Feces on the Philosophy of History!
A Manifesto of the MLA Subconference

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This January, we organized the MLA Subconference because we believe that there are tactics and strategies in activist and labor union toolboxes that are powerful and effective but that we as “professionals” have dismissed, forgotten, or perhaps never been exposed to. Because of this, professional organizations have failed to confront the jobs crisis in a way that is resistant to and critical of the private market’s role in dictating the terms of higher education. This is why we find it necessary to work outside academic organizations in order to transform our collective futures.

The subconference was organized by eight graduate students at five different universities in the span of about five months. Some of our goals were simple: to see if our peers would embrace a “shadow” conference; to register and discuss the ample frustrations that exist with academic and professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association; to provide a safe space in which to address the psychological impacts of economic precarity.

But we want to be clear: the goals of the subconference were not and are not limited to the immediate, the discursive, or the spatial. The subconference is intended as a site for forging relationships between academic and nonacademic activists, proposing and reeducating ourselves on the use of direct action on our home campuses and in our communities, and understanding militant research as a way to map, take over, and transform the financial and power structures of universities.

Professional organizations limit themselves to narrow administration-friendly tactics, such as attempting to make coursework more exciting.
suggest that we become administrators ourselves and encourage us to lend a hand with fundraising efforts intended to further pad already swollen endowments. We reject such activities since we realize that they go hand-in-hand with student debt, administrative bloat, and the privatization of higher education. The problems plaguing the academy cannot be addressed through such reactive methods but, rather, demand creative strategies of collective response. That response, however, must break with what Walter Benjamin (2003) described as the rigged game of historical progress, against which he famously proposed his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” For Benjamin, transformation was impossible without blowing history apart from within. As one step toward a collective explosion of the abject conditions in which many labor today, the organizers of the 2014 MLA Subconference propose the following theses.

1. Our starting point is simple: “history” is not inevitable.
   Too often, academics and university administrators treat the problems plaguing higher education as the inexorable result of technological or market forces. Some rush to embrace these last under the banner of “innovation,” viewing technological development, in Benjamin’s words, as “the driving force with which they think they are moving” (2003: 393). But many of those who lament the precaritization of academic work and its increasing subsumption to economic gain tend to view these trends as a historical inevitability. They replace faith in “progress” with an equally mechanistic certainty in the inevitability of catastrophe. It is as if they had taken the exact wrong lesson from Benjamin’s angel of history, helplessly observing that mounting pile of debris that we call progress. But the point is that we are not this angel—blown not before the storm but rather in it, picking our way through the rubble of the university. The problem we are faced with is deciphering how these ruins can be mobilized in order to push our current historical moment to its breaking point. In the face of determinism in both its triumphant and its tragic guises, we insist that it is we who will determine the history of the university, albeit not in conditions of our choosing. Some will say that this resolution flies in the face of history. Well, we say, fuck history.

2. The crisis in academia is both real and fabricated.
   On the one hand, the “crisis” is produced by and in turn reproduces real historical tendencies; on the other, these tendencies are neither natural nor inevitable. Perpetual increases in tuition, outsourcing, predatory and unsustainable debt, the immiseration of university food and service workers
through poverty wages and union busting, and the replacement of full-time, tenure-track faculty with part-time, precarious labor are all products of specific choices and intentional policy on the part of university administrators, regents, and trustees. These last have also colluded with bond underwriters and capital markets in the “financialization of everything” that helped to bring about the broader financial crisis, which in turn negatively impacts the lives of students, teachers, and university food and service workers. In other words, the academic crisis does not play out in between the university and the broader capitalist economy; rather, the capitalist crisis plays itself out within the university as a microcosm of the social whole.

3. The “new natural” is an excuse for inertia. Just as the so-called natural rate of unemployment concocted by Milton Friedman has itself shifted to reflect changing policy prescriptions—changes that are then both internalized and externalized as “natural”—so too are transformations in higher education passed off as the natural result of market forces. This formulation anthropomorphizes the market at the expense of human agency, effacing both responsibility and the possibility of real response. When former MLA president Michael Bérubé (2014) writes that critiques directed toward his organization have been misguided, since “the MLA is a scholarly organization, having no control whatsoever over the state of the academic job market or the employment conditions of contingent faculty,” he makes the MLA complicit with this separation of the content and the conditions of academic labor, of external market forces and the MLA’s more narrowly “scholarly” work. The abysmal labor system that the MLA laments and reifies is itself the product of collective choices and, as such, can be contested only through collective action.

4. The relationships we build in this “crisis” are intentional. When academics and their professional organizations ally with administrators, technology and finance corporations, and purveyors of cheap labor, they make a choice. They choose to forgo building relationships with organizations and movements that resist the normalization of contingent forms of labor. That choice conditions the strategies and tactics we have at our disposal for responding to this crisis. Higher ed administrators who justify that choice by saying that they are required to train students for the job market participate in and affirm an unjust and unequal financial and moral system: one that will, at all costs, reduce human labor and foster jobs that fail to provide a living wage or health care. The recent turn toward embracing nonacademic partnerships...
in the public humanities and alt-academic careers needs to be included in an analysis of precarious labor’s encroachment.

5. Tenured faculty are not dodos, but they are often ostriches. Many now think that tenured faculty will be preserved in a few rare sanctuaries, like exotic beasts. But tenured faculty are not dodos, they are ostriches: faced with a situation at least partially of their making—and in the face of which any number of actions and reactions would be possible—they choose to put their heads back in the sand. While some tenured faculty have indeed proven themselves staunch allies of the indebted, the exploited, and the precariously employed, their structural position within the academy often renders even the most explicitly “radical” of faculty oblivious to their role in hierarchical academic and economic structures. This is not to say that such faculty are indifferent to the situation. Many confront it with a sort of melancholy fortitude and resigned passivity—as when they say they might consider accepting fewer graduate students to reflect the apparently unalterable conditions of the academic “job market.” This, they say, “would be the ethical thing to do.” But there is plenty of work for us to do, in the form of temp labor. Why haven’t three generations of faculty fought for the conditions of their work for future faculty? This melancholic response captures the distinction between politics and ethics. Ethics tells us to change our behaviors in response to changing conditions; politics changes the conditions.

6. Student debt is a system of segregation. In forcing those from low-income backgrounds to take on increasingly astronomical debt to fund their education, US colleges and universities maintain a tiered social system that breaks down largely along class and racial lines. They do so by dangling education as a false promise that increasingly allows wealthier students to enter the same professional spheres occupied by their parents while low-income students are barred from these very spheres due to their inability to pay for more, and more expensive, credentials. While universities often cast themselves as victims of the decline of state funding, behind the scenes many of them have supported legislation that trades such funding for greater control over the privatized financial resources that students provide—through either loans or privileged means. But private and large public universities continue to benefit financially from the individuation of the financial aid process and the disproportionate allocation of aid to those students attending schools with high tuition costs, both of which build in preferential treatment for students in a certain class position (Slaughter
Moreover, those burdened with large amounts of student debt have less access to additional, postgraduate education, which would only cause them to incur even more debt. Students from low-income backgrounds are thus restricted from the very credentialing processes essential to entering the professional classes. In addition, such students are more likely to attend for-profit colleges and/or institutions without the means to subsidize education than are their wealthier peers. Since student loan debt cannot be discharged even in bankruptcy, low-income students are frequently doomed to a lifetime paying off debts that were never designed to give them the access to the high-income labor those debts purportedly guaranteed. As last summer’s Georgetown report “Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Privilege” (Carnevale and Strohl 2013) demonstrated, this system disproportionately disadvantages students of color. We should call this what it is: de facto, if not de jure, segregation.

7. The academic revolution will not be digitized.
Massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other similar platforms have led to an unprecedented, and admittedly ingenious, integration of academic capitalism through a democratizing rhetoric of public education. The MOOCs movement draws heavily from a free market philosophy of “creative destruction,” a term coined originally by Joseph Schumpeter, which argues that public education suffers mainly because of a lack of “innovation” and “creativity” in the classroom. (Ironically, there is little that is innovative about taping lectures and putting them online—what makes this approach “novel” is its sudden profitability in an environment of decreased state funding and increased undergraduate enrollment.) But such approaches reify the social and affective work that makes education successful in order to translate it into work that can be accomplished by technological and market developments. The only thing that such approaches fix, then, are market-based problems faced by universities seeking increased revenues and national branding. They cannot address the real, community-based problems of public education: accessibility and affordability, small and engaged classrooms, well-paid teachers, and safe and supportive learning environments. The work of teachers and educators now faces the same mechanized revolution as did the factory workers in the twentieth century and similarly will shift money from worker wages to further investment in private industry; students and education are not a part of that equation.
8. In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice, there is. We reject the academic fascination with precarity, vulnerability, contingency, and the creaturely as theoretically fruitful sources of speculation that ignores their material manifestation as real conditions and as sites of contestation. We embrace the change in political organizing that focused on precarity or the precariat that was accomplished by the best of the Italian autonomist tradition of the 1970s. But we must ask what happens when such work is lifted out of context and made the subject of research projects and plenary sessions disconnected from any form of political contestation. As precarious workers and intellectuals, we are doubly exploited: by the material (and immaterial) conditions in which we work and labor, and by an academic apparatus that leverages such exploitation into trendy dissertations. The MLA is more than happy to discuss vulnerability—in theory. What it refuses to do is to organize around the conditions that produce and perpetuate vulnerability in the first place. The MLA Subconference emerges out of this gap.

9. The practice of imagination allows the political work of change. If we pretend that this gap does not exist as a material condition—the gap between what we study (“vulnerability”) and the system that academic study increasingly reproduces (exposed and exhausted laborers)—that condition will return to haunt us in the form of a falsely involuntary one. This lapse often recapitulates class and racial alterity. Though we might feel helpless, it is, and the humanities teach us this, the work of imagining how we might not be what we think we are that allows us to become something else. This commitment to imagination is practical, and it takes practice. It takes a kind of hope that can be too easily dubbed naïve or utopian and thus dismissed. If some of us dislike utopian promise because it seems like a cliché of promise, a cliché of hope, we should remember that the difference between who we know ourselves to be and what we might become is the gap in which we must make our home. This gap is one we must necessarily imagine.

10. Imaginative and academic labor are work. Adjuncts and especially graduate students are frequently told that what we do is not “work”—not a job but a vocation, not a task but a project, not a wage relation but a labor of love. Often enough we hear this from faculty who have made their living critiquing forms of affective and reproductive labor but who appear ironically incapable of perceiving the labor relation sitting on the other side of the desk. Regardless of whether we “love what we do,” what
we do (teaching, grading, organizing panels, writing articles, participating in institutes) is work. Understanding academic labor as work does not mean that all work is the same—there are crucial differences between the labor of academics and the labor that takes place in factories, shipping yards, cafeterias, Amazon storage facilities, and so forth. Ultimately, however, all labor is a combination of manual and intellectual work. Understanding ourselves as workers, rather than professionals, means that we share a fundamental position of exploitation with other workers that far outweighs our affinity with university administrators and shareholders.

11. Real change grows out of solidarity.
Solidarity commits us to showing up outside the comfort zones of our academic spaces. This involves flipping our concepts rather than our classrooms. We see solidarity as rooted in mutual respect and recognition, not sympathy, empathy, or charity. The language of recognition bothers many of us in academia, because it seems to refer to a system in which only free, autonomous, and self-determining individuals can be recognized. But that misunderstands the real work of recognition, which is constantly shaped by revision, discussion, and action. Solidarity allows us to privilege knowledges and experiences that are formed under conditions of structural oppression, inequality, and expropriation and to learn how to respond to it. Real recognition, in other words, demands dialogue about different forms of contingency.

12. Our vulnerability with each other is also our power.
Rather than lament our vulnerability or ensnare ourselves in the trap of theorizing vulnerability in our individual offices and publications, we recognize that our strength moves in and through a collective dependence and vulnerability that we produce with one another. This is a vulnerability that evades capitalism. We believe that there are qualitatively different kinds of power: a power that works through oppression and domination, reinforcing the power of some at the expense of others, and a power that is produced by our vulnerability to and dependence upon others. Strictly theoretical work runs the risk of conflating the two, whereas in practice the difference can be seen in projects we create with others that refuse to participate in fantasies of competition, meritocracy, individuated gains, and possessive relations. Within this context, our homes, universities, resources, bank accounts, thoughts, and loves become things to be shared and circulated openly, rather than enclosed and defended. The university has become a primary site for teaching us otherwise. As professionals, we are told that our strength and resources lie
in self-referential possession, copyright, and claims over our entrepreneurial creativity, which obscures the relationships of dependency and reliance that make the university a place worth inhabiting at all. Thus, a double gesture is required: first, a radical dispossession of an exclusionary and individualistic system of wealth; second, a radical embrace of a wealth that exists beyond the privation of privatization and the weakness of self-possession.

Hope for the future, as Benjamin reminds us, requires a belief in the failure of the present. You must, in other words, find yourself at the brink, on a precipice, to begin the work of planning for an alternative future. We are at just this precipice. We find hope, though, by looking toward the past as labile and uncertain (Eagleton 2014), as a past that is determined by the present rather than the other way around. From such a historical vantage point, time grinds to a brief stop, a pause that creates the space necessary to resist a progressivist version of history that sees one action rising inevitably from the one that came before. This radical historiography shows us that political acts of reclamation are also imaginative and scholarly acts that assist in the struggle. Using these tools, we seek “to alter the circumstances in which capital meets life” (Neilsen and Rossiter 2005), to weaponize our ruins. To enact this possibility, we demand the following.

1. Reject the Normalized Crisis

_Determine the ways the crisis on your campus is real and the ways it is fabricated._ Treating hegemonic forms of domination and authority as simply a problem of knowledge can make the crisis seem inexorable. Instead, conduct an institutional debt audit to make visible exactly how capitalism works on your campuses and what student debt is paying for. You can get a good picture of this, to begin with, by locating your institution’s IRS tax form 990 to see how much the highest paid employees make. Visit your institution’s financial services website to download its yearly audited financial statements, which sometimes are presented as an “annual report.” Learn how your institution uses tuition dollars, student fees, and student debt for noninstructional purposes like construction projects, administrative salaries, updated facilities, physical expansion into new areas and neighborhoods, or all of the above.¹ Make this information “public” in creative ways—like the Counter-Cartographies project (www.countercartographies.org/) or Yale Inc. (geso.org/wp-content/uploads/Yale_IInc_opt.pdf)—and use it to organize, changing the discourse around university projects.
Teach the crisis. Adjuncts, tenured and tenure-track faculty, and graduate students: treat the pedagogical forum as an opportunity. Many universities and colleges now offer classes providing an introduction to the institution. Offer your own. Build a syllabus that familiarizes students with the history of their school and gives them the tools to perform research so they can understand its relationship with the community, where their tuition money goes, and how activist projects have shaped the institution. Locate examples of where resistance to university appropriation of spaces and to the university’s role in segregating cities has been successful. Relate this information to your own subject matter.

Treat your academic labor like work, because it is. Keep track of your work hours, and talk with other students and workers about theirs; organize discussions about department grievances and mistreatment; find out about how your department deals with sexual, gender, and racial discrimination. Start to do the work of unionizing if you don’t have a union. The recent Graduate Student Organizing Committee agreement at NYU sets a precedent to recognize private graduate employee unions and to negotiate collective bargaining agreements outside of national labor law. Pursue this precedent. If you have a union, get involved. Tenured faculty, let students and workers at your institution know in what material ways you can help them in their organizing efforts: with information, with writing, with a sympathetic ear. Refuse to safeguard your own relationship with the administration by distancing yourself from the concerns and organizing efforts of workers, students, and adjuncts.

2. Embrace Vulnerability

Build intentional alliances with similarly precarious community groups and members. Heterogeneous forms of class and racial composition can make groups with different roles at the university seem artificially distant. Instead, draw closer. Talk with the people who clean your offices, serve your food, maintain your buildings, teach your classes. Learn about how precarity affects different kinds of jobs at your university and if organizing work is ongoing in jobs other than yours. If there is a service worker union or support network, see if you can go to meetings. Invite (other) low-wage workers to join you at events and meetings. Learn in what ways the labor you do parallels their labor and in what ways it differs. This likely means placing yourself at odds with the administration at your institution; we urge you to embrace this position. Be a mobilized body.
Work and publish collaboratively. The academy uses the idea of merit to promote the careers of a precious few while many others struggle in the increasingly hostile conditions this system enables. Resist the culture of competition this engenders by engaging in joint projects. Demand funding for collaborative endeavors—not because collaboration is more “productive,” as we are told by capitalism today, but because it can help us to resist it. Write articles with your friends and peers; create journals and new venues for collective publication; treat scholarship like gifts rather than commodities. Pool your resources to better support one another; share monetary funds, tools, cars, wireless networks. Increase your dependence upon your peers rather than on your administration.

Refuse to be disciplined. School is more than an education; it is a conditioning process. It disciplines us to be good children, to accept what we are given without asking questions, to identify with our mentors and the institution. But the university is a bad parent that plays favorites. We need to create different kinds of affiliative, rather than filial, bonds that are less about reproducing ourselves and more about caring for each other.

“Steal” from the university. Use your access to journals, libraries and technology, financial resources, and printing facilities for projects that redistribute access and resources. Perform militant and co-research projects in your academic projects. Remember that “to abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission . . . to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university” (Moten and Harney 2013: 26).

Resist student debt. Along with other students and faculty, read “The Debt Resistors’ Operations Manual” (Strike Debt 2012). Refuse to see yourself as a deadbeat if you refuse to borrow on credit or cannot repay your loans. Commit yourself to the difficult work of organizing around debt and indebtedness.

3. Make Demands
Don’t confuse democracy with equality. Academic institutions and professional organizations hide behind a rhetoric of democratic decision making that hamstring intervention into the crisis of contingent labor. We cannot put it better than it has been stated in a recent Jacobin article:

The term “shared governance” is invoked to disguise this evisceration of [faculty] power but what it mainly means is that faculty senates can “advise” the administration and the administration can then do whatever it wants. To call
shared governance real governance is like saying your dog has an equal say in how your household is run because sometimes when he whines he gets fed. (Davis and Michaels 2014)

Decisions that might change current employer practices will never be made by such “democracies,” and it is unlikely that administrators will suddenly decide to use their power to promote equality rather than to maintain the status quo. Take a cue from radical union history: rank-and-file organizing and issuing demands from a space that is both inside and outside is the only way to achieve material gains in equality.

Faculty, use your tenure. Tenure was designed to protect politicized forms of speech and action. Use it. In the summer of 2011, faculty at the University of Virginia did just that, successfully mobilizing to resist the corporate-style firing of university president Teresa Sullivan. While we applaud this spontaneous and populist resistance to neoliberal forms of control, we lament the partiality of its success. Once this already privileged and successful administrator was back in place, faculty quietly went back to their offices, believing their actions would result in greater freedom and social justice for others. But the idea of “trickle-down” social justice is a myth. Let the faculty at the University of Illinois, Chicago, guide you: when you see exploitation around you, protest, go on strike, join a picket line, organize. Refuse funding models that pit one department against another. Build interdisciplinary networks that make this kind of competitive vampirism impossible. Reject corporate-style rankings of faculty.

Professional organizations, don’t issue “recommendations” about contingent labor. Statements on non-tenure-track working conditions should not hedge with compromising or hypothetical statements suggesting that health care, long-term appointments, and adequate wages be provided by universities “when possible” or “whenever plausible” (MLA Committee 2011: 1). Professional organizations should demand unequivocally that these conditions be met and take an active role in protecting contingent workers by setting criteria for membership that require institutions to provide a living wage, health care, and long-term appointments. Members need to demand that their professional organizations support the education of students about contingency and direct action as a response to austerity measures.

Make financial records public. If you have access to university and professional organization financial records, make them available to students and contingent workers so that we know how resources are allocated and
redistributed, where funding comes from, and how institutions are speculating on our futures.

*Occupy spaces for critical thinking with bodies and actions.* Business as usual is exploitative. Resist business as usual. Use your words, use your pen, use your bodies. Distribute inserts about adjunct labor in your class syllabi. Occupy your institutions’ construction projects and demand that the money borrowed for them and financed on the backs of student loans be allocated to intellectual programs and better labor conditions. Write letters to your campus and local newspapers. Hold marches and rallies. Disrupt administrative events and board meetings. Get a copy of your president’s speaking schedule, and stack the question-and-answer session with allies who refuse to ask about anything other than your issues. Demand one new faculty line, worker raise, and/or conversion of an adjunct line into a tenure track line for every new administrator hired and every new administrator raise. Have your department or your faculty senate hold a vote of no confidence in your administration. Go on strike. Get arrested.

**Note**
1. For a snapshot of what this looks like at the University of Michigan, see Whitener and Nemser 2012.

**Works Cited**


