

Academician, Heal Thyself!

Beyond exposing the ills of capital, we need to find other means and grounds to intervene and engage. Before getting caught up in the here and now, however, let us take a moment to revisit how we have responded to the there and then. Exposing the culture industry has been one of the major practices that laid the ground for what we recognize as the project of critical theory. From the ideological power of mass culture to the identitarian discourse on queer cultures, the gesture of exposure, of laying bare the mechanisms of power, has remained a constant in critique, even as this gesture has shifted its styles, targets, and interests.¹ In naming the pervasiveness of the drive to expose, we draw from and are critical of the Marxist genealogies that precede us. Indeed, it is difficult to get away from this inheritance. Even if decolonial methods and queer and feminist commitments are part of our larger approaches, they emerge in a bound-up relation to these previous genealogies—as ways to revise, reject, or engage them. The task of our work is to track how we mediate past with present, then with now. One particular shift can be traced from Frankfurt school critiques of the culture industry to our contemporary critiques of the academic industry.

The critique of the culture industry from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and the legacy of the Frankfurt school are anchors and points of rejection for us.² We know the major claims: popular culture in an administered world limits the desire, imagination, pleasure, and capacity of the masses; the propagation of consumable differences belies the unity of the culture industry's drive to classify, organize, and identify what it touches: "Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape."³ As difficult as it is to deny the force of such a critique, we are struck by the Frankfurt school's solidification of the relationship between culture and the subject, whereby the latter is the dupe of the ideology embedded in the former. Such a critical agenda comes with unfortunate consequences. Dialectical and historical materialism comes to inform teleological notions

of progress that undergird not only liberal but also Marxist conceptions of time and existence—frameworks that often racialize the global South as always behind and primitive, a tendency illustrated most infamously by Adorno’s essay on jazz and black aural culture.⁴ Yet queer-of-color critique has continually reminded us of how the centrality of pleasure in, of, and for the culture industry (and even capital) in providing the very means of survival. Put more simply, queers of color remind us that the things we are most critical of are often the things we cannot fully let go of, abandon, or forget.⁵ What is there, then, to “expose”? We are not ideologically duped; we would go so far as to say that any approach to ideology that seeks simply to reveal, lay bare, or expose the duplicities of capital will miss another way of grasping what is at issue in the here and now: that we are navigating the constraints of desire and existence in ways that are *excessively within* the bounds and binds of critical-theoretical discourse.

This condensed summary on the interconnections across culture, ideology, and Marxist critique is not meant to glorify scholarship and its attendant discourses as singularly able to provide answers to the contradictions of the present. Indeed, we are struck by how far the critical analysis of culture has moved from these tenets, yet how much our grasp of the institutional conditions under which we work duplicates them. The critique of the academic industry, we know, builds off of critical analysis of the culture industry. Even if the legacy of the culture wars and multiculturalism has reworked some of the tenets of the Frankfurt school, we nonetheless exist under demands for teleological narratives that benefit what Jodi Melamed has succinctly identified as neoliberal multiculturalism.⁶ Furthermore, minoritarian discourses themselves have become flattened and devoid of pleasure through such industrial demands. These are the conditions of the present: we all are now presumably intersectional; we all appear to care about trans (and now, we might add, of color) bodies and deaths, and indeed, black lives do matter (we all have and wear the T-shirts); we all appear to analyze race, gender, sexuality, and class, and, to a growing extent, disability and indigeneity are becoming further enfolded within such analytics. The university demands more intersections.⁷ Yet, this industry is a globalized one that relies upon not only academic norms around form and legibility but also, importantly, academic affects and orientations toward “proper” objects and critiques. Similar to the culture industry, the academic industry renders and dictates pleasure and affect in flattened and often predictable ways. We are taught now to list out identity formations, yet the academic industry has routinized such terms in ways that absorb pleasure, care, and urgency from the act of such naming. We work from within this system through exhaustion with many of the prescribed norms of the academy, and by following a queer-of-color ethic, we write from a relation of being most critical of yet fully engaged in

the academic industry. We write this while we know that it is the practices and modes of existence of those living to survive, oftentimes outside of the walls of universities, or those who primarily staff and maintain our campuses, or those whose lives are put at risk by the real estate interests of them, that point to the limits of academic inquiry. One of the key operating questions that emerges from such a conjuncture is how to work outside of the ossified norms of the academic industry while offering a document that speaks to and beyond academia.

During a time when the so-called incivility and sensitivity of college campuses threaten to become the white noise that surrounds any conversation about higher education, we feel compelled to articulate a fundamental condition of intellectual production in the here and now: in the interests of multicultural racial capitalism, the academic industry extracts the deep affective care and sense of immediate urgency that motivates and sustains minoritarian knowledge. Recently I taught Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* before introducing my students to Theresa Cha's *Dic-tée*. Both books of poetry are theoretically informed and complex. Many of the students (who primarily identified as students of color) initially found Cha's book too obtuse and overtheorized. I asked them what it was about black pain that allowed them to view Rankine's text, which is no less elaborate or conceptual, as easier to access, which was to ask: What is it about the academic industry that flattens our affective connections to racialization, that renders black pain as more easily digestible than that of other racialized groups? This is not to say that we do not have enough Asian and Asian American studies in our curriculums (this certainly varies depending on institution and geographical locale) or that a more fully incorporated Asian diasporic course of study would let us see the pains these texts vividly flesh out as "comparable" to each other. Rather, it is to note how the academic industry has rendered black pain as something that can be presumably and uniquely metabolized. At issue, in other words, is how to grasp and grapple with the common sense that produces both Rankine's and Cha's texts as differentially and asymmetrically productive within multicultural racial capitalism.

In such a situation, it is not enough to simply reject the academic industry. Rather, we are compelled to ask how to cultivate a stronger sense (intellectual, institutional, pedagogical, and more) of urgency and care, how to grasp that the apprehension of certain forms of minoritarian knowledge as more or less understandable than others is part of a generalized devaluation of both within the academy. Alongside Kandice Chuh and José Esteban Muñoz, we might understand this as an inquiry into what an otherwiseness might afford. Or, we might think of the amplification of sentiment as a collective movement toward intensities of and for minoritarian life—toward a becoming of what Stefano Harvey and Fred

Moten call “philosophers of the feel.”⁸ We can cultivate these forms of care by shifting from critical theory for theory’s sake toward theory for therapy’s sake—a critical therapy. Akin to Foucault’s cultivation of the self in his later lectures, a critical therapy compels us to feel and care in ways that work against the flattening constraints and numbing effects of the academic industry. How might the intensities and enormities of feeling become a critical hermeneutic in our writing and teaching? Such a critical therapy draws and shifts away from the Frankfurt school project known as critical theory. Such a therapy focuses on feelings, pleasures, desires, and anger, in ways that inquire into how ideology is lived rather than whether it can be exposed and so dispelled.⁹ Critical therapy contends with historical and geographical expanse—the worlds created through feeling, atmospheres, and moods in time and space. The knowledges that we draw from collectively amplify the intensity of other pasts and places that hum in the droning white noise of the present. Through accounts of the present that are drawn from longer historical arcs and an attention to lingering, unresolved sensations of how to work here and now, we grapple with the immensity of feeling (that is, its impossibility) as a place to work and linger, both collectively and relationally. Rather than rejecting the academic industry through anti-intellectualism, a critical therapy deploys theory as the object that one is most critical of yet most reliant on. We might imagine this project as a sort of group critical therapy.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Chow, *Entanglements*, 13–30.
2. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
3. *Ibid.*, 97.
4. Adorno, “On Jazz.”
5. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.
6. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.
7. Nash, “Institutionalizing the Margins”; Nash, “Intersectionality and Its Discontents.”
8. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 99.
9. Berlant, “Neither Monstrous nor Pastoral.”

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