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CRITICAL STAGES
EDITED BY PATRICK ANDERSON

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THE PERFORMANCE AND PEDAGOGY OF NEOLIBERAL AFFECT

Editor's Note: Under Mike Sell's excellent editorship, the Critical Stages column in *Theatre Survey* was developed as a venue for representing current issues for subdisciplinary divisions within the broader field of theatre and performance studies. As the new editor for the column, I hope to build upon Sell's previous editorial work by shifting the form of these short essays in two ways: first, by spotlighting concerns that reach both inside the many corners of our field and outside into a range of broader "publics"; and second, by engaging multiple scholars and artists in "conversations" in order to provide plural perspectives on these concerns. For this first column of my editorship, Eng-Beng Lim, Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz track several micro- and macromaneuverings of neoliberalism—from the classroom to the department to the "global

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university"—and consider how theatre and performance scholars might approach the political difficulties currently threatening the mission of higher education.

ENG-BENG LIM: In an advanced undergraduate course on comparative drama, a Theatre M.A. student threatened to "foam in her mouth" if we were to talk about Marx again, while another e-mailed to say she had been absent from class for six weeks because of a terminated pregnancy: "Please don't tell anyone." The unintended hyperbole of these utterances pointed to a tricky scenario in which unruly disruption or a state of self-exception may be upheld as a form of debate, a legitimate health issue, or "my" private views. In a class devoted to exploring twentieth-century social issues in performance, such encounters were teaching moments calling for the best of dramatic pedagogy, which professors dutifully perform. Yet I cannot account for the unsettling display of intellectual recalcitrance that lingers long afterward not only in this class but several others in recent years. More than case studies of teaching or students gone berserk, I raise these two incidents in my classroom to suggest that such professions are not merely hyperbolic or exceptional but are symptomatic of a larger neoliberal cultural politic permeating the United States.

As I tried to foreclose my student's inevitable "foaming" by steering the conversation toward a productive reading of "Neoliberal Newspeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate," a classic essay cowritten by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, the student staged her own Joe Wilson "You lie!" moment by charging that these two foreigners living in France had falsified figures about the class and racialized disparities of the U.S school system.[1] Their critique of multiculturalism as a cognate formation is faulty, the student claimed, because she "fact-checked on Google and could not find supporting evidence. Besides, the information is outdated, and what do two Frenchmen know about America?" It made no difference to this student that Wacquant is a respected sociologist at UC Berkeley and that the late Bourdieu remains one of the most often-cited cultural theorists in the United States. "These are elite people who know nothing about the working class," and they speak in "blanket generalizations," my student said. As she convulsed to a climax, she declared, "I am a church-going, John McCain–voting Republican and I do not feel represented in this class. All you professors ever talk about is exploitation this-and-that. I just want to get the hell out of here and back to Grand Rapids!" Meanwhile, the other student who had sworn me to secrecy about her health issue sent an e-mail to complain to various administrators that her professor was acting erratically and "playing musical classrooms" to avoid her. After her charges were dismissed, she used "hormonal imbalance" to justify her complaint, but no apology would be forthcoming. She was entitled to her opinions and her place in class even if she had missed seven assignments. One might like to believe that a student who tells her professor to "get over yourself" for extending a helping hand is an exception to the norm; but such a lack of grace is not so much "personal" as it is an emboldened sense of consumerist entitlement that increasingly texturizes the system of U.S. higher education. And such expressions of blinding entitlement are endemic.

We might say that such stirring pedagogies of neoliberalism (and their alliance with conservative outlooks) to which professors are increasingly

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subjected in our rapidly corporatized universities are now commonplace. But the limits of speech between a staged possession or pathological self-agitation ("foaming in the mouth") and the use of naturalized exigencies such as biology or "the market" as inviolable logics or natural silencers (of imagined reproach or penalty) by neoliberal subjects are reaching new levels of obfuscation. When drama students rise up in the name of teabaggers, birthers, and deathers, is there any place left for the social consciousness of Bertolt Brecht, Elfriede Jelinek, Lu Xun, and Dario Fo? To borrow Barney Frank's pointed response to a woman at a town hall meeting who likened health-care reform to "Nazi policy": "Trying to have a conversation with you would be like arguing with a dining room table." Entrenched in structural and ideological neoliberalism, should it be surprising that students can actually say with no qualms that female workers in garment factories depicted in films like *Made in L.A.* and *Behind the Labels: Garment Workers on U.S. Saipan* are better off because they earn an "income"?[2] How can we account for a student's rage against Marx and others who labored on behalf of the working class with whom she identifies?

This quandary is perhaps captured in the sad irony of the performance by "Billionaires for Wealthcare," a tuxedo-wearing agitprop group carrying placards declaring "Survival of the Richest" while posing for photographs with working-class patriot-protestors against health-care reform. They say "absolutely!" to the obscene profits of multinational pharmaceutical and health-care companies about which the "billionaires" boast as they walk in their midst and agree tacitly to their own disservice by these companies. From the classroom to the street, one might ask: Can performance practice have any effect at all in reorienting such a bizarre or displaced sense of entitlement? Can a hopeless pedagogy against neoliberal formations in a time marked by such rampant epistemic crises produce alternative publics to these misplaced rages and obfuscations?

LISA DUGGAN: There are no teabaggers in my undergraduate classes at NYU. The New York City location attracts students with relatively cosmopolitan attitudes, and the courses I teach (with titles like "Intersections: Race, Gender and Sexuality in U.S. History" and "Queer New York City") tend to enroll self-selected groups of liberal feminists, LGBT advocates, anti–corporate globalization activists, independent souls from the Gallatin School for Individualized Study, and arty queer kids from the Tisch School of the Arts. But that doesn't mean that these students are not neoliberal subjects. They are, after all, ponying up (or borrowing) more than $50,000 per year for their NYU education. They are embedded in structures of privilege and entitlement, or else they are encumbered by the strictures of lifetime debt. On one end or the other of the creditor–debtor economy, neoliberalism sweeps them all up.

I don't mean to be making a big distinction between "them," the students, and "us," the faculty. In the triumvirate of students, faculty, and administration, the students are often enough the least shockingly offensive group of neoliberal drones. The NYU administration—in all its union-busting, outsourcing, corporate-globalizing glory—performs the contradictory madness of neoliberal governance with the imperious aplomb of any other New York diva. Claiming to

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represent the values and achievements that the best liberal higher education in the United States has to offer, the real estate developers on the NYU Board of Trustees and their administrative officers advance antidemocratic procedures designed to entrench ever-starker inequalities of labor and access. But none of this is particularly surprising. More surprising, perhaps, are the professional performances of faculty.

On the stages of our classrooms, NYU faculty members present their fields of research across a broad political spectrum distributed unevenly across the disciplines. Some departments house faculty with overtly neoliberal commitments—Economics, Politics, Law. Other departments are known for the progressive liberal (and much further Left) sympathies of most faculty members—Performance Studies, Cinema Studies, Social and Cultural Analysis. These are not the surprising facts. The unexpected twist is that even the Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, or queer faculty members in the funkiest departments often respond to institutional incentives in compliant rather than defiant modes.

In addition to the overall erosion of shared governance at colleges and universities around the country, the private neoliberal research university in particular presents a range of incentives to faculty, including:

keeping salaries secret and making private deals for research funds or real estate that exacerbate inequalities;
funding the pet projects of faculty, patronage style, in return for compliance with administrative edicts and divine deanly dreams;
punishing faculty who openly contest administrative actions, state unwelcome opinions, or stand up for principles in the midst of institutional conflicts by excluding them from consultation and institutional rewards;
creating and enforcing institutional rules of confidentiality that prevent transparency, knowledge, and informed action; and
structuring the terms of competition for status and power among individual faculty, discouraging collective action (making solidarity seem stupid).

Faculty respond to these incentive structures. Progressive and Left faculty often lose track of the difference between the commitments that shape their scholarship and teaching, and that shape their scholarly reputations, and the decisions they make to forward their careers within their institutions. This unacknowledged gap was especially apparent at NYU during the recent struggle for graduate-student unionization. As administrators pressured faculty with a wide variety of calculated incentives, faculty support for the strike organized by the students' union steadily eroded under a fog of paternalistic rationalizations.

In this context, so different from Eng-Beng Lim's at MSU, my disbelieving annoyance circulates more around administrators and faculty than students. I am stunned by the righteous monologue of the Marxist Professor as Neoliberal, who rails against the labor practices of the corporate university, meanwhile lobbying the dean privately to undercut the democratic decision-making procedures in his department. I am uncomprehending before the sincere

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proclamations of the Anti-Racist Ally as Ruthless Competitor, who proclaims common cause with colleagues of color while undercutting their tenure and promotion cases behind closed doors. I am dumbfounded at the solidarity forever of the Labor Radical as Paternalist, who raises a fist in support of a graduate-student union while meeting secretly with the provost to craft a company union offer designed to undercut a strike.

One might be tempted to assign the actions of such bad subjects to individual bad sentiments. But the behavior is widespread and responsive to clear institutional incentives. Resistance to the incentives is unusual, and the individual who does resist can be the subject of personalized attacks against behavior that is characterized as evidence of psychological pathology or insanity. For in fact how can it seem sane to fail to pursue one's own best interests as they are structured by the institutional context that distributes rewards and punishments?

To many of our students, neoliberalism is simply the sum of commonsensical reference points that make meaning of the world for them. As we tell them in class, that common sense is the water and they are the fish—they can't see their own assumptions without critical effort. It's not so different for the faculty. Even the most critically radical often follow the neoliberal incentives structured by the institutions that pay us, promote us, fund our research, and underwrite our reputations. How, we should ask ourselves, might it be otherwise?

JOSÉ ESTEBAN MUÑOZ: I see in both of my colleagues' statements the harshness of our current moment within the corporate university. Eng-Beng Lim describes some of the pedagogical challenges we encounter in the teaching environment within which we currently toil. We all face different obstacles at particular institutions. While I recently served as visiting professor at another university, I encountered one student with a certain right-wing resentment that deviated from the views of the rest of my students at that school (or at the one where I usually teach). She identified herself as a patriot during my office hours and spoke in class about the myth of white privilege within our culture. I have a corresponding identification with Lisa Duggan's statement about our shared dismay with a collegial cohort we once understood as in alignment with our theoretical and lived critique. Interestingly for me, this has been manifested as the rejection of a set of heuristic protocols I will call *theory* as a shorthand. In my home institution I have seen this in exaggerated proportions during a failed job search in one of my affiliated programs, where critical theory, especially queer theory, was denigrated. In the larger field of performance studies I see this in the rejection of work that displaces the live object of performance for an anticipatable fetish for "liveness." (To be clear, I do not wish to dismiss the live as an important object for performance studies research, but I see its being cast as the exclusive object of performance as a troubling turn.)

But the above situating of my particular position, which I know risks sounding like nothing more than throat clearing, does not get us to the important "What is to be done?" question that my authorial superego feels called upon to address. I will certainly fall short in this self-imposed calling. But let me nonetheless make a modest proposal for a potential strategy that we can understand as a certain ludic affective stance. I want to suggest that we need to

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laugh like Hélène Cixous's Medusa,[3] move forward with Hortense Spillers's call to "change the joke and slip the yoke,"[4] and, following the track presented by Paolo Virno[5] (after Sigmund Freud), call upon the innovation uniquely presented by the joke. Let me be clear, this turn to the ludic does not suggest that we should mock colleagues we feel at political odds with or denigrate students who voice opinions that vary from our own. Instead it signifies as a certain laughing at the ideological and emotional situation into which we have been cast. It is an undermining, through a countering of endemic seriousness, that casts itself as part and parcel of a kind of unavoidable political and disciplinary reality. The prescribed and constructed realities that can be provisionally tracked as our neoliberal moment need to be seen as just that, provisional. The performance of the joke and the corresponding category of the ludic are interpretive and imaginative acts that suggest and foster the belief in another way of being in the world outside the parameters prescribed by dominant ideological blocs. In the joke and the subsequent laughter it solicits we can potentially locate an opportunity for innovation in the face of ossification.

What does this suggestion mean on the ground, in the classroom or at the faculty meeting? In part it means another way of responding to ideologically engineered conditions of possibility that declare themselves as pragmatic reality. It can possibly feel like a mode of pedagogy that refuses to look at students' orthodoxies as permanent or even real. It does not look at our collegial skirmishes as the real battlefield in the much bigger picture of the logic of disciplinary scarcity that charges us to denounce noncorresponding methodologies as false or lesser. It is, instead, to be open to the radical reordering of our worlds, political, emotional, and otherwise, that wait for us within the performance, the event, and the attitude we know as the joke.

ENG-BENG LIM: The poetics of such a radical reordering in the context of current institutional deformations may help open up alternative visions as well as conditions of possibility beyond a state of unending crisis, critical impasse, and local myopia. If part of José's joke is to broaden the description of trumped-up orthodoxies and disciplinary strangleholds as moments of neoliberal historicity, we might look away and back at the opportunistic logics currently deployed in service of the free market to decimate such programs and, in so doing, we might begin to revalorize the arts and humanities all over the country. Perhaps the ludic acuity of a critical idiom might help restage the scenarios we've each described of our institutional conditions: here's to rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic;* let's cannibalize each other to save pennies; theory is dead; I am permanently damaged by you. The power of laughing at the absurdism of such performatives is also the power to deny their powerful gambit for a pragmatic outcome. It is the power to look at the epistemic strains currently experienced as turf wars or cryptic signs of our times in terms of the university's ongoing corporate makeover and management in a larger context. The story of the institutional divestment in collective critiques that Lisa allegorizes through neoliberal collegiate figures and that José traces through the rejection of heuristic protocols that disaggregates performance into a fetishable

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"liveness" portends the rise of a corporate aesthetic with a different set of investments.

For many years now, the value of knowledge and the stakes of its production have been in the process of being recalibrated as the U.S. university is transformed into a global university that emphasizes self-sustainability, practical value, and a rampant privatization of the "common good." As universities race to establish satellite campuses in Asia and the Middle East, the intensification of professional training as a first priority is also helping to promote profit, entrepreneurial innovation, and university brand names. New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Asia, Ltd., which offers only M.F.A. degrees, is already established in Singapore, and a full-fledged liberal arts campus in the Middle East, also known as NYU Abu Dhabi, will begin recruiting students in 2010. While rendering the "local" struggles of academic and pedagogic differences in a new light, such a transformative ethos brings with it a new set of questions for the arts and humanities. What is the role of theatre and performance in an educative enterprise at the conjuncture of professional, global, and institutional forces that favor profit, economies of scale, practical training, business, and the live sciences? How may non-revenue-generating areas of study such as performance and theatre studies, queer studies and ethnic studies, continue to push for institutional commitment for alternative forms of expression, agency, and subjectivity?

In the context of the U.S. university's ambition to be a center of learning for the entire world, such inquiries are crucial in undoing imperial strongholds and their sedimented knowledge formations as well as proprietary rights of access and privilege. We may ask, Whose safety is being preserved and at what cost? Why should colonial privilege be sustained in new forms even in a ruinous economy? This critical vigilance is not simply a search for the "new" but a tactic for negotiating binding as well as obfuscating forces. And so to José's laugh and Lisa's two-faced progressive-leftie, I'd like to add, as persona non grata, the radical undead who rises in contradistinction to the liberal, the conservative, and the newly incorporated neoliberal to haunt the university's uncritical navigation of global routes and the performance of global feelings for profit.

ENDNOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "Neoliberal Newspeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate," *Radical Philosophy* 105 (2001): 2–5. For example, Bourdieu and Wacquant state that "one in ten youths from households earning less than 15,000 dollars per year has access to a university campus, compared to 94% of the children of families with an income exceeding 100,000 dollars" (4).

2. *Made in L.A.*, dir. Almudena Carracedo (2007); *Behind the Labels: Garment Workers on U.S. Saipan*, dir. Tia Lessin (2001).

3. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875–93.

4. Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 16.

5. Paolo Virno, *Jokes and Innovative Action* (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2008).

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