

A Garden of Wandering: A Response to Simon During

Eileen A. Joy

Is it possible to conceive of, to draw a garden of wandering?
Michel Serres, *Atlas*

In his essay 'Precariousness, Literature, and the Humanities Today', Simon During argues that 'precariousness is not merely a social condition connected to capitalism', but is rather 'built into the archaeology of Western thought and practice', and thus the humanities 'need to adapt to and accept their relation both to social and metaphysical precariousness'. More specifically, During writes,

In the end, we don't have to defend the humanities, we have to attune them to an emergent global social order whose conditions are not under our control. And that attuning requires, amongst much else, analysis of the cultural past from the perspective of the current social regime, that is to say, from a position in which precariousness and debt are primary and in which state capitalism has become largely immune to democratic negation.

During's essay is dense and packs a lot into a mere five or so pages, and I neither disagree with his diagnosis of the present condition of global economics, nor with his assertion that we can no longer invoke well-worn (and nostalgically lapsarian) caveats about the humanities as crucial for human 'dignity' and 'social functionality'.¹ Nor have I ever been naïve enough to believe that the humanities

¹ What I would, however, insist upon is that we continue nevertheless to make arguments for the arts and humanities as critical to the rich plasticity of mind,

poses (or has ever posed) some sort of counterforce to the ways in which neoliberal capital has thoroughly transformed all aspects of social life, especially in its fusion of the social and technical, and in its ability to transform any catastrophe into yet another opportunity. Nothing, in short, moves faster than (inhuman) capitalism, and with dire consequences for what might be called the intelligentsia as well as cultural production in general. As Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek write in their ‘Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’,

as neoliberalism has progressed, rather than enabling individual creativity, it has tended towards eliminating cognitive inventiveness in favour of an affective production line of scripted interactions, coupled to global supply chains and a neo-Fordist Eastern production zone. A vanishingly small cognitariat of elite intellectual workers shrinks with each passing year—and increasingly so as algorithmic automation winds its way through the spheres of affective and intellectual labour. (Williams and Srnicek)

For Williams and Srnicek, the traditional Leftist response of developing ‘folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism’ is no longer adequate to counter the unstoppable tide of neoliberal capital’s techno-social acceleration. And thus, instead of working to tear down various engines and platforms of neoliberalism, a new Accelerationist politics would re-purpose those engines and platforms, harnessing their deliriously accelerated processes to different and more ‘common’ post-capitalist ends: let things get as bad as they can get under capitalism, at which point capitalism either implodes or leads to new zones of alternative social practices—zones in which, it is worth emphasizing, the traditional liberal humanist subject may no longer even exist.

Without going into all of the reasons why this new Accelerationist politics (or more properly, philosophy) can veer dangerously into techno-futurist, trans/inhuman ‘Prometheanism’ and even neo-reactionary fascist fantasy scenarios (on that score see, among others, Brassier; Noys; Land; Negarestani; A. Williams), I merely record here my agreement that there can never be an ‘outside’ to capitalism (neoliberal or otherwise), but rather than signing on to this state of affairs (either to help speed it up toward destruction or to re-purpose it for different ends), I remain committed to the idea of ‘dropping out’—not as an art or politics of non-participatory resistance to the *status quo* that also assumes escape is possible (although it is partly that), but as a mode of measured departure from certain institutions (e.g., the University) in order to build rhizomatic, desiring-assemblage para-institutions that would both intersect and

experience and expressivity, which are themselves importantly tied to well-being and flourishing at all sorts of micro- and macro- scales (see, in this vein, Fradenburg, whose work powerfully demonstrates that the humanities is where we go when we don’t want, quite literally, to lose our minds).

play with existing institutions while also carving out their own globally-networked Archipelagoes of Thought.

Where I pause, then, in During's essay, is over the idea of a supposedly necessary adaptation to a seemingly intractable state of affairs, as well as During's faith in genealogical analysis as one of the best things ('amongst much else') the humanities (and literary studies, more narrowly) can do at present.² In this scenario, the world goes about its downward spiral and the Humanities remain purposeful as a Bureau of Diagnostics, which sounds as if we are still placing a lot of faith in the utility of critique and historical analysis (much of the work under the banner of Anthropocene studies is a good example of this, when that work is primarily tied to programs of academic environmental studies).³

But let me be clear here—I am not about to invoke tired debates over theory versus praxis. Rather, I am more concerned about how we secure the necessary spaces within which to continue practicing our arts of analysis and commentary (with an emphasis on *arts*), especially as the University itself is being taken over by managerial technocrats invested in further privatizing and outsourcing higher education, and young persons are finding it increasingly impossible even to gain access to universities and/or have been saddled with staggering levels of student loan debt that amount to indentured servitude (J. Williams), not to mention the alarming rise in the adjunctification of faculty lines (Bérubé). I would add, moreover (and this is a critical point for me), that the University itself, as an intellectual community writ large across institutions, has engaged in some fairly toxic research (and career) gatekeeping over the years, such that I no longer consider the University as the best place within which to secure and practice what some call 'academic freedom'. Of course, the University has always been, in some sense, a bureaucratic institution: its very 'institutionality' and various modes and protocols of professionalization of disciplinary knowledge necessarily create and sustain a situation where, as Foucault once argued,

the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. ... We all know perfectly well that we are not free to just say anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. (Foucault, *Archaeology* 216)

² I assume there is much packed into that 'amongst much else' in During's essay, and therefore I wish to ask how one goes about securing the hospitable conditions for such humanist work to exist at all in university environments that are increasingly hostile to the idea of wide ranging, experimental, and freely provocative thought.

³ It should be noted here that this is work I have both participated in and have also fostered as an editor and publisher (see, e.g., Cohen; Ellsworth and Kruse; Joy, 'Blue').

Of necessity, ‘academic freedom’ requires peripatetic practices—we can’t be bound any longer to this or that (institutional) place and its increasingly top-down protocols, in terms of developing certain knowledge practices, especially at a time when institutions of higher learning are becoming more and more inhospitable. For many, faculty and students alike, we just can’t *live* here anymore (perhaps we’ve already been shut out in advance, with graduate degree in hand, massive amounts of debt, and no job), and it’s time to depart, taking this valuable work with us like so much contraband, while insisting that we will now be ‘rooted in the absence of place’ (Weil 39).⁴

It may thus be time to decentralize the Humanities through various para-academic practices, such as has already been accomplished via the Open Access (OA) movement, for example.⁵ Here, I take to heart Daring’s advice to the Humanities to *attune* and *adapt* itself to ‘an emergent global social order whose conditions are not under our control’ and to the ‘social and metaphysical precariousness’ that emerges therefrom, but not through literary-historical analysis of that situation *only*. Rather, I would urge us to actually inhabit that precariousness more fully—to get Outside, stand in the rain, and see what can be done there. I myself resigned a tenured professorship in 2013 in order to run punctum books and the BABEL Working Group full-time.⁶ Both of these entities exist to work on new modes for knowledge creation, exchange and dissemination, as well as to ‘build shelters for intellectual vagabonds’ both within and beyond the University proper. More specifically, BABEL seeks to work the interstitial spaces between the university proper and the various outposts of intellectual and cultural production operating outside it. While we certainly harness all of the (online, networked, mobile) technological tools at our disposal, many of our enterprises are pitched at re-strengthening socially embedded practices, happening in real time, in material locations, and between persons

⁴ The more full quotation, which I think is very apropos to the contemporary position of tenure-stream faculty within the Humanities, is: ‘The city gives us the feeling of being at home. / We must take the feeling of being at home into exile. / We must be rooted in the absence of place’ (Weil 39).

⁵ For a vibrant discussion among the graduate and post-graduate editors of the OA journals *continent* and *Speculations* on the subject of academic precarity and emerging para-academic practices and domains, see Editors. It is worth noting here as well that even the Open Access movement can be co-opted by neoliberal capital, and perhaps already has been: many commercial academic presses have already reorganized themselves in order to capitalize on state-mandated OA initiatives, such as those inaugurated in the wake of the Finch Report in the UK. See the Research Council UK’s 2012 ‘Policy on Open Access and Guidance’, as well as a link to the ‘National Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings’ (a.k.a. the ‘Finch Group Report’), here: <[http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/open access/policy/](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/open%20access/policy/)>.

⁶ For more about the history, mission and ongoing projects of the BABEL Working Group, see: <<http://www.babelworkinggroup.org>>. For more on punctum books, an independent, para-academic, open-access press, see: <<http://punctumbooks.com>>.

who are sharing physical spaces together (while also communicating and collaborating across vast distances with other activist cells and hives), which is why we haven't given up on the idea of bricks-and-mortar schools. We are even planning to start our own school, one that would have its grounding in specific local conditions, but which would also be digitally networked across locations. We see ourselves as a Deleuzoguattarian desiring-assemblage that takes the importance of nomadic thought and practice quite seriously. We do not believe that we can overturn the inexhaustible flexibility of inhuman capitalism, but we do believe we can work within that flexibility to take advantage of it in order to repurpose its new spaces and tools for our own, more subversive ends.⁷

Unlike some within my more radical circles, I do not believe that traditional critique has 'run out of steam' (Latour), and as long as there exist asymmetrical power relations and the neoliberal-capitalist uptake-reification of everything, we will need critique, especially if, by critique, we mean speaking truth to power,⁸ even as power is harder and harder to locate. Not only is it increasingly difficult to pin down power—to storm its buildings and parliaments, as it were—but even the public commons itself has become fractured and dispersed, distributed along the nodes, protocols, networks and cyber-clouds of our Information Age.

And thus we might recognize better all of the ways in which traditional critique—whether academic books or op-ed journalism or massed bodies in the street—is somewhat slow-footed in relation to the hyper-speeds and flows of the networked informatic technologies that monitor and control so many aspects of our lives today. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker write in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*,

Inside the dense web of distributed networks, it would appear that *everything* is *everywhere*—the consequence of a worldview that leaves little room between the poles of the global and the local. ... The network, it appears, has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it. (4; see also Galloway, *Interface Effect*)

Further, Galloway and Thacker urge us to consider networks' nonhuman aspects: they are 'a medium of contemporary power, and yet no single subject or group absolutely controls a network. Human subjects constitute and construct networks, but always in a highly distributed and unequal fashion' (5).

⁷ It worries that so many people working within the Digital Humanities seem unaware of the ways in which their projects, and the funding structures and techno-utopian rhetoric that underpin them, dovetail so neatly with the neo-liberalization of the university. On this point, see Grusin. For more of my thinking on this subject, see 'Hands Off Our Jouissance'; 'A Time for Radical Hope'; and 'Let Us Now Stand Up for Bastards'.

⁸ On this point, see Foucault, *Fearless Speech* on *parrhesia*.

So, power has left the streets and buildings and become nomadic (and maybe even post-human), and we—the critics? the interpreters?—may also need to depart, to disappear into the ether, while also squatting in the abandoned real estate (such as the University⁹), in order to engage in tactical manoeuvres that would not amount to critique as much as to creative intervention, even creative *scrambling*, of the sort discussed by Rita Raley in *Tactical Media*. Here, criticism would become (or morph into) tactical *disruptions* of ‘dominant semiotic regimes’ as well as ‘the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible’—especially important in a post-industrial era where the ‘field of the symbolic’ has become a ‘primary site of power’ (Raley 6).

Increasingly, then, I find myself more and more convinced by Nicolas Bourriaud’s arguments in *The Radicant* that we (the Humanists, the Artists, the Cultural Producers) need to reinvent together a ‘common world’ which would be ‘a space of horizontal negotiation without an arbiter’, where we would ‘practice translation and organize the discussions that will give rise to a new intelligibility’, and which we initiate through a ‘new exodus’ (188). Bourriaud proposes that we go ‘radicant’, which means ‘setting one’s roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one’s identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviours, exchanging rather than imposing’ (22).

Bourriaud purposefully opposes the ‘radicant’ (a vegetative figure, like ivy, that adapts its growth to whatever terrain it finds itself in) to the ‘radical’, a chief figure of modernity and post-modernity who supposedly cuts all roots and ties with the past. The radicant doesn’t cut her roots—she both sets them down and takes them with her elsewhere, engaging in endless series of re-enrootings, and thus there is attachment as well as mobility. For me, this means that, wherever we go, we take the Humanities with us as a set of objects and practices always subject to endless and dynamic translations and negotiations without end.

Personally, I work on behalf of Derrida’s ‘university without condition’, which Derrida believed would ‘remain an ultimate place of critical resistance—and more than critical—to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation’, and which has special safekeeping by way of the Humanities, entailing the ‘principal right to say everything, whether it be under the heading of fiction and the

⁹ I capitalize ‘University’ here in order to denote both the ideal (romanticized western) University as well as the totality of the specific concrete places in which it instantiates itself in various unequal forms. I also follow the lead of Bill Readings who traced the ways in which the University has become a ‘transnational bureaucratic corporation, either tied to transnational instances of government such as the European Union or functioning independently, by analogy with a transnational corporation’ (Readings 3).

experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it' (26). As the University has become more and more inhospitable to the sorts of non-calculable events of learning 'without condition', we must make our way elsewhere, cultivating alternative and radican Gardens of Thought. I believe that the University and its classrooms will continue to be important sites for keeping open the *question* of thought and for fostering various important modes of affectively-wired cognitive experiments, but I also think it is time for a subterfugitive, vagabond, rogue para-Academy, especially when so many of us are hanging on to the university by the skin of our teeth (and minds).

I therefore take my cue from (and dedicate my service to) brave and energetic post-grads without secure employment (the academic precariat), such as Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei who, possessed of a degree from the European Graduate School and while teaching as an adjunct at universities in Albania and Singapore, has created the Department of Eagles, a department 'without a building' which functions as 'an independent project bureau for artists and thinkers in and beyond Albania', and which has been responsible for fostering symposia (such as 'Pedagogies of Disaster' in 2013), new journals (such as *continent*. and *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies*), and archival research projects (such as The Albanian Lapidar Survey). And as if that weren't enough, van Gerven Oei even founded and runs his own press, Uitgeverij, which labours to publish 'anything that's between categories, obscure, or witnessing the edges of language'.¹⁰

The task now, for those of us dedicated to the flourishing of the Humanities, is to get Outside and work alongside the growing academic precariat to reinvent the Academy as a welcoming (and wandering) Pavilion of Thought. Whether or not this will be sustainable into the future is up for grabs, but what *is* for certain is that, for those of us who care about the future of the Humanities under neoliberalism, we must continue to read and reflect and write and analyze and critique (of course), but we must also found new spaces where such practices are less encumbered than they are currently are within the techno-managerial University. Whether we realize it or not, we are all Itinerant now.

¹⁰ Regarding van Gerven Oei's truly energetic outputs, see The Department of Eagles: <<http://departmentofeagles.org/>>, the published dual-language proceedings for *Pedagogies of Disaster*: <<http://punctumbooks.com/titles/pedagogies-of-disaster/>>, the massive 3-volume catalog for the Albanian Lapidar Survey, *Lapidari*: <<http://punctumbooks.com/titles/lapidari-volume-1/>>, and his press Uitgeverij: <<http://www.uitgeverij.cc>>.

EILEEN A. JOY is a specialist in Old English literary studies and cultural studies, as well as a para-academic rogue drone-strike machine, with interests in poetry and poetics, historiography, ethics, affects, embodiments, queer studies, the politics of friendship, speculative realism, object oriented ontology, the ecological and the post/human. She is the Lead Ingenitor of the BABEL Working Group, Co-Editor of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, Director of punctum books: spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion, and Associate Director of punctum records.

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