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Life and Death and the University

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Abstract

The ‘totally pedagogised society’ might be considered an age after pre-pedagogical ancient literacy, the pedagogy of early universities and the utilitarianism of mass education, an age in which education has become a battle over the social futures of a ‘people to come.’ Here we concern ourselves with the neoliberal subjection of university education to systems of economic measure, or ‘econometrics,’ that increasingly determine what is valuable and what is valued. Such systems have ‘ascriptive’ force in that they prescribe criteria for all kinds of educational performance. ‘Scripts’ like KPIs, evaluations, rankings, surveys, reports, reviews and so on, now digitised and constantly self-upgrading, enlist university workers in a neoliberal regime of measured and enhanced performance. More than that, they inscribe a certain ‘distribution of the sensible,’ a way of thinking, feeling and acting, that is not only textual but architectonic. In the same way that writing as mission, strategy and policy models university buildings, these buildings model a new way of thinking, feeling and acting. Education becomes increasingly a matter of ‘built pedagogy’: the idea of education that new university buildings instantiate is that education is about investment – both economic and emotional – that pays, rather than about imagination, which does not guarantee marketable returns. In university environments today, we see a conflict between probable and possible futures: the former occupies itself with what is measurable and thus marketable in education; the latter, with education as the capacity to imagine new and different worlds. In the conflict between the two – probable and possible worlds – lies the life and/or death of the university.



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The ‘totally pedagogised society’ (Bernstein, 2001, p. 365) might be considered an age *after* pre-pedagogical ancient literacy, the pedagogy of early universities and the utilitarianism of mass education, an age in which education has become a battle over the social futures of a ‘people to come’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 218). Here we concern ourselves with the neoliberal subjection of education to systems of economic measure, or ‘econometrics,’ that increasingly determine what is valuable and what is valued. Such systems have ‘ascriptive’ (McLean & Hoskin, 1998) force in that they prescribe criteria for all kinds of educational performance. Our interest in the scripting done by performative measures such as KPIs, evaluations, rankings, surveys, reports, reviews and so on comes out of teaching the many forms of academic writing, which more or less subtly encode the econometric social scripts of universities (Callon, 2002). These scripts, now digitised and constantly self-upgrading, enlist university workers in a neoliberal regime of measured and enhanced performance. More than that, they inscribe a certain ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2004), a way of thinking, feeling and acting, that is not only textual but architectonic. In the same way as writing as mission, strategy and policy models university buildings – the kinds of spaces in which education takes place – such buildings model a way of thinking, feeling and acting. Education becomes increasingly a matter of ‘built pedagogy’ (Sturm & Turner, 2011a): the idea of education that new university buildings instantiate is that education is about investment – both economic and emotional – that pays, rather than about imagination, which produces less marketable returns (Barnett, 2013). In university environments today, we see a conflict between *probable* and *possible* futures: the former occupies itself with what is measurable and thus marketable in education; the latter, with education as the capacity to imagine new worlds. In the conflict between the two – probable and possible worlds – lies the life and death of the university.

The Fractal Academy

We are hardly alone in noting the global convergence of university building plans and the language of excellence, innovation and sustainability that drives university mission statements and strategic plans, along with the management structures through which such writing is formulated and promulgated (Spencer, 2016). What results is an amalgam of STEM-driven business, debt-driven capital works and efficiency-driven administrative reform, all of which are amenable to performance measurement in the name of ‘transparency’ (visibility and accountability), but require a cadre of middle managers, consultants and HR professionals to carry them out. Thus, career trajectories, research outputs and funding targets, teaching evaluations, and student numbers, programs and courses are all constructively aligned with the idea of (future) investment as the mission of the university. Fittingly, our university, the University of Auckland (UoA), finds itself located in a ‘Learning Quarter’ (‘Auckland’s extraordinary place of learning, knowledge and energy’ [*The Learning Quarter*, 2019]) that is at the same time an innovation hub, the embodiment of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ (Etzkowitz, 2017).

There is a *fractal* logic that underlies investment in the entrepreneurial university such that it strives to approximate the striving of every other would-be entrepreneurial university (the self-same university of this striving is one that is situated nowhere and everywhere). Fractal forms, naturally occurring in shapes like a coastline or a cauliflower, replicate their external structures internally, that is, they appear the same at different scales (Brown & Liebovitch, 2010). The fractal logic of the entrepreneurial university works through probabilization as a way to manage risk, for example, to the sustainability of building plans. What is made ‘probable’ through this process is

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the return on investment in such building plans to university investors; what is ‘enhanced’ is not just the rebuilt area but the technical means of assessing the risk of investment in it. According to this logic, sustainability comes to mean the securing of investment.

This fractal logic pervades investment in all levels of the university’s operation, producing strongly self-similarising effects that seem ‘naturally’ occurring (as if the university could not develop in any other form). A grant will be offered on the basis of the promise of further funding. A career trajectory is shaped to match existing successful careers. Libraries are reorganised to make accessible to more students the most read books. Programs are reconstructed to make more widely available the most popular courses or those that approximate most closely those best attended at other universities. And new university buildings approximate new university buildings elsewhere. The University of Auckland’s model building is the Owen G. Glenn Building (OGGB), a glass and steel monument to global entrepreneurship that serves as a template for the ‘built pedagogy’ (Sturm & Turner, 2011a) of the campus.



Figure. 1. Owen G. Glenn Building at the University of Auckland

In this building, an airy atrium, like that of an airport, hotel or shopping centre, welcomes students like consumers; teaching is mostly conducted in large lecture rooms below; academics (the producers) work in secure offices above. Built according to the scripts of the entrepreneurial university, such a building inscribes behaviours in its occupants that align with its encoding. To the degree that their structure ‘probabilises’ a return on investment in its building and pedagogy, other buildings will assume the same shape. In this way, campus buildings become isomorphic, just as universities do (hence our university’s graduate attribute of global citizenship and the Faculty of Arts-hosted flagship program in Global Studies that exhibit a globalising imperative to

approximate programmes elsewhere). Thus, the fractal academy becomes the emblem of a totally pedagogised society.

Invasive Learnification

But how does built pedagogy express itself in the fractal academy? Built pedagogy relies on ‘prehensive’ buildings, architectural and otherwise (Parisi, 2013, p. 135), that is, structures that do not just shape social practices, but ‘pre-scribe’ them algorithmically. In such environments, what learning is likely to happen has *already* taken place, or, at least, the University, in terms of the outcomes prescribed by its measures, would like to think that this is so. This fetish for engineering learning outcomes through built pedagogy we would call ‘invasive learnification’ (a portmanteau of Gert Biesta’s [2016] ‘learnification’ and Gernot Böhme’s [2012] ‘invasive technification’). The structures of what have come to be known as ‘learning spaces’ (Oblinger, 2005) offer a digital mould that university workers come to fit as learning subjects (much in the way that IQ tests prescribe what we take intelligence to be). This process of prehension entails three linked movements: *imprinting, informing and investment*.

Firstly, the digital writing technology that now mediates university environments (as in the example of our university profile pages) *imprints* us as at once subjects and objects of its design drives. All university workers (including students) are ‘stamped’ by the university’s mission and plans, in terms of which university environments are constructed and their operations and inhabitants managed. In this way, university workers necessarily internalise the imprint of the university’s communicative systems and the investor interests that drive them, whatever their individual views of university education (elsewhere, we have referred to this digitally inscribed imprinting as ‘deep communication’ [Sturm & Turner, 2011b]).

Secondly, digital communication takes built form in university environments – the prehensive architecture of built pedagogy – making them as much instructional as infrastructural. It is not so much the structure of buildings as the rationales for their construction that encode educational practices. Built pedagogy thus *informs* space with the idea of investment as the mission of the university. In such environments, it is not only university workers’ behaviour, but also their intentions that are anticipated and, through ever-extending feedback mechanisms (audits, reviews, surveys), enhanced, or ‘upgraded.’ While university architecture is underwritten by the code of the digital models by which it is constructed, it is the relation between digital inscription and the rationales of new university buildings that is decisive – a relation that is articulated by the overarching imperative that all university activities be made measurable and thus ‘transparent’ (Strathern, 2000). The steel and glass materials of new university buildings communicate the would-be ‘robust’ (steel) and ‘transparent’ (glass) ethos of the entrepreneurial university.

Thirdly, capital *invests* university environments with capital interests, or, more precisely, with the drive to secure a return on investment, a securitization manifested in the risk management calculations inherent in university security and health and safety regimes, which are designed to protect a university’s reputation and ranking at any cost (security is mobilised against those who disrupt the university’s ‘service,’ and health and safety, against its legal liability to staff and students). The increasingly risk-averse social scripts of built pedagogy are informed by the immanent consistency of technically enhanced econometrics, themselves the product of risk management. While learning *without risk* is strictly anti-pedagogical pedagogy (Biesta, 2016),

university environments have never been more explicitly pedagogical, precisely because they secure learning in advance from risk.

Affective Atmospheres

The digitization of built pedagogy via invasive learnification thus renders the experience of university workers (including students) consonant with capital investment in university environments. Such environments become, as it were, measures of performance, performance that must be transparent and invite future investment. Such built pedagogy makes visible the mission of the university in the form of ‘spectacular architecture’ (King, 2004, p. 3). This explains the drive for trophy buildings that will put a university on the map – like the Guggenheim Bilbao – if it doesn’t stand out in the league tables. Think of RMIT’s Swanston Academic Building and Design Hub, the Cube at the Queensland University of Technology, the Ravensbourne University in London, IT University of Copenhagen, or even the OGGB at the University of Auckland. Such examples multiply as the global university multiplies, self-replicating and self-similarising, and becoming ever more generic.

But spectacular architecture also makes a spectacle of transparency. Not for nothing are new university buildings often glass, inside and out, such that they exteriorize the ‘transparent’ policies that govern their university’s mission. ‘Visible learning’ (Hattie, 2015) prescribes learning outcomes that foreclose possible outcomes, ensure probable ones and give the appearance of learning having taken place. Education is reduced to an econometric transaction: students are consumers, who want a ‘learning and teaching experience’ that meets their expectations, including of having learnt what they have paid to learn; academic and professional staff interact through a ‘shared transaction centre,’ which is just one way in which the university monitors investment in the social exchange of teachers and learners. As learning is exteriorised to indicate that teaching is being done, email is dispatched to indicate that work is being done. Although the spectacular is not in itself negative, making a spectacle of social exchange can be. In our visit to the RMIT building, for instance, we encountered in a meeting room on one of its upper levels a group of people whom we were able to observe through the floor-to-ceiling glass wall of the room. As we pretended not to stare at them, they pretended to ignore us. Yet, by our observation, their interaction seemed altered and turned into a spectacle. They were denied the ordinary intimacy of colleagues meeting, through which trust might be nurtured, because whatever they were doing was made ‘transparent’ to anyone passing by. In some sense, their work was validated by our presence. They were, presumably, doing exactly what people in this building were supposed to be doing, which is to say, they were enacting the building’s business.

Such spectacular buildings are captivating – and not just to Vice-Chancellors, their marketers or their ‘target markets.’ They create ‘intermediary’ (Böhme, 1993) atmospheres that modulate the affective being of those who observe or occupy them in characteristic ways. Entering this a spectacular university building, with its cavernous spaces and internal ravines, we felt weightless, yet in thrall to the forces that animate it. One member of our party visiting the RMIT Design Hub commented, ‘I feel smooth.’ But what does it mean to feel *smooth*, which is, after all, an odd description of a human affect (objects or surfaces are smooth)? Perhaps it is to feel transported. And, indeed, we were not just moved by the experience of being in such a frictionless space; nor did we just move through it effortlessly by means of the elevators, escalators and travellers that mark such buildings. Rather, we are transported to the future-now. The experience of being moved by the building, both aesthetically moved by it and physically moved through it,

however intense, made us feel that we were not strictly acting of our own volition; indeed, our motion had been prehensively performed by the building, yet it seemed, when we were in it, to respond instantaneously to what we wanted to do.

To extrapolate from our experience as visitors to the university and as university staff, our ‘we’ can be expanded to include all ‘workers’ in university buildings: staff, students, and, as on show at RMIT, other ‘stakeholders’ like design consultants, corporate and community partners (decreasing public investment and correspondingly increasing private financing makes the university ever more a resource for hire). The entrepreneurial university makes us all real and present to ourselves as subjects and objects of a deeper social script that makes each of us feel transported to our future as our ‘choices’ are probabilised. At our university, the invasive learnification of this social script is illustrated by the ‘student digital journey’ (Whiteside, 2019), which moves students on a digital traveller through their programme of study, ever closer to the market position that their university credit promises. Something similar happens when students experience a curriculum that has been ‘constructively aligned’ (Biggs, 1996): they come to feel that no other learning outcomes are possible than those prescribed at the outset by the teacher.

We are all imprinted by the design drives that inform the university and cannot but invest in its mission. In the case of the building, we are taught by it as it learns from us, all the better to teach us. As we are consumed by the building, we are moved to consume. Its affective atmosphere is immersive and invasive. Or, to put it differently, as we invest emotionally and economically in the university, it invests in us. Of course, the deep script we ‘learn’ to enact is dictated primarily by the econometrics it teaches; and, as we learn, we enhance that system, whether we want to or not; we become ‘prosumers,’ others might say (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). In doing so, we make a certain idea of university education more probable, that is to say, one that is more measurable and self-enhancing, and thus marketable.

Stigmergence

How does the process of probabilization that emerges from invasive technification work? It emerges *stigmergently*. Entomologist Pierre-Paul Grassé coined the concept of stigmergy, the ‘stimulation of workers by the performance they have achieved’ (a portmanteau of the Greek *stigma*, ‘mark, wound’ and *ergon*, ‘work’), to describe how termites create a mound by rolling mud balls along the pheromone trails they lay down, but, crucially, without any termite intending to do so or attending to the process, as a whole (Theraulaz & Bonabeau, 1999). The mound is the product of a ‘collective mind,’ or better, the collaborative self-organization of the termites. It ‘mounds’ through their collective work. Prehensive buildings, architectural and otherwise, work similarly: they materialize econometrics, but without anyone necessarily intending this result or attending to this function. Such buildings structure our activities, and condition any account given of them, including our own. Further, what we call a ‘university’ is a somewhat arbitrary circumscription, at a lower level, of a larger stigmergent system, from which emerges what might be called a University of universities, a global university of which all universities are merely local variants, each pushing towards a more generic, and hence more global, version of itself. Likewise, Vice-Chancellors and their ilk, in their mission statements and econometrics, sound increasingly like each other, or, like the One Vice-Chancellor of the One Global University. Of course, that University will never arrive because it will continue to upgrade itself through measurement and self-enhancement ad infinitum.

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But stigmergence also affects those who enact it. A stigma refers not only to a ‘mark,’ but also to a ‘wound’ (as in the stigmata of Christ) that serves as a stimulus to further activity. As academics slavishly follow the ‘pheromone’ trails of other academics seeking a career through publications, grants, networking and so on, they incur a debt to the globalising University, and, at the same time, experience their lack of agency as a kind of living death (or ‘zombification’ [Ryan, 2012]). Such prehensive structures thus threaten academic workers existentially. For example, the University of Auckland’s OGGB, which serves as a model for the architecture of the University campus in toto (Sturm & Turner, 2011a), has attracted the entirely negative ‘performance’ of suicide over the past few years, which has led to the construction of barriers to prevent students from following the lead of these tragic acts (‘Student dies,’ 2014). To move (or be moved) through the building is to be reminded of the possibility of death that is marked by the barriers. The construction of the barriers can be considered a form of feedback, through which the building produces an upgraded version of itself, taking into account the possibility of this kind of behaviour on the part of its inhabitants, as suicide can now be considered a clue to how this building works. The barriers mark a wound upon the building and its inhabitants.



Figure 2. Wire mesh ‘death’ barriers, Owen G. Glenn Building, University of Auckland

Such a building attracts death in a way that other buildings on campus do not because it is both spectacular, dramatizing activities by making them visible, and prehensive, reducing human and more-than-human elements in its domain to functions of its self-upgrading stigmergence (from the point of view of the building, there is no difference between human and more-than-human elements). Further, as we move through the building and are moved by it, we experience our

potential ‘death’ as this very lack of agency. The interior staircase of the RMIT Design Hub in Melbourne, another monument in glass and steel, starkly manifests this spectral aspect of stigmergence.

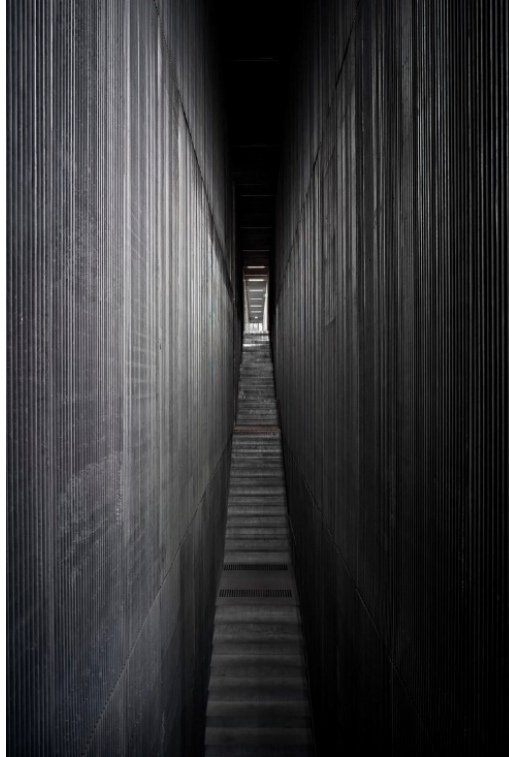


Figure 3. RMIT Design Hub

One way out of the Design Hub involves descending an abyssal staircase, with sheer sides several stories high, until we emerge, not ungratefully, from its confinement into the open greenness of a plaza. This passage through its spectacular but sepulchral interior embodies how built pedagogy, for all its promise of transparency, can work stigmergently to foreclose human agency.

Part of the threat of such buildings, then, is how they reveal stigmergence to be restlessly self-organising, to be both out of our control and controlling (Deleuze, 1992b). In this, they are akin to other self-organising complex systems like audit, as Marilyn Strathern (2000, p. 191) has it: ‘we can see audit as a social system with its own self-organising properties, regenerating itself through the auditable accounts it elicits.’ In a caricature of openness called ‘transparency,’ audit mobilises data, namely facts and other entities, from its environment to enhance its own complexity, ‘translat[ing] data into information’ (Strathern, 2006, p. 192) through a process of self-description. The process by which we document our translation into subjects of measure through constantly revising our ‘academic career portfolio’ is just one example of audit as self-description. The PBRF (the national Performance-Based Research Fund), SETs (student

evaluations of teaching) and learning analytics are other more obvious examples. Academics are imprinted and informed by this process such that they invest in it and become subject to its imperative to upgrade, all in the name of transparency.

Seismotics

Actual death in our university suggests an emergency that cannot be accounted for in terms of the university's econometric social scripts (the wound is an insult before it is an injury, that is, it is an event before it is a trauma). In Luciana Parisi's (2013, p. 163) terms, it is an 'incomputable' event. And yet responding to that event through the construction of barriers could make it seem like the building has upgraded itself in response to something that cannot be accounted for in terms of its built pedagogy. It would seem to highlight the stigmergent self-organization of the university, through which human and more-than-human elements and their interactions become aligned with the 'prescriptive' prehensive structures of the university. This alignment can be seen in the profiles of university workers and the research output databases in which their ongoing activity is accounted for and constantly updated. The social scripts of the university – to which the Senior Leadership Team are as much subject as any other worker – seeks the kind of consensus characteristic of an innovation hub, that is, of the University qua enterprise. While the OGGB does indeed look like the Starship Enterprise from Star Trek come to rest on the university grounds, it models a larger university environment of what Catherine Malabou (Malabou & Shread, 2012) calls 'constructive plasticity,' one that is responsive, in the first instance, to market investment (the interest of investors in university-based knowledge, and the university's interest in workplaces for its graduates).

But the 'destructive plasticity' of the emergency corrupts the university's scripts, fracturing their fractality and generating a self-dissimilarity rather than self-similarity. For Malabou, 'destructive plasticity' describes a response to an emergency that denies the narrative continuity of the self and prevents a return to its former state, as is the case in a severe brain injury that renders our former sense of self irretrievable and self-similarity impossible. Likewise, the suicides in the OGGB mean that it can never be the same building it was before the suicides took place because their emergency brings its prehensive structures into question and calls for a social account that is irreducible to the econometric social scripts of the university. Although Aotearoa/New Zealand's suicide rates are unaccountably high (Statistics NZ, 2019), it is the way in which a society or institution or building might be deeply at odds with itself that is important here. To inhabit this fracture is to think *geotheoretically*; to do so is to contrast the self-similar (fractal) entrepreneurial university that is situated nowhere and everywhere with the self-dissimilar (fractured) places in which such universities are actually located – a fact that is all-too-apparent in a settler-colonial society like ours with a broken history, due to settler invasion and occupation, that has produced a lived disparity between a short settler history and longer indigenous histories of place (Turner, 2002). While Rancière's (2010, p. 139) universalising concept of 'dissensus' highlights the peopled nature of places, in that it refers to a conflict between different ways of seeing in one place, what we call 'seismotics' (Sturm & Turner, 2017) underscores the place-based nature of peoples, referring as it does to historied, and thus fragile, relations to long-known lands and waters. A university alert to its place – and its peoples – is open to possible futures that are at odds with the generic and global future-now of built pedagogy.

Geo-theory

To the degree that enhancing transparency for the sake of accountability in the university is comprehensive, the prehensive architecture of built pedagogy closes itself off to the fracture of self-dissimilarity. Yet to foreclose fracture is at the same time to admit it, as is attested by the OGGB's self-upgrading, for example, through the construction of death-defying barriers. Indeed, transparent buildings like the OGGB cannot but promote clandestine activity, in fact, a 'clandestine university' (Doherty, 2019) that is less socially prescribed because it is open to history, happenstance and change. Because localised environments are open to historically and geographically specific 'lines of fracture' (Deleuze, 1992a), or conflicts of people and place, their self-dissimilarity resists genericising and globalising imperatives that are self-similarising. The self-dissimilar represents what Parisi (2015) calls the 'incomputable' (random) element within the 'computable' (prehensive) that resists the self-replication of fractal modelling, which elides the differences that make things neither simply similar nor dissimilar. For example, two not exactly similar (or not dissimilar) things may be very, quite or not so similar (and dissimilar). And something that is not exactly similar to something else – which similarity, of course, depends on what is taken as their point of similarity and requires that their dissimilarities be ignored – is difficult to replicate. Furthermore, any degree of dissimilarity between things invites comparison between them, which demands familiarity with the things in context and the exercise of judgment as to their relative value. The self-dissimilar, then, is marked by the ambiguity of value judgments about what is (all-too-)familiar, which make it all but impossible to replicate such things without what is understatedly called 'local knowledge,' without knowing the 'ground rules' of the place and being 'on the ground.' To think geothetically in this way opens up the many possible worlds and futures occluded by the probabilised generic globalism of the entrepreneurial university and settler institutions of its kind.

Worlds and futures are conceivably as multiple as the forms that universities might take. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, at least, universities are also known in indigenous Māori terms as *wānanga*, but it makes little sense that historically tribal institutions could be globally ranked because their purpose is to store, nurture and share knowledge for the well-being of *iwi* (tribes) and *hapū* (subtribes). Our university's own conception of itself as a *wānanga* (*Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau* is the Māori transliteration of its name) itself marks a point of fracture with the continuity of the longer history of people and place it now occupies (see Sturm & Turner, 2020). Our thinking, however, about the problem of the openness or otherwise of built pedagogy is informed by living in Oceania, a 'sea of islands' (not 'islands in a far sea'; Hau'ofa, 1994) and a world discovered by its first Polynesian settlers through the cross-current movements of ocean-going *waka* (canoes) that traced out lines of continuity rather than the foreclosed forms of fractal geometry. The geothetical 'remembrance' of such voyaging and other local all-too-familiar knowledge unfolds an infrastructure of living knowledge (*kōrero tuku iho*, literally, 'stories passed down') that runs athwart the globalising imperatives of the entrepreneurial university and, as it were, finds its future in the past of its place. If our university is to *live* in the face of the deathly fractal logic of such settler institutions that makes over place in the service of a new colonialism, it must attend to the agencies and currencies of place-based pedagogy, and to the co-creation of new social scripts, or ways of being together, that signal the possible futures of a 'people to come' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 218). In this way, geothory is open to the transversal movements that make places and their peoples 'polyversal,' or 'multiple and connected' (Eisenstein, 2004, p.

183), and enables us to envision the university of the possible as a *polyversity* (Sturm & Turner, 2018, p. 307).

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