical; nearly, though not quite, tenurable. Of course, these circumstances or markers never exist in isolation, they extend through a milieu. Now place this avowed clinical faculty member within a social context of what some might recognize as an erosion of faculty governance, a decrease in tenure-track positions, buildings that structurally support faculty hierarchies, an increase in an online presence across colleges and universities, perhaps even a felt sense of anxiety or fear regarding politics in the classroom or office-space. Thus it is that such things relate and, through their very relation, governance—calculation—occurs. The faculty dividual is rendered legible within/as modulating population, a relational thing manifesting through processes of prediction (what might come to be) and preemption (what cannot be); governed into security. Such governance occurs as a productive element of the milieu, a series of effects through which the faculty dividual is known. As a result, it is the incessant production of the milieu to which we might apply our cartographic practices, mapping the effects of security and preemption as they develop in the immediate-now.

The Milieu

As Foucault articulates it, the milieu is both a set of what he terms “natural givens—rivers, marshes, hills—and a set of artificial givens—an agglomeration of individuals, of houses, etcetera. The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it” (Foucault 2007, p. 21). Foucault (2007) further defines the milieu as the “space in which a series of uncertain elements unfold” (p. 20). The milieu is thus a space of technological intervention (in the name of security). Further still, events come into being, are conducted, through technologies.

Thus it is that the milieu is a material set of relations that manifest uncertainly. Security, then, is grounded within the relational milieu, seeking to maintain, normalize, and pre-empt uncertain ends. For Foucault, the concept of the milieu is a security device that conceptualizes and manages population: “the notion of milieu fixes the gaze of those governing onto the circulation of population” (O’Grady, 2014, p. 524). The milieu orients governance in particular ways. Importantly, it is through the notion of the milieu that population becomes a governable object, buffeted by the normalizing logics of security. In this case, “population” is productively material—not simply an idea or a grouping of statistical measures without grounding. Instead, “population” encompasses humans, nonhumans, and their co-existing relations, as well as the effects of their relating (O’Grady, 2014). Thus it is that population exists as a materially effected (and effecting) series of intersecting relations, varying along with the intensities of such relations. As such this notion of “population” is far from fixed, but is instead a modulating and circulating material process. Further, population becomes the object of security through a series of self-regulating relations that maintain order through planning for an imagined future—one that accounts for select breaks in future order and verifies select security practices as necessary governance: taking into account “precisely what might happen” (Foucault, 2007, p. 20).

Given that Foucault identifies the milieu as a field of intervention that affects population, it may prove useful to consider possibilities for resistance to contemporary forms of governance within such spaces. Higher education, as a milieu, plays a key role in planning for uncertainty—enactments of preemptive logic. Indeed, to engage with questions of uncertainty means one has to produce effects, things to be managed and tied to the effect of security. Thus it is that Morrissey
(2013) notes that “planning for uncertainty means that populations [and their productions]…must be coded, ascribed value and quantified” (p. 799). This is strikingly apparent in higher education, given the increase in management culture that activates security mechanisms seeking to manifest some desired (and quantifiable) end.

Resistance?

Worthman and Troiano (2016) rightly point to the necessity of locating and operating within spaces in which resistive and productively imaginative work might occur; it is my belief that higher education might be a place for such engagements. Through our relationally-minded scholarship we might intervene simultaneously at the level of daily practices and the layered notion of the *milieu*. Indeed, if it is “a milieu in which we exist and must act in order to be someone” (p. 3), perhaps we have to disrupt such regimes of truth in order to make possible alternative modes of becoming, more disruptive senses of subject-creation. We become with and within the milieu; we change our relational existence even as it changes us. More simply, in order to change the objects we make of ourselves, we need to simultaneously alter the circumstances in which such objects are made known.

What, then, is political action in this moment of intensive dividuation manifesting within Academic Analytics in the milieu of higher education? If, as Lazzarato (2015) notes, the *new collective* is to be found in “data banks, surveys, market studies, and so on” (p. 193)—that is, conglomerations of the *dividual*—how are we to interrupt these normalizing processes? How are we to become less governable given the way in which plugging in to analytics makes possible our/my career arc? Perhaps such interventions might productively extend from a re-orientation to notions of truth.

Of late, there seems to be a bit of political consternation of the meaning of ‘truth’ in our world; what is it? How is it known? To whom (or what) does it speak? As Foucault (1980) aptly noted, “truth is a thing of this world.” The wording here is not accidental and points to more than truth as an historical artifact of context. As a *thing*, of course, truth becomes a dense-entanglement, made up of a series of practices, processes—relations—that establish its contextual recognition. So, how, then, are we to engage with such relations—such *things*—to the extent that they lose their governmental power? That is, how are we to critique or tell-the-truth about things as a disruptive intervention? These are the questions for educational researchers generally and critical scholars of higher education more specifically.

In some ways, I suppose I follow Patricia Cough’s (2010) request for newly developed ways of engaging across methodologies and theories to “address governance while giving freer rein to the indeterminacy of the in-between of the exceptional and the unexceptional ordinary” (p. 641). Given this excavation of reified and more dynamically relational thingification, it makes good sense to turn to the question of resistance. That is, how do these critical orientations of governing make possible select formations of becoming otherwise? What do they make (newly) possible?

To begin, theorists steeped in traditionally neo-Marxist considerations of reification most often work to expose this process of thing-making as inherently alienating and contradictory. Through demystifying the reification process, such critics perhaps hope to reveal cracks in the façade of complete representation—in these critical interstices new modes of being might take form. This form of critique is steeped in the dialectical tradition. On the other hand, those intent on productively engaging with the governance of things from a materially-relational perspective...
might engage a more speculative stance that emphasizes the potential for miscalculation, to present possibilities for becoming differently. This is to dwell in the messy space where being (what one is) blurs into becoming (what one incompletely might come to be). Given this, those of us who value the strategic possibilities of research practices in the academy might usefully question how select inquiry practices might make possible disruptive miscalculations; those activities that exceed the bind of normalization.

In the end, Deleuze (1992) famously wrote, “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (p. 4). Notice here the call to not be overcome by the affective response (nor to produce the affective as a goal unto itself) but to shift to strategies made possible within such affections. What new weapons are at our disposal? What newly material things might we make possible that escape or exceed normalizing logics of preemption? If higher education is to exist as the government of things, scholars need perpetually new weapons to make possible new formations, miscalculations that make futures newly possible; ends never preordained, becomings never reverted to being.

References


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