I am recently returned from the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Austin, Texas, accompanied by one of my co-Directors Chris Piuma, and I have to say that...
it was the most exhilarating, inspiring, galvanizing event I have ever attended, and for reasons that had practically zilch to do with the actual Convention itself (not counting a few amazing sessions I attended, such as Jesse Stommel and Dorothy Kim’s Disrupting DH Redux session which was in-your-establishment-face-kick-ass; the session that we built around Kathleen Biddick’s shortly forthcoming new book Make and Let Die: Untimely Sovereignties, which was incredibly moving; and Chris Newfield’s session on the financialization of the university, at which Richard Grusin stepped us through the recent decimation of tenure and faculty at the University of Wisconsin), and it had everything to do with what was happening on the fringes of the conference: the Subconference of the MLA, sponsored and hosted by the BABEL Working Group, Studium & Punctum (books+records), at Cheer-up Charlies on Red River, Punctum Record’s Free Week showcases at Stay Gold and Cheer-up Charlies, and the party Dan Rudmann staged Friday night to celebrate Studium’s new home in east Austin. Also, a helluva lot of fun happened at Weather Up Austin for the Happy Hour BABEL & postmedieval staged to celebrate winning CELJ’s Codex Award (for special distinction in premodern historical studies, from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages) and which later served as the site for GLQ‘s books party. Let’s just say that dancing broke out. A memorable final (quiet) evening was had at Justine’s restaurant on Sunday evening, in the company of Dan Rudmann, Chris Piuma, and Jonathan Forbes, where we encountered Brianna Jewell (Justine’s hostess), who was one of the PhD students who helped us to
stage BABEL’s first biennial meeting in Austin in 2010, and
given that our first after-party during that meeting was at
Cheer-up Charlie’s, well, let’s just say: something came full
circle. And something also cracked…for me, anyway.

For a while now, I have found that I really need to concentrate
all of my energies on punctum books, although I have also
found myself pulled in so many directions that it has been
difficult to always give it my full attention, and I have been
increasingly despondent over my (in)ability to do my various
“jobs.” But there is some light breaking over the horizon. Now
that Lara Farina, Julie Orlemanski, and Daniel Powell have
joined Myra Seaman in the editorial directorship of
*
*postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, I can step
back and let them essentially take over. I will stay on as an
editor and will continue to be involved in the conceptualization
of special issues and in the strategic planning of the journal’s
future(s), but I feel confident (and happy) that the journal is
mainly in the hands of my beautiful, brilliant, capable friends. I
know they will keep it “smart and weird,” and I love them for
that. Likewise, thanks to the establishment last year of the
Steering Committee of the BABEL Working Group, whose
management of our biennial meeting in Toronto last October
was a smashing success, I can also let go a little of my
control-freak tendencies, and maybe even sit back and watch
as new things unfold for BABEL, thanks to the efforts of
Suzanne Akbari, Liza Blake, Sakina Bryant, Jeffrey Cohen,
Lara Farina, Jonathan Hsy, Asa Mittman, Julie Orlemanski,
Chris Piuma, Angie Bennett Segler, Karl Steel, and Maggie
Williams (as well as to whoever will be our 4 new members this coming Spring term). And thanks to the expansion of the directorship of punctum books, which now includes my partners David Hadbawnik, Chris Piuma, and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, I am beginning to feel as if the avalanche of work that punctum has invited may actually (and finally) be manageable.

Having left the University in 2013, but always working on behalf of it, after this MLA Convention, I think I need to recommit myself to that University (an Ideal as opposed to any specific institution) and to the Radical Commons, which also means re-committing myself to Dan Rudmann and his cohort with Punctum Records, Studium, and Human Sciences in Austin, Texas. We are going to have some big news to share about this renewed alliance, and as to what happens next, and in the spirit of sharing some of my tribulations over the past 2 years, I will share here an *expanded* version of the paper I delivered during the plenary session of the Sub-conference of the MLA, which was meant to address how, in this Neoliberal Age, when anything that can be monetized will be, how we will maintain any sort of line between the “public” and the “private,” and why that might, or might not, even matter anymore. Since the conference organizers themed the conference as “Between the Public and its Privates,” I thought I would riff on the double-entendre of “privates.” The paper has been greatly expanded to help me consolidate all of my feelings about what happened while I was in Austin, much of which happened because of the vision, efforts, and humanitarian-
communitarian ethos of Dan Rudmann and his Austin cohort. This is also, then, a love letter to them.

**It is the Connection of Desire to Reality that Possesses Revolutionary Force, or, Why I Decided Not to Commit Suicide, After All**

by Eileen A. Joy


**But if this world, even though it has changed…, proposes no new figure of community, perhaps this in itself teaches us something. We stand perhaps to learn from this that it can no longer be a matter of figuring or modeling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still unheard demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings…. Nothing has yet been said: we must expose ourselves to what has gone unheard in community.**

~Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

**Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic. Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality… that possesses revolutionary force.**
~Michel Foucault, Preface to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

*for Dan Rudmann, Heterotopianist Par Excellence, Friend, Comrade, Game-Changer*

*all images from Studium & Punctum Records & BABEL events, 2014-2015 (see more at http://www.studiumaustin.com /here)*

**Invocation: Your Privates**

I am here to talk to you about your privates. And yes, I mean *those* privates.

**The Individual is the Indivisible Unit of Democracy**

I want to begin with a brief aside about what I have found are some common, and persistent, misconceptions about
punctum books and its mission. First, we are not Digital Humanists, although we have often been described as such. We do not eschew nor scorn the term, nor do we ever want to denigrate the field of the Digital Humanities (DH) writ large from some sort of unreconstructed, post-medievalist Luddite position. That would be idiotic, and some of our most important allies are Digital Humanists and New Media theorists such as the “disruptive” scholar-activists Jesse Stommel and crew at Hybrid Pedagogy, and other scholars such as Janneke Adema, Cheryl Ball, Jen Boyle, Benjamin Bratton, Helen Burgess, Wendy Chun, Johanna Drucker, Martin Eve, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Alexander Galloway, Rick Godden, Matthew Gold, Richard Grusin, Gary Hall, Jonathan Hsy, Alexa Huang, Ed Keller, Dorothy Kim, Adeline Koh, Jussi Parrika, Roopika Risam, Domenico Fiormonte and crew in Italy, Alan Liu, Rita Raley, Angela Bennett Segler, Eugene Thacker, and others who are challenging the business-of-usual of an increasingly neoliberalized Academy (and Interwebs) and who are working, with great verve and passion, to call attention to issues woefully unattended to within the Digital Humanities that have to do with longue durée media histories and archaeologies, undocumented and uncompensated labor, indifferent (and occasionally hostile) corporate “interests,” race, gender, disability/accessibility, queer and trans identities, settler colonial logics, indigenous cultures, the neoliberal takeover of the Public University (and the Public Interwebs), and the like: these people are our heroes and as a publisher we are passionately committed to cultivating and promoting their work
But we are also more than eager to rattle and storm the ramparts of what we like to call the Smug Digital Humanities (SDH) within which certain prominent scholars and publishers and universities believe they have the “one answer” to whatever is supposedly ailing the Humanities (and the Public University more largely) and who are seemingly very willing to get into bed with some seriously questionable partners, such as corporations like Informa, Coursera, Apple, Google, NewGen, Nielsen, Udacity, and the like. Even worse, in the face of the thorough neoliberalization of the Public University, some SDH-ers seem very happy, and almost giddy, about the possibilities for a more “entrepreneurial” University. Instead of demanding that the state (and the nation) live up to their obligation to fund public higher education (and all of its pursuits and experiments) as an inalienable right of the citizenry and as the one of the highest social goods, they seek salvation in private foundations, for-profit corporations, and “the market.”[1] And they call it “revolutionary,” “radical,” and “new.” They call it the “future” and they build “Futures Initiatives” and “Futures Institutes.” Wait until they find out that the locks on the very things they will build and are building have been changed and their “keys” no longer work. It’s going to be very cold Outside, but it’s also going to be warm if you seek out the basements and bars and clubs and spare bedrooms and parks and parties where some of us are now gathering to stage a Revolution.
And yes, this is a Revolution, and a joyous one at that. It involves radical (even productively *regressive*) change but also a reclamation of what was always ours and always will be ours, held in common (let’s call this not just intellectual property but historical property). It involves non-possessive love and mutual admiration. It involves vows of poverty and mendicant itinerancy. It involves walking together across the City in the rain. It involves building makeshift shelters in the Woods. It involves cocktails. It involves dancing. It involves the idea, in the parlance of the poet Lisa Robertson, that “the most pleasing civic object would be erotic hope.”[2] Bear with me.

Second, we did not found punctum books because we were driven by the desire to advance and assist the Open Access (OA) movement, although we certainly consider ourselves activists *within* that movement, but it was not a primary motivation. (And similar to the Digital Humanities, and especially in Europe, with very few exceptions, OA publishing has been so thoroughly co-opted by commercial interests that academic humanities publishing has almost thoroughly
devolved to a “state of exception” that is literally breathtaking in its “bottom line” economics.) What was a primary motivation behind punctum can be summed up by something punctum’s co-founder Nicola Masciandaro said when we were hanging out in his apartment in Brooklyn in 2011: why is everyone so afraid to write what they want to write, to publish what they want to publish? Why, we ruminated together, whether we are seeking tenure-track jobs or have tenure already or simply want to get inside the covers of a book, are we besieged by so many anxieties and fears regarding what we think we are allowed to say, allowed to write, allowed to express? Might it be possible, we wondered out loud, to found a press that would specifically answer to the specific desires of singular individuals who might almost be dying(inside) to write something that they have convinced themselves in advance is unpublishable and for which no existing publisher would take the “risk”? And might a publisher then perform the (loving) function of a form of self-care that attends to these singular desires, that allows them to flourish and find their way into the world that would be sustaining of the spirit and dignity that gave birth to them? (The Publisher as an Agent of Natality.)

And speaking of dying to write something that might not answer to “front end” marketing concerns, the academic monograph is far from being over, although many have claimed it so. This supposed “fact,” or idea, often emerges from the same Chicken Little mentality that continues to declare “the book” is dead, even though by many accounts it
is doing quite well, and most people choose to read in a variety of forms and will likely continue to do so.\[4\] There is currently a lot of hand-wringing within the Academy and also within academic publishing (at both university and commercial academic presses) over whether or not the monograph has a future and/or what new form(s) it might (have to) take in the future, and much of the discussion over such assumes that the monograph should both conform to (and shape-shift in line with) whatever new digital platforms for knowledge dissemination are emerging as well as continue to adhere to the most traditional (and often strangulating) systems of review and content formats that would then supposedly confer “prestige” and “authority” upon the books being published, in whatever form.\[5\] But if the email queries and proposals that punctum receives daily are any indication, so many people (both academics and para-academics) have so many books they want to write (both monographs and edited collections), that we literally cannot handle the demand and we have to regularly institute reading embargoes, sometimes as long as four to five months, just so we can catch up.

This brings me to the core mission of punctum books, and why I also think what we are doing is truly different from any existing university press and even from most independent presses (although we have our allies and heroes, such as Open Humanities Press and re.press, among others): we are an Open Access press, not because we make our titles broadly available to the public (to Readers) without exorbitant fees and high paywalls (although we do do that, and it
matters, especially in the context of public universities where research should never be shuttered from the public), but because we are dedicated to opening up access to publication for Authors who otherwise might not find a publisher, either because their work does not fit within a readily recognizable current disciplinary paradigm or because they want to experiment with the forms and styles of academic writing or because their work engages in disciplinary mashups that make marketing their work overly difficult and so on. It’s a question of personal freedom and how the publisher (however defined: university-based, independent, etc.) is an agent of both sustenance and productive transformation.

Because, you see, we are for the individual, and for individual desire: singular, molecular, possessing a certain opaque unto-itself-ness, and for me, a certain dignity—forgive the (somewhat) spiritual metaphor, but even Derrida believed in dignity (something I learned from the gorgeous and always indispensable Michael O'Rourke[6])—which is why I always agree with the political theorist George Kateb that the most important indivisible, unpoachable unit of any democracy is the individual. And I further agree with Kateb when he writes that the right to be free of degradation and misery answers to a minimal samaritanism as morally obligatory on society and looks to government to carry it out. It is a right to be given something, to be enabled to begin to live a life. Samaritanism is obligatory on society, and obligatory samaritanism would be the foundation of a right to life which was expanded beyond its
present constitutional interpretation in the United States. I believe that this right, more than any other, stands in need of expansion through positive governmental action, despite all the serious risks involved in charging governments with the task of fostering life. [7]

For me it always was, and always will be, about the individual (human, beast, or fowl), which stands over and against, in a sense, the Public and also the Group, and this individual must have something to live for, and within the Academy and Para-Academy at least, that often means what Alain Badiou has called “the grace of living for an idea.” As Badiou elaborates further,

the infinite of worlds is what saves us from every finite disgrace. Finitude, the constant harping on of our mortal being, in brief, the fear of death as the only passion—these are the bitter ingredients of democratic materialism. We overcome all this when we seize hold of the discontinuous variety of worlds and the interlacing of objects under the constantly variable regimes of their appearances. We are open to the infinity of worlds. To live is possible. Therefore, to (re)commence to live is the only thing that matters.[8]

To recommence to live…one might say that for those of us who not only believe “another world is possible,” that we have also concluded that this world of the Neoliberal University is presently impossible, and similar to a dream Derrida once had, we feel that “[b]illions of men and women in the world share this dream [of another world]” and we believe with Derrida that, “[t]hrough slow and painful labor they will give
birth to it some day.”[9] And with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, we are lighting out for the wild territory ahead—in Jack Halberstam’s words (writing about Moten and Harney’s Undercommons), “the wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness.” Most important, the path to this wild place is “paved with refusal,” and we “begin with the right to refuse what has been refused to [us].”[10] Which is why, beginning in 2016, we will no longer designate ourselves as “Brooklyn, NY: punctum,” but will instead denote ourselves as “Earth, Milky Way: punctum.” We are going to be everywhere, which is also to say—nowhere and everywhere at once.

And this is why Community, or the Collective, of an importantly inoperative sort still matters, and here’s why….

**Interlude: Santa Barbara is a Beautiful Place to Die**

Ever since leaving my tenured faculty position in August of 2013, I have faced all sorts of difficulties and even despair as
regards my decision to manage the affairs of the BABEL Working Group and punctum books full-time. Over the past year—and as a direct result of the difficulties of maintaining our projects as independent but also para-institutional entities (both in terms of financial deficits and a lack of support from persons and institutions)—I have fallen into some pretty dark funks, leading to moments of personal but also collective depression, and I’ve had to examine everything I’m doing and constantly ask myself if it’s worth it and whether or not I even know anymore what matters. I have been spending a lot of time wrestling with whether or not the Humanities, and more largely, the University, are even worth attending to anymore. Should I cut and run and save myself and stop worrying so much about what happens to everyone else? If I believe so much in an ethos of the care of self (as formulated so beautifully by Foucault in his late writings), then why am I completely not caring what happens to me? Am I going to be completely ruined, out of work, broke, and frankly, broken? Will I lose my optimism? Will I be ground down into some sort of person who can only be bitter and regretful about how nothing worked out as planned and hoped for? And here I feel compelled to confess something in public that until today only about three other persons have ever known—that in the summer of 2014, I considered suicide as a way out.

I want to be clear: I don’t think I would have ever really committed suicide (such as actually planning it out in some sort of detailed fashion, which is when you know you’ve crossed some sort of line), but I did indulge in what therapists...
and analysts and psychiatrists term “suicide ideation.” At the
time, I was (and am) living at West Campus Point in Santa
Barbara, California, in the home of Aranye Fradenburg, a
professor of Medieval Literature and Literature & Mind studies
at the University of California, Santa Barbara, also a practicing
psychoanalyst who has written extensively on the need to
defend a mindful (and humane) humanities, and a punctum
author,[11] but also a long-time patron (and frankly, heroine) of
the BABEL Working Group,[12] who had invited me to live in
her house and to run BABEL’s and punctum’s base of
operations from her home, with no financial obligations
whatsoever (in other words: she expected no rent, no utilities,
no compensation of any sort), and without her, and also others
such as Anna Klosowska and Valerie Vogrin, who provided the
same arrangement in Cincinnati and Saint Louis, respectively,
before I moved to Santa Barbara, I don’t even know how I
would have survived at all. The world depends on such
givers—they openly defy Derrida’s argument that every gift
has an incalculable cost and they practice an art of hospitality
that is stunning in its selflessness.

But even with these acts of generosity and kindness, in the
summer of 2014, as noted above, I nevertheless suffered
some pretty serious bouts of despair that extended from June
through October of that year (with some recurring bouts in
2015 as well). At one point, it got so bad that I stopped
answering all punctum emails for close to six months (and vis-
à-vis my point above that the number of book proposals we
receive daily is overwhelming, this inattention did not harm the
flourishing of the press one bit, although I don’t doubt that more than several people curse my and punctum’s name every time they are raised in conversation, and we may have even lost some direct book sales). Sometimes, in the evening, I would walk along the bluffs facing the Pacific Ocean at West Campus Point and I would wonder which would be better (or worse): jumping off and getting all smashed up below, or swimming out into the ocean and just going further and further until, too tired to swim any longer, I would sink and drown. Both scenarios frightened me, although I have heard dying by drowning has a certain peace and beauty to it. When I attended the biennial meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Reykjavik, Iceland in July 2014 and all of my medievalist friends were running around exclaiming about the wild beauty of the varied Icelandic landscapes, from volcanic tundras to glaciers to waterfalls, all I could see around me were inhuman, deathly terrains, and I felt as if I had landed on the surface of a strange, uninhabitable moon. I won’t go into everything that brought me to this, but I can sum it up by saying it involved money (as in: I didn’t have any), the ways in which humans, and (gasp!) humanists, are often petty and narrow-minded and ungenerous, and it also had to do with something we all know: working with groups and collectives is hard and often demoralizing. It had to do further with all of the ways in which I had been overtly and more subtly told to pack it all up and go home. And finally and most brutally (for me), it had to do with how I felt I was going to disappoint everyone who had invested faith in me. I was going to let everyone down. I was going to fail, but worse, others were going to fail alongside me,
because they believed in me and I was just a horrible fuck-up who didn’t know what she was doing. I couldn’t bear this thought and I couldn’t stop thinking it.

In short, despite all of this, I didn’t want to die, and I never have, and I still don’t. Being alive is too much fun, and there is much to do, and much to see, and I like people too much. As much as they piss me off and often disappoint me, at the end of the day, I want to be in the company of my revolutionary friends, preferably with cocktail in hand and a punctum band like RF Shannon or Lomelda on the stage, and everyone around me is dancing and happy. Can a dance party, which is also a Free Week music showcase, also be a Revolution? If it’s punctum bands taking the stage at Stay Gold and Cheer-up Charlies in Austin, Texas during the Sub-conference of the Modern Language Association,[13] hosted by Studium+BABEL+punctum,[14] as just happened last week, then yes, it can be. A Revolution that doesn’t throw good parties won’t survive.[15]

Surviving / Freedom is a State of Being
As Foucault knew, there is a little fascist in all of us, and yet we need to constantly ask ourselves, as Foucault did,

How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior?[16]

Can the Collective survive, without becoming fascist, or is it always doomed to fall apart at some point? Can we figure out ways to survive but also to embrace that eventual falling apart in ways that might prove liberatory and sustaining? How could we create a collective that would cultivate and sustain continual unsettlement, ungrounding, and abandonment, and which would be willing to dwell in a University in Ruins as a mode of “try[ing] to do what we can, while leaving space for what we cannot envisage to emerge”?[17] Who, further, would sign on for a group (or desiring-assemblage) whose mission is continual disruption and which seeks an inoperative community without identity? This question partly stems from Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking on community and how,

behind the theme of the individual, but [also] beyond it, lurks the question of singularity. What is a body, a face, a voice, a death, a writing—not indivisible, but singular? What is their
singular necessity in the sharing that divides and that puts into communication bodies, voices and writings in general and in totality?[18]

An “inoperative community” would be one that merely commits itself to *thinking* community beyond its bad histories and beyond any futurizing ideologies that seek specific (utopian) ends. My question (and worry) of whether or not anyone will want to join an inoperative community, especially under the aegis of a university under siege by techno-managerial forces, is also partly influenced by the thinking of the cultural critic Jan Verwoert, who has also asked,

If, living under the pressure to perform, we begin to see that a state of exhaustion is a horizon of collective experience, could we then understand this experience as the point of departure for the formation of a particular sort of solidarity? A solidarity that would not lay the foundations for the assertion of a potent operative community, but which would, on the contrary, lead us to acknowledge that the one thing we share—exhaustion—makes us an inoperative community, an exhausted community, a community of the exhausted. A community, however, that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional, exuberant politics of dedication.[19]

This would be to think of Community, or the Collective, as a sort of “mutual admiration society,” but also as a Convalescent Ward, in which “taking care” (of ourselves and each other) would be more important than “performing” according to so-called “professional” standards and protocols. What sorts of
agencies might we be able to craft under these conditions that would be mutually sustaining and which would not signify giving up, even when things are going badly?

Given all of these questions (or worries) and my own personal upheavals, the one phrase I keep returning to, almost obsessively, is Academic Freedom. There is perhaps no concept that is seen as less debatable among academics than “academic freedom,” but I’ve personally always been a bit bothered by it, partly because, over the years, I’ve seen so little of it in actual practice. Quite obviously, one isn’t going to get very far arguing against the importance of academic freedom, but at the same time, most discussions and debates about academic freedom see it as inextricably connected to, and guaranteed by, tenure, and I’ve always been a little mystified by this—first, because I believe that freedom of expression should be vigorously cultivated, cared for, and defended as a legal right everywhere and for everyone, but secondarily, and more importantly: what about everyone in the university who does not have tenure, and now, with non-tenure stream teaching positions making up about 70% of all teaching positions, what about those who never will have tenure? And let’s be honest, how many people with tenure are really as brave, in their speech and actions, as they claim they will be when they finally achieve tenure? Yeah…I thought so, too.

But here’s the weird thing: this is not the question that really interests me. You see, I believe that even if all faculty at all universities had tenure, there would still be very little academic
freedom, not because faculty can be fired at will, regardless, for the things they might say and write (although we see examples of this all of the time, in quite frightening ways), but because of all the myriad ways in which we are coerced (both forcefully and more subtly) to think alike, or to follow certain methodologies of thought, outside of which it is believed only bad or nonsensical scholarship could result. In his very short and extraordinary Preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (quoted above) Foucault wrote that, in the face of what he called “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us,” we should concentrate all of our energies on these questions, How does one introduce desire into thought, into discourse, into action? How can and must desire deploy its forces within the political domain and grow more intense in the process of overturning the established order? *Ars erotica, ars theoretica, ars politica*....

Increasingly, I find academic freedom to be the most vital, but also the most elusive, element of academic (and para-academic) life. There is no academic freedom, per se; it is not even a *right*. What it is, instead, is a kind of practice that we have to work at (vigilantly) every day (for ourselves and for others), and at the same time, it is also a state of being, a sort of ontological ground without which practically nothing new could ever emerge nor proceed, which is why I believe one of the most important tasks—perhaps the only task—of an Inoperative Community today would be to simply clear space
(to make room). Or, as Thomas Carlson writes in in his beautiful book *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and the Creation of the Human*,

There is perhaps no act less loving than to step in for another, or indeed all others, so as to make everything already actual for them, given ahead of time; and there is perhaps no act more loving, or more difficult to define, or quite simply more difficult, than to give another the actuality of possibility itself—to give another time and life. (p. 216)

One must be free from worry, free from debt, free from hunger, free from predators, free from ill health, free from bullying, free from censure, free from oppression, free from harm, free from grief, and so on, before one can even begin to feel safe enough to express oneself, or even to *work* at all as a thinker and researcher, unbeseiged by various fears and anxieties. This is true more generally for everyone, of course, and is considered by many to be a global human right, but: who guarantees this, who works on its behalf?

It is worth repeating: freedom is a state of being, and it is *not* natural. What this means is that we actually have to work, and fairly hard at that, to establish the means, spaces, and mechanisms with which anyone anywhere at all could exercise their so-called “academic” or any other sort of freedom. We have to *feel* free (which is not the same thing as actually being free, but which will have to “do” in the interminable interim). And please keep in mind that legal acts don’t guarantee the sorts of prosperity (of mind, soul, and body) that enable real freedom (as ontological *ground*) such
that one could exercise one’s freedom as a *practice* that contributed to one’s well-being and flourishing. I know that sounds tautological, but it’s the only way I know how to express this idea at present—that what we need to work on now, if we really care about “academic freedom,” is not just ensuring or extending tenure for more persons, but also working, in Foucault’s words again, to track down and extirpate “all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives.”

**Radical Hospitality / Broom of the System**

What I’m ultimately trying to convey here is that, if someone were to ask me today what BABEL, and punctum books + records, and Studium, is about—what they stand for, what they are trying to do, what they are trying to *effect*—I would say something like, we are trying to create spaces of radical...
hospitality within which individual persons might feel more free (which is not the same thing as being completely free: that could never be possible given the forces that shape this world, both human and inhuman)—to experiment, to take risks, and most importantly, to pursue in their work their (and not our) desires, unencumbered by professional anxieties over whether or not those desires are legitimated in advance by what particular fields and institutions have already deemed as “proper” to themselves. This is also to ask that we replace the idea of the Public University as some sort of guarded (and self-regarding) competitive-agonistic staging ground of cultural authority with the idea that the public university—especially in its role as a critical site for the creation and dissemination of knowledge—should be reconceptualized as a site for the care and curatorship of all persons who desire to contribute their labors to an always precarious, always unsettled, and most importantly, always unbounded intellectual commons. And the Collective would be like David Foster Wallace’s great broom of the system: clearing space and making room for things to emerge that cannot be predicted in advance. This is to say—the collective works for the one, for the singular, and thus for all. It makes room. It simply makes room, with no claims, no demands, and no expectations.

Jouissance / A Loveable World
So let’s think of collectives as public agents working on behalf of the private (not to be confused with capitalist privatization) and the *privates*!—id est, the *libido*, especially when we understand “libido” in Freud’s conception of it as a love- or life-force, of which sexuality and sex are only some among many possible manifestations and acts and tendencies and affects, etc. that might emerge therefrom. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud wrote, “The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists…in sexual love with sexual union as its aim. But we do not separate from this—what in any case has a share in the name of ‘love’—on the one hand, self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas.”[20] As Jonathan Lear explicates Freud’s thinking here, a necessary condition for there being a world for me is that I love it, or invest it with libidinal energy. Because my love affair is with a distinctly existing world, I must be disappointed by it. A distinctly existing world cannot possibly satisfy all my wishes. Out of the ensuing frustration and disappointment, I am born. Melancholia, or some archaic precursor, must lie at
the heart of every I.[21]

And here I come back full circle to the idea that what many of us who feel cut off or abandoned by the Public University right now want is the freedom and space to experience, and to enact, “the grace of living for an idea.” And this is both a melancholic and yet a perversely hopeful desire. It doesn’t ask to know what *will* happen (we could never really know), but it nevertheless wants to craft *some* hope that *something* will happen, and that it will, of our own willed necessity, be better than *this*. And what this really means is that we commit to living in the present together, neither fully abandoning the past or the future, but insisting on the present, and on the many acts of presencing ourselves to each other, as the moment(s) where *something else* can shimmer between us, if even fleetingly.

So let’s construct together what Hakim Bey called “temporary autonomous zones”: fugitive spaces where some of us might gather (as authors and readers, friends and strangers, teachers and students, lovers and fighters) to practice our work as rogue and fugitive agents in search of new means for the development of a certain institutional *amour fou* and “clockless however,” a “politics of dream, urgent as the blueness of the sky.”[22] The fact of the matter is—whether we inhabit student desks, tenure lines, adjunct positions, or post-/never-graduate, somewhere-other-than-here positions—now might be the time to take a bit more seriously the development of new and alternative spaces (both within and without the university) for learning, for inquiry, and for
knowledge-culture production.

The Public University should comprise everyone who wants to be a part of it, whether or not they have an official position or desk. If we can “manifest” ourselves (which is to say, to make ourselves more present to each other, which is to also say, more responsible for, and more vulnerable to, each other) in some sort of collective endeavor that works on behalf of the future without laying any possessive claims upon it, then we might be able to craft new spaces for the University-at-Large, which is also a University that wanders, that is never just somewhere, dwelling in the partitive—of a particular place—but rather, seeks to be everywhere, always on the move, pandemic, uncontainable, and yes, precarious, always at risk, while always being present-between-us (manifest). At the same time, we insist on perversely-hopefully laying claim to specific institutions and subject areas—the University of California, or premodern studies, for example—as collocations of objects and trajectories of thought that we desire to hold close to us, while also placing them in certain perpetual tensions with everything else (even ourselves).

So I began with Foucault’s argument that desire is a revolutionary force and I would like to circle back to that by way of another of my heroes, Aranye Fradenburg, who in a beautiful essay published in 2002 titled “Group Time: Catastrophe, Periodicity, Survival,” wrote that “enjoyment is the matrix of knowledge, and knowledge is not diminished thereby….Interpretation and explanation are activities central to libidinal structuration and vice versa….We thereby reclaim
our technical work [the humanities, for example] as the work of desire, and desire as that which makes the world.”[23] In her book *Sacrifice Your Love*, she continued the theme, urging us to take up

the question of the *jouissance* of the academy, rather than assuming it is our task to discipline *jouissance* out of the academy. For one thing, we cannot discipline *jouissance* out of the academy, because discipline is always permeated with enjoyment. So why give ground on our enjoyment?[24]

But desire, and enjoyment, and *jouissance*, and the *study* they occasion (and let us keep in mind that the room and time for such *study* is becoming more and more elusive in the Neoliberal University that does not appreciate or foster slow time for reflection)—these things, of necessity, must all have room, they must all have freedom, and this will also mean understanding that the other critical term here, in addition to freedom, is *responsibility*. Someone, or some distributive collectives of someones, needs to take responsibility for securing this freedom for the greatest number of persons possible who want to participate in intellectual-cultural life, and for enabling the greatest possible number of forms of such life, thereby also ensuring the creative robustness of the larger social systems within which we are all enfolded together, whether university, whiskey bar, apartment building, city park, subway car, kitchen, church, boat, bedroom, or *polis*. And a Publisher, or a School, which is part of the Inoperative Collective, as my and my cohort have decided, is a person, or a group, or a multiplicity-becoming, or a desiring-assemblage,
who accepts responsibility for this.

So hey Mr. DJ, put a record on…don’t think of yesterday…and don’t look at the clock….

our beloved Dan Rudmann

& with a special shout-out to the proprietors of Cheer-Up Charlies, Maggie Lea, Tamara Hoover, and Charlie himself
ENDNOTES


Source: Intellectual Property and the Struggle Over Value,”


[5] Regarding the concerns over the future of the monographs and its supposed demise, especially relative to it not being sustainable economically, see for example, the final conference report of Jisc Collections and OAPEN on “Open Access Monographs in the Humanities and Social Sciences,” a conference which was held at The British Library in July 2013 to explore the ways in which the publication of monographs would intersect with new digital publishing platforms, and where one of the overall conclusions was that the humanities and social sciences will still rely to a certain extent on monographs as a significant output of their research dissemination while those monographs will also need to be delivered in a variety of open-access platforms if they are to
have any sort of wide impact and also be sustainable over the long term. That all makes sense, but there was also a lot of hand-wringing during the conference over how to continue to ensure that these open-access monographs would continue to build and confer “prestige” and “authority”: https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Reports/oabooksreport/. Further, the (revised) “White Paper” released by University of California Press on April 30, 2014, “The Future of the Humanities in the Digital Age at UC Press,” proposes that the “perennial problem of monograph publishing” (meaning, it is both required for tenure and promotion at most institutions while it is also not economically sustainable) be addressed by creating “a new Open Access model which would make [monographs]...freely available in digital form, with the costs of publication shared between the different stakeholders (the Press, the author/department, and libraries).” The UC Press “White Paper” can be accessed here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/8fjaxhzhvte3ltkk/Hum Workshop REV_draft_whitepaper_043014.pdf.

[6] See Michael O’Rourke, “After,” In the Middle (weblog), November 29, 2010, http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2010/11/guest-post-michael-orourke-after.html, where he writes that Geoffrey Bennington “has recently added ‘dignity’ to the long list of quasi-transcendental in Derrida’s writing, seeing it as a watchword for the last fifteen years of Derrida’s work, in the context of valuing the dignity of what we do. Just like the demi-deuil or half-mourning Derrida often spoke of, Bennington talks about a demi-dignity, or half-dignity, which
would be unconditional, less than sovereign, an unconditional sovereign to-come. This unconditional dignity lines up with the out-of-jointness of time in the ‘Exordium’ to Specters of Marx and is axiomatic for the very possibility, the very chance or life of deconstruction. By exposing itself—like trace or différance—to something outside itself, dignity is an undeconstructable. It mirrors the structural endlessness of deconstruction itself in that it can never be achieved, nor is it ever finished. Dignity is, Bennington tells us, an infinite task and an ongoing responsibility.” See also Geoffrey Bennington, “Derrida’s Dignity,” keynote paper presented at the “Second Derrida Today” Conference, Goodenough College, London, July 21 2010.


Humanities is where we should *want* to go when we don’t want, quite literally, to lose our minds. Whether or not the humanities she loves and works on behalf of is still possible within the Neoliberal Public University, as it is currently structured, appears doubtful in the extreme, but we at BABEL and punctum are not willing to jump ship (just yet), as the University contains within its halls, for all of its problems, the greatest brain trust this world has ever seen. And we regularly poach our collaborators from within these halls while also cultivating those denied access to these very same halls.


[13] “The MLA Subconference is an independent and evolving group of graduate students and adjunct faculty in the humanities who are interested in creating a new kind of conference environment, in order to propose alternative professional, social, and political possibilities for ourselves and our peers. We see both the committee and the conference as an open, collective endeavor that will work collaboratively with and outside more formal academic networks”: http://mlasubconference.org/who-we-are/.

[14] Studium is the brain- (and love-)child of Dan Rudmann, and serves as the umbrella organization (and also home-base) for punctum books + records and Human Sciences, our new “radical pedagogy” platform, based in Austin, Texas. Studium is also a specific site, with buildings and gardens, that
comprises editorial offices, workshop and seminar space, and event/performance space, because both Dan Rudmann and I believe in the importance of face-to-face and socially-embodied/embedded “living/working” practices.

[15] And here let me give a shout-out to the proprietors of Cheer-up Charlie’s Maggie Lea and Tamara Hoover who have created in Austin, not just a bar and performance space, but a social institution that serves as a true home for so many of the beautiful vagabonds of Austin’s alternative communities. Their proprietorship is not just a “business,” but a gentle form of management that is also a form of therapeutic self-care. As the BABEL Working Group had their first party there for our first biennial meeting in Austin in 2010, I consider Cheer-up Charlie’s a sort of spiritual home for BABEL and I was thrilled to return there for the Sub-conference of the MLA.


[19] Jan Verwoert, Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform, pamphlet for the exhibition “Art
Sheffield 08: Yes, No and Other Options” (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, 2008), 110.


