

Unseating Mastery: The University and the Promise of the New

Theory, Culture & Society

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/02632764241296042

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs**Erich Hörl** 

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Abstract

The conversation between Erich Hörl and Premesh Lalu draws on their extended conversation on efforts to link discordant temporal and spatial encounters with the idea of the university and how, more importantly, to care for the future of its educational responsibilities. While much of the debate on the university is focused on how it is affected by large-scale geopolitical shifts and the rapid expansion of technological resources, Hörl and Lalu bring into view a language of the university that holds to its promise in the sources of a founding supplement that may yet exhibit the potential for guiding the university through turbulent times ahead. This is a call for a retracing of the emergence of the complex hegemony of the master signifier in university discourse, and the potential to supersede it by way of a re-articulation of the desire for a concept of freedom borne out of the emancipation of the 19th-century institution of slavery.

Keywords

futurity, higher education, post-apartheid, postcoloniality, speed, technologization, university discourse

Introduction

The conversation reproduced below occurred within a broader discussion about the need to restore and refund the university today. Under the working title ‘Re:Timing the University: Apartitionality and the University to Come’, Erich Hörl and Premesh Lalu, together with the respective institutions to which they belong – the Leuphana Institute

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for Advanced Studies (LIAS) in Culture and Society at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany, and the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) of the University of the Western Cape, South Africa – are seeking to reconceptualize what the university is for and what university could mean, to renew and reimagine the question of what is called a university. This necessary, if not urgent, repetition of the university question is driven by the following thesis: After half a century of breaking apart, fragmenting and disintegrating ways of life, forms of knowledge and thinking, as well as socio-political programs by the strokes of technical and economic innovation in the post-Fordist neoliberal escalation, the psychical-collective capacities and processes that are vital for coping with radical change are at least endangered, if not actually suspended, transformed into processes and forces of disindividuation. Above all, the time required for ‘recompossibilization’, in the sense of recomposing possible worlds out of different assemblages, that is central to opening up futurity, is missing in the full speed of disruptive processes actually experienced by globalized societies, each in a situated manner. This fault threatens to lead us up a blind alley, into a new form of quasi-ontological hypostasis of separation and partition, for which Derrida (1985: 292) – in connection with apartheid – coined the neologism ‘apartionality’ (*apartitionnalité*) for the essentialization of being separate as segregation, or being divided (or literally, apart). In apartitionality, societies’ futurability collapses in a catastrophic way. In this critical situation we are facing the university has a special task and responsibility. We need to reinvent the university as a place that gives us time and space to recompossibilize, to rebuild it as a scene of an unknown effort to restore futurability. That would be its *retiming*. But what is it exactly that defines and shapes the temporality of a university as an institution providing time for recompossibilization under the condition (and pressure) of a hyper-accelerated technological and economic disruption? And how could the university reconfigure itself as a place of careful thinking and responsible invention? Those are some of the questions around which the effort of rethinking the university to come revolves.

According to Erich Hörl, the reopening of the university question is situated within the historical horizon of what he calls the Disruptive Condition (Hörl, 2023, 2024). For him, all its urgency stems from this. The Disruptive Condition names our situation, which has been characterized since the 1970s and more forcefully since the 1990s by rupture, suspension and interruption beyond and after progress and emancipation – a pure insistence and immanence of rupture without an opening up to the future, which haunts the contemporary forms of life, knowledge and thought. This logic of rupture is a suffocation of potentiality and futurity as a massive backlash to what is associated with 1968, when various struggles began to permeate societies (Negri, 1989). Whereas back then the desire for ruptures was expressed vividly, indicating the birth of a new, now intellectual subject, afterwards the cold fascination of a logic of rupture without alternatives begins to prevail. The latter appropriates the desire for ruptures, reevaluates it into the (futureless and impotent) reign of disruption. Its implementation, which, on the basis of cybernetization and computerization, aims at nothing but the frantic standstill of the present as an all-pervasive (and all-interrupting) accumulation movement of capital, also and especially affects the university. In the post-Fordist, knowledge-based accumulation regime of cybernetized capitalism – a regime that subsumes all forms of knowledge, theoretical and practical knowledge, implicit knowledge, etc. – the university has

increasingly mutated into a transnational corporation that is mainly concerned with the production of scientific and technological innovation potentials that fuel accumulation. Against this backdrop, not only is the idea and role of education, which now focuses on the fabrication of proletarianized knowledge subjects, changing fundamentally. The critical and socio-cultural function of the university, which could be described as strengthening societal potentialization, is in a deep crisis as well. But couldn't and shouldn't the university be an outstanding place for questioning the short-circuiting of the futureless logic of rupture? Shouldn't the task and idea of the university be redefined from here and thus the university question be repeated against the background of the prevailing historical situation, which is now entering the 'now of knowability'? It is important to develop new readings of this institution, also beyond its European-modern heritage. To uncover its potentialities today, which contour the university to come and thereby promote societal potentialization in general – this is what is at stake with the university question. The production of common thinking must be re-established at the university, if it ever existed there. This questioning is borne by faith in the university, in which the 'faith in the world' echoes, a faith which, according to Deleuze, we lack and which must be restored with all our strength. Yes, that's what it's all about: restoring faith in the world.

Premesh Lalu argues that the work of elaborating a concept of post-apartheid freedom in South Africa may yet prove to be a necessary touchstone in the process of reframing the idea of the university in our contemporary planetary conjuncture. Drawing on a recent monograph, *Undoing Apartheid* (Lalu, 2022), he has identified apartheid as a variant of a cybernetic mode of power, rather than simply an ideological outcome of a Cold War partitioning of the world. Lalu asks for a shift in focus from conventional emphases on the opposing poles in the exercise of power between grand and petty apartheid, between architectonics of social engineering and psychic breaches enacted in the everyday. Instead, he traces a pernicious and more persistent strand of apartheid in global shifts in university discourse beginning in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In this rendering, apartheid's genesis lies in efforts to link the human to revolutions in science accompanying the British abolition of slavery in 1834 in the Cape and Caribbean. Passing through the revolutions in thermodynamics in the 19th century, via the birth of the short-lived sciences of psychophysics and psychotechnics in the early 20th century, to the rise of cybernetics after the Second World War, apartheid crafted an idea of race by locating it in the milieu of a university discourse directed towards the expansion of technological resources put to work in the service of population control. Far from being a project specific to South Africa, apartheid anticipated the racialization of labour and the racialization of desire that redirected disciplinary forms discernible in slavery, colonialism, and fascism to neoliberal ends. The university of apartheid burdens the idea of the university with its reorientations of the scientific explorations of metabolism, energetics, and informatics through which a modern concept of race, and with it, a modern idea of the university, was remade. Largely orchestrated through transfers of knowledge from the physical sciences to the human sciences, the remaking of race translated the shifting signifiers of the master's discourse in ever more catastrophic rearrangements of sense perception. Lalu's commitment to undoing this legacy of apartheid through a project of aesthetic education as a step towards unseating mastery and inaugurating an idea of the university attentive to an enveloping planetary condition may have implications beyond

South Africa. It may inadvertently help to foster a mode of thinking across hemispheres that calls attention to the work that the signifier ‘South’ performs in the idea of the university more generally.

The conversation took place in December 2023 via Zoom. It was transcribed and revised in January 2024 and finalized in March 2024, alongside a workshop titled ‘What Is the University For?’, jointly organized by LIAS and CHR’s Iyatsiba Lab in Cape Town, University of the Western Cape. An earlier version of Erich Hörl’s contribution was translated from German by Meredith Dale.

Erich Hörl: What we share in common, Premesh, is that we care about the university. That’s what has brought us together here for this conversation. What I am speaking about is caring about the university in a form that also acknowledges its role as an institution of care, an institution of epistemic care, careful thinking and so on. And that care about the university must also be contextualized in the broader framework that we care about what happens to us in the here and now, in our broad present. The question of the idea and task of the university, which we have inherited from previous generations, now appears to be inscribed in a much wider unease about the present state of affairs. Against the backdrop of our present condition, it falls to us to examine this heritage, make selections from it, and submit it to critique. It seems to me that the question ‘What is the university for?’, as you once formulated it, has been forgotten, given all the commotion around buzzwords like excellence and efficiency (to introduce key concepts from Bill Readings’ (1997) *The University in Ruins*, right from the start) which still – and more than ever – dominate the university under the technological condition, and have completely subverted the idea of the university. If that is true – if in the course of what we might call the disruption of the university that question has indeed been forgotten – it would appear to me a matter of absolute urgency to remind ourselves of its necessity, its history and reach, to reformulate, reactualize and recalibrate it, to put it back on the table and to ‘reimagine the university’ as you put it.

But why should we take on this task of reimagining? Why should the university be our ‘matter of concern’? What is so exceptional about the university as an institution that we should consider – in view of its disastrous state – not just reimagining it but in fact refounding or regrounding it? What is the status and scope of this question? The renewal of belief in the university, if it ever existed, or in other words, its affirmation which is fed by its reconstitution as an institution of care – could it be part of a renewal of belief in the world, which, according to Deleuze, we so sorely lack today? I should add that what we are speaking about here is the modern university. And, at least in the 20th century, ‘the question of the university’ has taken the form of the question of the ‘idea’ and the ‘task’ of the university. You have set a different tone by refocusing the question on the ‘university discourse’. This has the potential to guide our reflections. But what exactly is the ‘university discourse’, what comes into focus through the reframing of the issue that it implies, and why should we take this as our starting point for reconceptualizing the question of the university? Does it already contain the seed of its renewal? What does it allow us to see more clearly? To what extent does it touch on Jacques Lacan’s famous problematization of the university discourse – in the scope of his theory of four discourses of knowledge, which he developed under the impression of the 1968 rising and in response

to it: the master's discourse, the hysteric's discourse, the analyst's discourse and the university discourse (Lacan, 2007) – and where does it go beyond it?

Premesh Lulu: I have had a longstanding fidelity to the questions you pose, especially as it allows me to think more carefully about what's at stake in recharging the idea of the university as necessary for giving expression to the meaning of post-apartheid freedom. That's how I'd like to approach our conversation, as finding ways to recharge the idea of the university, and reinvent attitudes that will allow us to ask what education might do for us now. The question that comes to mind is not only why we must care for the university, but also *how can we possibly not care for the university?* How can we not care when so much has been spoken and written about the university, but also with the university in all its varieties and pluralities of disciplines and histories and inquiries, in the working out of the tension between constraint and freedom – the conditional and the unconditional – that has been integral to this vast, expansive encounter with the question of the university? I've indicated a few texts that I think it would be crucial for us to think through. As you already mentioned, Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* has become for us, in our generation, a touchstone to think about what has shifted in the university. But in an earlier iteration of this vast expensive writing and literature on the university, Karl Jaspers' (1959) *The Idea of the University* proved important.

I was thinking specifically about the modular ways in which Jaspers sets up the scholastic and the Socratic universities, and the university of apprenticeship. Briefly, the scholastic university is the one that is focused on the question of the transfer of tradition. In this version of the university, we find something that we inherit from the idea of the university, something that we have tried to move beyond, but which we nevertheless can't do without. We are always in a relationship to tradition in one form or another. The trace of the scholastic is always also available to us in a second model of the university, which Jaspers identifies as the Socratic university. In the Socratic university, we are effectively dealing with a model of education that is about the self-realization of the subject. And there are forms of it that permeate the later humanist criticism, say of Jacques Rancière, in his notion of equality, where the task is not so much to figure out the relationship between master and servant, but actually to build models of equality in education – models that allow for a shift from what I call a model of friends and enemies to a model of extending a hand of friendship across generations. The Socratic university, like the scholastic university, has also been with us and will continue to be with us as an idea of the university for the foreseeable future. But Jaspers develops a third category of university, one that has resonance for our technologically driven contemporary world. This is the notion of a university formed around practices of apprenticeship. In this model of an apprenticeship university, we brush up against a specific limit in our conception of the university, one which animates the meaning of the university in a productive way, especially when it is threaded through the capacious designation 'the South'.

EH: In the original German, Jaspers speaks of *Meistererziehung*, literally the 'education by a master'. The English translation of *Meistererziehung* as 'apprenticeship' tends to emphasize the development of a craft or skill, and to some degree obscures Jaspers's main focus, which is on education by a master and the authority of his personality.

PL: Yes, the master signifier is present in each of these models. But it is more complicated in the idea of apprenticeship. As Jaspers puts it, ‘apprenticeship’ recalls qualitative differences between master and pupil. While Jaspers bemoans the model of apprenticeship for its near-complete subjection of the student to the will of the master, he nevertheless underlines the qualitative difference that it calls forth in the relation between them. What’s fascinating about these three models of the university that Jaspers sets up is that each of them deals with a relation to mastery. While the Socratic generally displaces the scholastic and apprenticeship models, in the American South and South Africa – where racialized slavery preceded late industrialization and the rise of communication technologies – the apprenticeship model persisted. Beyond the agency that moves the various discourses of mastery, I would say that the apprenticeship model in a racialized South holds out a possibility of bringing into view the questions of *techne*, technology, and labour. This is a question about the orientation of university education that has dominated the world since the end of slavery both in South Africa and the American South, and now quietly permeates the global scene. I’m thinking here of the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the first half of the 1900s. Washington was insistent on a model of education that was driven by the needs of vocational training for the descendants of slaves in the enforced system of segregated education in the American South. This is what was behind the rise of industrial schools such as the Tuskegee Institute. The idea of industrial schools in the American South found its way to South Africa in the first part of the 20th century as an early South African nationalist intelligentsia sought access to education in the Atlantic world. An industrializing South Africa, we might say, encounters the debate on education threaded through the post-Reconstruction period of the American South. But a second educational aspiration mooted by W.E.B. Du Bois in the debate about post-slavery Reconstruction under conditions of forced segregation argued for an education of the full human. For Du Bois, an aesthetic education would be indispensable for breaking out of the psychic inheritance of slavery. In other words, Du Bois held the view that the racial structures that one inherits from slavery could only be surpassed through an education focused on the senses.

EH: Would you say that this represents a crucial supplement to the three models Jaspers outlines?

PL: Yes, there’s something unspoken, but at the same time indispensable, in the way Jaspers distributes the elements of the idea of the university. We can see this by calling attention to the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois about education after slavery, which I think has yet to be resolved, not only for the descendants of slaves, but also for the worlds of mastery that have come after the abolition of slavery. The debate tells us that there’s something more in the apprenticeship idea of the university, located as it is between the scholastic and the Socratic. Perhaps we may think of it as an apprenticeship in judgment that forms around the supplement of the racial remains of slavery – race as such representing the unresolved question left over from slavery. And whether it is the scholastic or the Socratic that decides the debate on the reigning idea of the university, the question of apprenticeship lingers. Jaspers makes clear what it is that distinguishes the university from other ways in which we acquire knowledge or engage with the question of knowledge. The university bears the traces of tradition at one level,

of self-reliance at another level, and apprenticeship at yet another – each critical for the work of crafting non-dogmatic theories about the co-evolution of humans and technology. While it looks like he's pitting one form of mastery against another, playing on its different meanings of 'power' and 'craft', what he's effectively aiming at a synthesis of the university – an idea that would draw out the best of the scholastic, Socratic and apprenticeship models. He is searching for the renewal of what he calls the 'originative spirit of the university'. This relation to the problematization of mastery is the long-standing commitment to the idea of the university across the philosophical and poetic traditions that we inherit, particularly in the humanities. It is why we care about the university. Consider the example of Foucault's lectures on parrhesia, where Alcibiades has to come to terms with what it means to engage in the courage of truth by way of an education of the soul. Is not what he gains from Socrates an education which extends a hand of friendship across generations rather than resorting to sophistry or mastery? I have found Foucault's lectures on this theme instructive for negotiating the variety of forms of mastery in university discourse. That's how I would approach the question of why we ought to care about the university and what we preserve in the idea of the university. I don't think one reinvents the idea of the university with every passing generation. In our episodic world, we habitually think of knowledge as an event, but it's actually more of a variation on the norm that one is engaged with. I think that an impasse was encountered in the rebellion against education in an age of desublimation that we refer to as the source of the student movements of May 1968.

I wish to mark May 1968 not simply as the French rebellion, but also as the intensification of anti-colonial struggles that had unfolded across the world. This is where we might locate Lacan's notion of the four discourses, which reveals and disturbs the work of the master signifier in university discourse. I find Lacan's four discourses provocative, particularly his conceptualization of university discourse. Perhaps we can go into that, as we explore a possible model for education. My perspective is forged in relation to a South African vantage point in the aftermath of apartheid, in the struggle to emerge from it. This is a vantage point that can potentially illuminate the condition of the university globally.

EH: It is rather surprising to find Jaspers being taken up again and to reread his interventions on the university question from a contemporary perspective. His urge to grasp 'the central forces and general forms of intellectual existence [*geistige Existenz*]' certainly sounds strange to our deconstructivist ears, not the least because of the invocation of the spirit [*Geist*] that takes place here. There is now a new German edition of his writings on the university question, which includes the different versions of his famous text on the idea of the university (Jaspers, 2016). If we had the time, we really should take a closer look at how the argument and the text as a whole have developed and changed over the years, from the first edition in 1923, to the heavily revised and expanded post-war edition in 1946, to the rewritten version of 1961, and how those changes reflect and bear witness to the historical trajectory of the problem of the university throughout the 20th century.

The first edition was written in the early 1920s, during a moment of fundamental crisis of the German idea of the university as expounded by Fichte, Humboldt and Schleiermacher. This was the early years of the Weimar Republic, when Jaspers was a close friend of Heidegger and an ally in opposing the industrialization and decline of the

university. In fact, it was this text in particular that sparked the first frictions between them. The second edition came at the moment when the universities, which had been so abused and perverted by the Nazis, reopened after the Second World War, and the question of the university suddenly became relevant in the context of the democratization of a society devastated by dictatorship. Here the question of the spirit or intellect [*Geist*], which had been so central in the first edition, is secondary to the ability to ‘pursue truth unconditionally’ (Jaspers, 1959: 1). He describes the university as an outstanding site of unconditional ‘determination to know [*Wissenwollen*]’ (Jaspers, 1959: 2) and in particular – and this was new – as ‘the one place where by concession of state and society a given epoch may cultivate the clearest awareness’ (p. 1). This very striking formulation underlines the diagnostic task of the university.

The third and final version, written together with his student Kurt Rossmann in 1961, intervened in the deep and long-running discussion of reforms in West Germany, to which Jaspers had regularly contributed with brief but extremely critical texts. He returns again and again to the question of renewing the idea of the university and to the idea of intellectual life as an anti-totalitarian force. That is without doubt a unique resource that we will need to work through if we are putting the same question on the table again today – a today, by the way, in which the great contestation of the university seems to be on the agenda again.

PL: I had no idea, but it is very revealing. I’m very enthused by what you’ve just told me and feel encouraged to think further with Jaspers.

EH: If there is any meaningful historicity to the question of the university, and if the idea of the university and the form in which we problematize the university as such, its idea and task, are therefore subject to change over time, that would lend a particular contemporary urgency to one specific aspect of Jaspers’ thoughts: in a situation of disruption, the problem of handing down tradition (or I should perhaps say, following Derrida, inheritance as an always already prosthetic task and not simply a given) assumes a preeminence and a significance that it may not have had for Jaspers himself. How should the university handle the interruption of transmission that now confronts us on account of the acceleration and short circuiting to which social media and AI give rise? What does this mean for attempts to redescribe the university, if we wish to avoid merely appealing to the scholastic model of simple (re)transmission (which, given these technological changes, is probably no longer an option anyway)? How can the university realize a structural interpretation of heritage that is not simply reactive or reactionary? The apprenticeship model is of interest today because, as you pointed out, Jaspers places weight on the question of learning and judging; he emphasizes the idea that judging, inventing and creating specific things is something that has to be learned. And that learning – and this is the point I am driving at – requires time. The high speed of contemporary societies makes that an enormous challenge. I am thinking here of microtemporality as the timeframe of algorithmic environments. Antoinette Rouvroy (2013), for example, has written about how the new types of power associated with algorithmic governmentality leave us bereft of the time we need to engage in the activity of interpretation and, ultimately, to form judgements. Instead, automatic subsumption comes to predominate.

Can the university be understood and configured as a place where a specific temporality rules, where one can learn to take the time that is required to be inventive, to judge critically (rather than merely promoting and affirming the algorithmic judgement)? Should the university be conceived as a place that gives us time, as opposed to the ubiquitous taking away of time, its ongoing theft? Should we perhaps be working towards an intrinsic temporality of the university, in a form that subverts the present situation, characterized as it is by globalist techno-capital at full speed? That would mean confronting the age of disruption with time for transmission, invention and judgement. Incidentally, both these complexes – disruption and speed – demonstrate beautifully how the issue of the co-evolution of humans and technology, as you refer to it, cross-cuts the question of the university.

I am also fascinated by your idea of mixing the debate between Washington and Du Bois into Jaspers' three models of education. How, in a context of ultra-rapid societies, can we bring Washington's and Du Bois' discussion about holistic education back into play? How can this question be updated for the present day? And how is the question of the so-called South – which has essentially been completely omitted from the history of the modern university, as you put it so trenchantly – indelibly inscribed into the university discourse? To my mind that is perhaps the central point of everything that I have learned from your work: that if we pose the question of the university today, we have no alternative but always to ask the question with exactly this difference in mind, and from the differential perspective opened up by the South. The designation 'South' colours practically everything associated with this question.

PL: That's a persuasive segue into exploring the potential in Lacan to lead us somewhere else – to come back to your interest in the reach of 'university discourse', and why I believe that this conceptual focus is central. I don't want to claim Lacan as guild master, because I think the four discourses that he distinguishes militate against precisely that impulse. Rather, what I want is to plot another route for the university by means of the four discourses, if you will allow, through the encounter with Du Bois and Washington between the First and Second World Wars, but also leading to what we've come to know as strategies of partition in the wake of the Second World War. Is this political strategy of partition not effectively an accumulation of time – which is to say, time that does not pass but rather builds up – that has made a mockery of the cheap talk of the end of the Cold War? Why are political strategies of partition accumulations of time? Well, in a politics of partition there is a build-up of numerous struggles that do not pass away but return in and as these divisions. I'm fascinated with thinking the historicity entailed in this question and with thinking about what the South does for us as supplement, as you said – to think 'supplement' here in accordance with Derrida's working out of what he calls the 'essential' or 'originary' supplement.

As it is often constituted in the disciplines, the South is, unfortunately, reduced to a calculation of addition and subtraction. It is approached either as a matter of inclusion or exclusion and, therefore, as in need of an adjustment. In my view, this is a very limiting perspective. What it ignores is the way in which the South is absolutely integral to the imagining of the modern university. Thought of as a supplement, the South illuminates an aspect of Jaspers' and Lacan's combined concern with the master's discourse. Lacan's

configurations of the master's discourse, university discourse, hysteric's discourse, and the analyst's discourse trouble the preservation of the university. I read Lacan as engaging in an effort to unsettle the master's discourse, but also to surpass Hegel's conundrum of the master/slave dialectic.

The problem of the master's discourse was precisely what defined approaches to segregationist education that Du Bois and Washington were engaged with, and which in South Africa distinguished between the 'native' question and the 'poor white' question. In South Africa and the US South, the master's discourse directed education to transform the descendants of slaves into subjects of new industrial labour. In South Africa, this process was undertaken in the name of liberal trusteeship, which sought to ensure the transformation of a rural subject of labour into an urban one. Education was not simply about literacy or desire, let alone enchantment, although it did give rise to nationalist sentiment and impulse. Ironically, it was ultimately about mediating relations between master and servant.

Lacan's four discourses trouble the dialectic between master and servant/slave, and shed new light on how education inadvertently reveals the effects of segregation and its overcoming. That has been a preoccupation of postcolonial thinking now for the last four or five decades, a concern that predates the rush to ground thought on the decolonial, which, in my view, rests on the politicization of the ontology of the subject, at the expense of sharpening the critique of imperial reason. I want to draw a distinction between what I think was the project of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, amongst others – which I see as belonging to the critique of imperial reason – and a recent shift, largely brought about by political theory and anthropology in the university, of the politicization of the ontology of the subject. This is perhaps one way to differentiate between the work of postcolonial critique and calls for decolonization. Postcoloniality plugs into the idea by working towards an apprenticeship in judgement. This postcolonial critique resonates with Lacan's four discourses in how it locates the problem of mastery in imperial reason.

Let's consider one final distribution of the idea of the university, this time Bill Reading's identification of the university of reason, culture and excellence. The designation 'South' does something more than what Jaspers and Lacan are seeking; it unmoors mastery through an appeal to a postcolonial sensibility formed around the critique of imperial reason. In short, 'the South' names a desire that approximates the Lacanian *objet petit a*, especially in its desire to surpass the problem of race and the master's discourse. The South, we might say, intensifies the disruption brought about by Lacan's modification of Jaspers' search for a renewal of the originary spirit of the university.

To borrow liberally from you, Erich, we might call this a Disruptive Condition, one that postcolonial criticism directs towards an unspecified and unfulfilled aspect of desire in university discourse. In other words, the epistemic crafting of a subject trying to escape the rule of mastery or sophistry invariably brushes up against the unresolved problem of race. This subjectivity now permeates the entire discourse of the university, across the spectrum of the master's discourse to university discourse, from the hysteric's discourse to the analyst's. This reading of what the word 'South' does to the idea of the university has echoes in Fanon's reckoning with a psychiatric hospital in North Africa in the 1960s. Perhaps we can come back to that later. Let me first say something about the desire to overcome what the master confers on the subject of Empire through the

processes of education specific to the university. The postcolonial frame allows us to work on the distributions of Lacan's four discourses. With, I should add, one small but consequential difference. The problem of race does not only signal mastery but, importantly, also presupposes a technological milieu that threatens a repetition compulsion. In my recent book *Undoing Apartheid* (Lalu, 2022), I've tried to see what happens to education when we map race onto this technological milieu forged in the modernity of the university in the wake of the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1834 and on the cusp of the age of Empire. The book touches on the rise of physics and the physical sciences, and the revolutions in thermodynamics, mainly as reflected in German idealism and British Natural Philosophy in the 1830s, and largely centred on the Cambridge Philosophical Breakfast Club, and the expansion of scientific endeavour through the rise of a politics of collecting in Empire. So that's perhaps the onset of a new model of the university in the 19th century.

From there we move rapidly to the expansion of technological objects of communication and the emergence of *Lebensphilosophie* in the midst of the First World War. I focus on the Wundtian paradigm of experimental psychology, psychophysics and psycho-techniques. And the third iteration of race accompanies a debate between Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn – not forgetting Friedrich August von Hayek and several others who apply the models of science to economic rationality and behavioural economics, converging with the movement in cybernetics – hence loosely plotting the technological milieu that reinforces and remakes the idea of race. The university flounders on the entropic remains of race, ultimately folding the slippery signifier of race into a technological milieu. Du Bois and Washington were clearly anticipating something of this order in the 1920s that only received its full expression after the Second World War, when the entropic energy of race was subsumed into systems of population control, forms of governmentality like partition, and unprecedented forms of communication and control. I liked how you gave me an opening to delineate a different fate for the master's discourse.

EH: While reading your work I have often thought about how exactly you bring the university discourse into play and what you are focusing on there. What you have just laid out is convincing. The question of the university needs to be revitalized in order to break the university's dependency on the master and on mastery. We need to shift the whole discussion in that direction, perhaps even moving away from concepts like 'idea' and 'task' that were so central to the question of the university, at least in the 20th century. Because those are terms in which the master's voice still reverberates to some extent. We need to redirect the question to the university discourse. If we consider the architecture that Immanuel Kant lays out in his *Conflict of the Faculties* – the upper faculties of medicine, law and theology, and the lower faculties engaging in philosophy and everything that today we would call the humanities, in light of the new university model that you've just described, from the Philosophical Breakfast Club to Hayek, Popper and Kuhn – what ultimately emerges is a university of industrial culture that is essentially incapable of self-reflection. To oppose this development is precisely the task of the lower faculties. Only they are truly free to think, while the other faculties have always been in key respects instruments of the reproduction of the state, in the sense that they replicate the state form in the intellectual sphere. And if the capital

form, which has certainly always been salient in some sense or other, increasingly supplants the state form (or the alliance of capital and technology increasingly takes the place of the state) what we're left with is the corporate university, which both realizes and embodies that transformation.

To return to Bill Readings, one could say that after the university of reason of the 18th century and the university of culture of the 19th, we have now arrived at the university of excellence and the corporate university. But there was a moment around the demise of the university of culture (which must also be understood as the university of the nation-state) that was characterized by the hope that the university could become something very different. I am referring to the 1970s, when 1968 still reverberated, but it was still noticeable in the 1980s when I was a student. We saw a powerful opening of the question of the university, a radical revisitation. In 1980 Gérard Granel published a text in *Les Temps Modernes* that still bears traces of that hope, an appeal for change in the university. He calls for 'an *other* university' whose task is to '(re)open life-in-common in the mode of a world to come' (Granel, 1982: 80). On the one hand this is a despairing text, where Granel describes a university already ravaged by having been placed at the service of capital, in which any problematization of the world is not merely avoided but explicitly subverted. And Granel had absolutely no illusions here. As far as he was concerned, the modern university could by definition only be understood in light of the imperatives of technology and capital. But the text also breathes a spirit of great hope, an enormous optimism, the optimism of thought, which Granel trusts absolutely. He was inspired by a 'general hope' that this might be a moment in which we had to invent the university as 'a matrix for the modes of a world to come' (Granel, 1982: 79). Here, belief in the world and belief in the university are closely linked, even interwoven. Yet once we get to Bill Readings – writing only a little later, but the 10- or 15-year difference is crucial here – it is plain that something fundamental has changed, in the sense that all that hope has simply evaporated. And if we reopen the question today, we seem to find ourselves very far away indeed from that hope, in a time of disbelief. But we should remember that brief episode of hope. It really did occur in our life time. Indeed, we should work to ensure it is remembered.

When I asked at the beginning why we should (still) care about the university at all, there is another underlying question behind that: Do I trust the power of thought, as Granel did for example? This is not about a personal inclination but about a desire inherent to any thinking that cleaves to the institution of the university, that's invested in it; it's about something that exceeds the university. A desire for thinking, but also a desire in thinking for a place from which and from where it is possible to think – a necessary but futile endeavour, since its very institutionalization would always already have destroyed thinking. I experience this destruction day after day. At the same time, this desire, being a surplus that exceeds the university, still keeps the university coming into play as an institution – despite everything, we try to make an *other* university out of it.

PL: Much of my thinking on the university is forged at the institutional site of a historically Black university in South Africa, created by apartheid as part of its separate education policy, and where the desire persists to imagine a university beyond apartheid. So, I confess to engaging the resources of autobiography. But the autobiographical is only a point of

departure. The idea of the university requires thinking in relation to others. *And that's what the university provides for – a thinking in relation to others.* What interests me is how the technological milieu shifts the university's idea, which we too easily disregard as merely epiphenomenal. Here I think the work of Bernard Stiegler is proving crucial, especially his insistence on the centrality of the memory function of the university, its function in support of the reenchantment of the world, and also its consequences for the orders of knowledge. I think the Kantian model of the conflict of the faculties has shown itself again and again as facilitating a certain kind of repetition compulsion that has actually produced the sense of defeat in many instances. And I think the model of the university built on the revolution in the physical sciences in the 1800s, which sought the grounds of the university in the consilience of inductions and was reinvigorated at the end of the 20th century through the work of E.O. Wilson, shows up as a very conservative model of the unity of knowledge.

For Wilson, there is no longer any need for human judgement and certainly no need for humanist reason given the hegemony of the method of the physical and natural sciences. We will, by his reasoning, surrender judgement to machines. And in his reckoning, consilience means that all disciplinary procedures succumb to the operations of cause and effect. What's written out of the script of the university to come is desire. And there's a troubling sense of triumphalism in the conquest over the sensory in Wilson. The entire effort to surpass mastery is lost to the paradigm of the unity of knowledge that is being promoted through this all-encompassing sense of a victory of the physical sciences in the broader conflict of the faculties.

It's very similar to Fukuyama's end of history thesis. The supreme idea is in place, the master signifier is in place, and what's more, the master's discourse is intact. Wilson's and Fukuyama's ideas of the unity of knowledge at the end of the Cold War share a symptom that's worth considering. Following the May '68 student uprisings in France and the push towards a world free of colonial domination, the master's discourse had been severely challenged, not least by the so-called signifier of the servant. Because the servant's relation to the object proved much more proximate than the master's relation to the object, the agency of the master appears to have become more and more dispensable in that moment, especially through the dispersals of discourse and mechanisms, veridiction. But what unfolds essentially is the search for a new model of veridiction, in which the university partakes as an institution tasked with establishing relations of truth across forms and expressions of knowledge by professing to free itself from tradition.

In the narrative I am crafting, this potential of being released from the old, from tradition as such, was taken over by a very conservative principle of refutability, emerging from the theory of scientific revolutions. A combined Popperian and Kuhnian notion that makes everything in the university a principle of refutability takes hold. And it thus dislodges what is potentially a radical attempt to shift the emphasis in veridiction from institution to subjectivity that appears to me to be unfolding in that very moment after the Second World War. And this is what I specifically find in my reading of Foucault and Fanon, and their complementary, but also discrepant, relation to the history of madness. I've been inspired by Nancy Luxon's contrapuntal reading of Foucault and Fanon on madness and psychiatry (Luxon, 2021). Cryptically put, for Foucault madness is indispensable to the concept of freedom. But in France, the anti-psychiatry movement had lodged a particular complaint against the institution of the psychiatric hospital.

In Fanon's reckoning the psychiatric hospital was important to hold on to because it is the site of what he calls *disalienating* encounters. In other words, it is impossible to imagine how the colonial condition could be overcome without the help of the institution. And in Fanon – Nancy Luxon makes this point – the hospital becomes a waystation. So, one way to think about the university, beyond a calculation of victories and defeats, is to ask how it can function as a waystation that allows for *disalienating* encounters. That's one possibility. The other, of course, is that it might also be a place – and again, here Nancy Luxon has been very helpful – for teaching what we don't know, or as Gayatri Spivak puts it, learning to learn. The question of uncertainty or the unknowable *objet petit a* in Lacan's sense is a useful guide for our efforts of creating spaces for experiments in equality in education – not just across faculty and students, but in combining the work of thought and the work of the hand. The unspecifiable content of desire continues to surreptitiously infiltrate the processes of education. It now needs to be allowed to surface institutionally, in my view. And alternatively, I would say that the university might also be a space for a more affirmative rendering of that question of building new attitudes towards technology. Rather than being overwhelmed by the question of technology or striving to command and instrumentalize its deployments, we might wish to think about how it could inaugurate an education towards a new attitude. And here you can see why the work of object theatre and the puppet (in the tradition of the Handspring Puppet Company and William Kentridge) that I've written on in *Undoing Apartheid* becomes important. The puppet is an object that is located midway between the human and the technological. It is the scene of uncanny returns, if you like, of the subject, overcome by a certain form of mastery, from time to time.

EH: Well, there you have put your finger on absolutely key elements for a university to come. Above all I see a striking intersection of the democratic and the technical in the university, which we need to pay attention to. We face the challenge of the master's discourse, which still has a firm grip on the university, despite the events of 1968, or rather, precisely because of 1968, and as a backlash. This collides with a deep misunderstanding of the university's relationship to the technological milieu, which is central to the course of the individuation, disindividuation and transindividuation processes that permeate our high-technology (and globalized) societies.

You underlined the aspect of the university as a place of thinking in relation to others, a relay station for disalienating encounters, a place of teaching about what we do not know. The university to come might perhaps even be a key site of thinking-*with*, following Jean-Luc Nancy or also Donna Haraway here. We need to establish university spaces where new attitudes to technology can be produced and practiced, where new approaches can be experimented with, where a new stance, a technological *ethos*, can be rehearsed. To some extent that could be seen as an updated echo of Jaspers' model of apprenticeship – but this time without the master.

I wanted to ask you what concepts the coming university can be built on, or at least to describe the difficulties that permeate the university to come. They need to be concepts that at long last replace the empty slogans of 'excellence' and 'efficiency' that have undermined the university epistemically and ruined it institutionally. You said that the coming university must provide space for invention, for the uncertain and unknown,

even the outrageous. In an age of algorithmic governmentality and the enforcement of a corresponding temporality, of preemption and anticipation directed towards appropriation and command and control of the future (or its automatization) there are certainly very good reasons to invoke the outrageous. But at the same time we are increasingly haunted by the monsters of the unavailable. We are witnessing rather a revaluation of the unavailable and unpredictable, which was once a critical category marking the bounds of the modern apparatus of appropriation but now returns with shocking force as the real. Can these concepts really form the groundless ground for the university to come and restore the capacity for futurity, which we now need more than ever? What other concepts might lend themselves to these reactualization efforts?

PL: I mean – and this tends to sound extremely pessimistic, given what I’ve just said about an affirmative university – for me the future is already colonized. We are seeing the repercussions of that new colonization of the future already at hand. The more we are faced with greater urgencies, and immediacies, and the more the event becomes constricted both in time and space, the greater will be the propensity for mastery. In fact, Paul Virilio was on the mark in this respect. We are in a moment of a masochism of speed and a constriction of space – nothing could be more devastating than to think a liveable life in the throes of such a condition. Yet there are other ways and other kinds of temporalities – other than this urgency which has been foisted upon us and upon the university and its disciplines – from within which to think. In fact, the university and its disciplines might be partly responsible for the excess of speed in which we find ourselves – it’s not outside of that temporal realization of life and the world.

What I want to think a little bit with you about is this idea of building new concepts, and which kinds of concepts are called for. Part of the inventive work of the university is around the question of the invention of concepts. I’ve also been thinking alongside Norbert Wiener, who is someone who intrigues me. I am especially interested in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Wiener, 1954), which is a text that is sometimes prematurely set aside because it’s thought of as the mere popularization of the cybernetic argument. What intrigues me is how quickly Wiener becomes sceptical about automated machines and what they would mean for the human. Likewise, I’ve been thinking a little bit about what desire means for the post-apartheid in a moment of the overwhelming sense of despair that unfolds in the wake of neoliberal globalization and the circular causalities of race on which it feeds. I believe that nothing could be more telling of this condition than the effects of post-slavery labour regimes in South Africa over 200 years. I’m not wanting to stigmatize those who have engaged in a long struggle to emerge from such a sensory assault. I’m making a point about symptoms of centuries of racial subjection and what we’re now witnessing in the rise of algorithmic capitalism. In each we will find attempts to quell and hold that subject in a certain relationship of subservience, or servitude.

Now, let me momentarily go back to Du Bois. There’s an anecdote that says that upon arriving in Berlin in 1893, Du Bois had an opportunity to attend a performance of Goethe’s *Faust II*. At one level, he encountered a familiar story about the conflict between the intellect and desire. But Du Bois also finds in the production a very troubling symptom. He was provoked by feelings of race that threaten to reappear in forms that are unprecedented in relation to his experience in the American South. Whereas education

promised a way out of the experience of slavery in the 19th century, Du Bois argues that what he sees in *Faust II* is a convergence of desire and intellect that puts into play an unanticipated anxiety that warns of the return of race. In our modernity that return has been mobilized again and again as a signifier for politics, so much so that it no longer requires explicit articulation. What Du Bois is concerned with is what has come to pass as a racism without race. It is for this reason that he seems to nudge us towards thinking the uncanny in the structure of race. I think there's a different mode of the uncanny at work here. In our current technological milieu – characterized by the convergence of highly technologized instruments of communication with forms of subjection that are mnemotechnically sustained – the double bind of uncanny returns may yield concepts necessary to address a problem lodged at the very core of the idea of the university.

More importantly, I think that the uncanny gets us to the senses – both in terms of how the sensory has been integral to the foundations of the modern university, but also how the senses have been corralled towards the ends of governmentality. Perhaps a new set of concepts will help us to attend to what remains in the realms of the sensory. The implications of the university trapped in a sensory order may require a reworking of a Schillerian model of aesthetic education. Gayatri Spivak's aesthetic education in the age of globalization is an important starting point for a remodelling of the indispensability of an aesthetic education to deal with the question of the uncanny and uncanny returns. I think nothing could better prepare us for a future that is already colonized than to attend to this question of uncanny returns via an aesthetic education.

EH: In a context of colonization of the future and loss of futurity, from which the university is in no way excepted – indeed which, as it engages re-perspectivation, it must make into one of its major axes of investigation – the necessity of aesthetic education appears undeniable: an education in handling the uncanny. When I began thinking about this conversation, one author immediately sprang to mind, who I absolutely wanted to include, who addresses the question of the uncanny in the university, namely, the uncanniness of technology. I'm thinking of Bernard Stiegler. He thinks the university under the condition of computational enframing (*Ge-stell*) – or what he calls 'the disruption', which could be regarded as his reformulation of Heidegger's *Ge-stell*. For Stiegler, disruption is the culmination of the enframing (the *Ge-stell*), the climax of globalized European nihilism, which Nietzsche expected as the 'uncanniest of all guests' but is now said to have entered its final stage of computational or automatic nihilism. So, what does it now mean for the question, idea and task of the university, to be in disruption or, as I prefer to say, under the Disruptive Condition? To what extent is the university affected by the automatic nihilism of disruption? And what does that imply for the task of reconceiving it? But first of all, we must ask: what does disruption actually mean to Stiegler? In order to answer that I must briefly digress. Stiegler sees the operative principle of epoch formation as a specific type of doubling and non-simultaneity, what he calls the 'double epochal redoubling'. This is quite clearly the key concept of his philosophical programme, and also structures his analyses of the present. He distinguishes a first *epokhē*, which is a time of suspension, from a second one that is a time of recomposition. The first *epokhē* is the time in which the forms of technics and time that define

an epoch are interrupted, it manifests as crisis – a time that no longer sees itself as an epoch at all, but rather as an ‘absence of epoch’. The second *epokhē* is a time in which, by way of various modes of knowing, thinking and living, a new technical reality is adopted – and new forms of psychic-collective individuation, of transindividuation, which are constitutive for the new epoch, arise.

This second time, of recomposition or recompossibilization, is ultimately also a time of questioning, which – after technology has called a whole epoch into question – opens up the unexpected and improbable. For Stiegler, history is essentially the unfolding of this dual motion, the entanglement of these two times. If the existing modes of knowledge, thinking and life, which actually represented the appropriation of former modes of technical change, are suspended without the second time of the *epokhē* occurring, without ensuring this second time – meaning that the new technical reality cannot be adopted after all – then a general proletarianization, denoetization and disindividuation will prevail. In the psychic-collective paralysis that follows, epochality itself begins to disintegrate, the crisis of the epoch becomes permanent and we enter the epochless epoch, the ‘epoch of the absence of epoch’, as Stiegler puts it. And it is precisely this pure interruption – pure because it consists in nothing but disintegration, no synthesis occurs – that Stiegler identifies as ‘the disruption’. In the disruption the second time of recomposition is lacking. It’s the ultimate absence. ‘Disruption’ is thus a thoroughly historical designation, the name of a historical condition, perhaps even a new regime of historicity, to take up a notion of François Hartog. The term describes our time of automatic nihilism, in which the second time of double epochal redoubling is destroyed. And precisely here lies the necessity to reinstate the question of the university and to reformulate the task of the university. In contrast to Derrida’s (2002) ‘unconditional university’ – and in light of the technological milieu – Stiegler shifts the question away from dissidence or resistance, away from the complex of enlightenment and power, and instead towards therapy and care. In a direct response to Derrida, he underlines the ineluctable pharmacological conditionality of the university: ‘the university and the academic world in general are therapeutic institutions charged with bringing about the emergence of the second moment of the *epokhē* redoubling’ (Stiegler, 2015: 175). Could there be a stronger formulation of the task of the university to address the uncanniness of technology and to teach us how to deal with the uncanny, to understand and rehearse it again and again?

After 1989, in the ultra-liberal techno-scientific context of digital planetarization, the university became a central actor of disruption as the ‘innovating university’. But the university itself, as institution, is itself subject to disruption. We can speak of a university-in-disruption. It certainly ceased long ago to fulfil its central therapeutic task, namely to transform technical becoming into societal future (which I think comes quite close to what you, Premesh, call education for a new attitude), notwithstanding the incessant talk of the necessity for a great transformation that one currently hears at the universities. Stiegler’s reckoning with the university is comprehensive, even if we will still have to consider closely to what extent it is also justified. Where once there were thought and reason, Stiegler now sees ‘automatic understanding’ predominant. In order to respond to this situation, the university must first and foremost restore ‘the possibility of a second moment’ of the *epokhē* (Stiegler, 2015: 176). Therein lies its entire responsibility and its absolutely outstanding position. And in order to do it justice in a situation

of comprehensive disindividuation, massive destitution of the institutions and the proliferation of planetary irrationality, it must reinvent and reconstitute itself as an institution. Say we were to speak of a temporality of the university that, under the conditions of full-speed techno-economic disruptivity, offers time for recomposition and establishes the university as a site of careful thought and responsible invention – in what might such a temporality consist and what forms would it exhibit? And what is an institution of care? We are talking about careful thinking, which is always *thinking with*, care about the knowledge produced, care about ‘what stories we tell to tell other stories with’ (Haraway, 2016: 12), epistemic care, care about the worldings we instigate, careful handling of tradition and so on. What would a university of care look like? Naturally it’s an issue that requires elaboration. But to me it seems that at present it’s actually highly virulent, and if the question ‘What is the university (for)?’ is back on the table, then the issue of care needs to be included in the discussion.

PL: I very much like the exposition you’ve provided. It alludes to something specific that we might want to think about together. I’m referring to the notion of the ‘second time’. And not to forget the interregnum, which we might refer to as an interval. I’ve been arguing here that the post-apartheid is not what comes after, it’s less a reference to the transcendent than an interval. As in the mode of Canguilhem, certain variations on a norm become available to thought in the space of an interval. In the revolutionary parlance of so-called transitional societies, change is expected to occur as a rupture. This is a construction of the event that is no longer helpful. Knowledge, and by extension the university, is lodged in a circuitry of technogenesis that requires the effort of re-circuiting and re-routing certain impulses. The temporality of interval might be useful here – as those who encounter the problem of race in university discourse have come to realize. I wonder whether the tendency towards proletarianization that Stiegler identifies as a symptom of our age is what comes after a failure to reconstitute the domains of care or whether it is already discernible prior to facing the deluge.

This is where the supplement of the South might allow us to see how proletarianization at the institutional site of the university was always already underway, under the sign of race. And its currency can be gauged by how care very quickly became a programme of liberal trusteeship, which is the benevolent transfer of the energy of the slave into new forms of servitude, into industrial and immaterial labour. And trusteeship became a model of reconstituting the domain of the master or mastery, a process that led to the modernization of the 19th-century idea of race. So, to circumvent that drift, one would have to say: let’s rearrange the terms along lines suggested by Lacan’s four discourses, so that we have other languages for responding to the uncanny in anticipating its returns. The absence of epoch – and *epokhē* – leads to a question about the possibility of the new, which is always forged in an interval, but always, as the South reminds us, by way of contending with uncanny returns. And it is this South that pops up in the spatio-temporal site of the interval to exclaim: ‘You’re not going to arrive at where you claim you’re heading. You’re very much heading in a direction we’re trying to avoid going in. Again! We’ve been there before.’

EH: May I just repeat what you said about proletarianization, in order to highlight what I see as the decisive aspect? Generalized proletarianization cannot simply be seen as a

consequence, it is not simply the inevitable outcome after the failure of the second time, in the disruption. Instead, seen from the South, one must acknowledge that there has always been proletarianization and that, to a certain extent, the university as a modern institution is founded on proletarianization in the guise of race. Thus, proletarianization is not simply the antithesis of the modern university (undermining it and so on) but is inscribed into its very constitution. Yet another reason to thoroughly rethink the university project. And incidentally, race is certainly also Stiegler's unthought.

PL: Hence the different modality of care, perhaps along lines suggested by Joan Tronto or yourself. We need to think about what one does with care, to dislodge it from the propensities of war – because colonial wars never happened without the deceptive deployment of a concept of care. The colonized subject, in other words, needed to be destroyed in order to bring it within the realms of care – hence the tasks of cultivation assigned to universities, libraries, and hospitals in the story of colonial modernity. And that's the ironic and deceptive structure of a colonial predicament. That's why Fanon is saying to the anti-psychiatry movement that the point is not to get rid of the psychiatric hospital. The point is to hold on to the institution of the psychiatric hospital. Because the hospital is where potential disalienating encounters unfold. Fanon is looking for disalienating encounters as an antidote to the onset of a racial formation in a colonial setting. I think we are in the same predicament as Fanon. And I think it's where we ought to set to work – on the appropriate placement and distribution of concepts that enable care within the schema.

EH: This problematization of the concept of care is far-reaching. The term 'South' dramatically shifts the perspective, even in relation to the questions of care and proletarianization. The university discourse itself was transformed by the originary supplement of the South, and it must continue to change.

PL: Let's continue to think about the potentialities of working in a collective sense, across hemispheres, and unseating mastery as the determinant of knowledge.

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