We are asked to address the university today in the local context of the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where we live and work. On the one hand, this is an educational setting at the ends of the earth, exotic and exciting (perhaps); on the other, and rather more apropos, this is a university much like any other. Very much wanting to be Melbourne, it is probably also rather more like Minnesota (no disrespect intended). In any case, the difference between all three, in terms of their globalising design-drive, is negligible. The league tabling of universities worldwide has produced an uncanny genericity – universality, even – of aims, objectives and outcomes, which is to say, university mission statements (UMSs): excellence, enterprise and efficiency. And it has greatly increased the importance of the measures (“econometrics”) that assure us that these ends, to which all who work in universities must devote themselves, have been achieved.

Econometric education (what David Weinberger calls “accountabalism”) is often couched in terms of the word “experience,” as the emergent property of the three E’s, so to speak, and as if it too were simply measurable (and as if universities actually cared about their clientele). It describes a “good” at our university in the same way that the word permeates the prospectuses of our (league-table) poor city cousins AUT University and Unitech: that is to say, our “experience” is better than yours because league
tables say it is so – or, rather, make it so. Actual experience of an institution, a community and a place is systematically devalued. Class warfare has not so much migrated to the tertiary sector as embedded and enhanced age-old discrimination. The trick is that “discrimination” today refers to “improved” systems of measure – their increased ability to slice and splice space, time and value (see Hoskin and Frandsen on “space/time/value machines” [1]) – rather than to social status, so making university environments appear class-free. (The capping of student intakes – by raising entry criteria – at our university has nonetheless greatly affected the ability of those most poorly-off in our society, in particular, indigenous M?ori, to participate.) What we can report, therefore, is that our university here looks very much the same as your university there and indeed universities everywhere. This sameness, for us, spells the death of education in any non-cosmetic sense of “enhancement,” which is to say transformation by collective imagination, or “democracy” (Rancière, Dissensus 45ff.). The word enhancement itself is now metricised (as are many of its synonyms: “improvement,” “growth,” “evolution,” etc.). Imagining itself is subject to systems of measure, such that it is difficult to imagine things being different; this is the ascriptive force of systems of measure at work: what isn’t measured, or strictly measurable, doesn’t count for anything.

If anything, the New Zealand university is more generic in the world-excellent sense, though this may be special pleading (New Zealanders are notoriously modest in their narcissism). Our colonial past, however, makes us super-globalisers (settlers are avant-garde in their capitalism): we act out the historical design-drive of globalisation in our “fast-following” tendencies – our inherent slavishness to metropolitan models (Skilling and Boven 40-41) – and consequent genericity and “B+-ness.” The Occupy movement, and accompanying student unrest at the University of Auckland throughout 2011, which ran alongside a protracted dispute between unionised academics and our corporate-minded Vice-Chancellor, begs the question of the deeper “occupation” of the country by P?keh? (non-M?ori) settlers and its radical transformation by colonising capital. In the context of on-going educational “reforms” (a.k.a. restructuring of university units and programmes for the sake of greater efficiencies), it cannot be surprising that M?ori stand to lose most. What connects our colonial history to globalising imperatives of enterprise that have affected universities everywhere is a logic of replication that is as old as the nation itself, but that now assumes a pedagogical guise. Given that knowledge itself, or more properly information, has become the commodity of commodities, and immaterial labour has displaced material labour, colonisation today takes the form of pedagogical “enterprise,” with the university as its flagship.

A little history is unavoidable if we are to understand the local development of the university, and not simply replicate the imperatives of globalisation (enterprise, excellence and efficiency). Historically, the globalising design-drive of settler capitalism initially worked to subsume the long history of indigenous inhabitation to the short history of the settler’s make-over of place (see Turner, “Make-Over”); we inhabit its continuous present (or future anterior: its always-already-will-have-been [Hill 193]). To retool some Marxist terminology, “formal subsumption” may be considered the formal alignment of the new country with the capital interests (in land, population and production) that its settlers represent, and the extension in and through their enterprise of an imperial economy (see Marx 1019-38). Those “forms” include land titles, property rights and wage relations. “Real subsumption” makes such forms the actual content of lived local relationships. So settlers replicate the propered society of the mother country, but also, over time, adopt a local identity in terms of which the interests of the colony and the metropole have been fully aligned. (That settlers consider themselves not to be English simply masks the unexceptional nature of their settlement, and the fact that local public culture largely comes from other Anglo-settler societies, with M?ori called upon to fill the local uniqueness deficit [Fairburn].) The result is a political economy of identity – an identitarian economics – in which to be a “New Zealander,” or “Kiwi,” itself signals the success of the enterprise of settlement. Local universities are not just determined by this logic but are its flag-bearers.
Today, the logic of replication drives the production of local knowledge, and explains the country's highly generic fast-following tendencies, albeit masked by our Asia-Pacific branding. The transformation of the older brick and mortar university (the Oxbridge University 1.0) into the steel and glass – and fibre – university (the transnational University 2.0) has been enabled by the new econometrics of knowledge. The technical capitalism of “improved” measure, delivered by a raft of business school devices (like Total Quality Management), drives the “universalising” of world-excellent universities. Due to the new infrastructure of managerialism, the content of education – indeed the very “idea” of the university – has undergone a process of abstraction, making enterprise the sole horizon of human possibilities, and thereby limiting different imaginings of our collective future. It is not that the economy has become more productive but that systems of measure have reoriented its operation, likewise the mission of universities: academics are incentivised to research rather than teach, to network globally, and to post outputs in world-leading journals, mostly outside New Zealand, while students are incentivised to gain the transferable skills that match openings in the market. Teaching merely ensures that the aims, objectives and outcomes of courses, properly aligned with those of the department, discipline, faculty and university – the nested capitalism of its micromanagement – are ticked off by student evaluations. Altogether more important – for universities and other “stakeholders” at least – is the national measure of academic performance (PBRF or the Performance-Based Research Fund), which has us academics competitively discriminating and counting outputs, googling for peer esteem – and discounting non-countable activities. This kind of join-the-dots education fulfils the design-drive of techno-capitalism and obscures our ongoing colonialism. In this context, it is difficult to appeal to “critical” and “creative” thinking, as this is precisely what the world-excellent university says it does. We prefer vocabulary that sits less comfortably with mission-statement speak, and which suggests a renewed role for such off-mission “arts” like wisdom, charity, idleness, chance . . . just talking. As opposed to the capitalistic consonance (“consensus”) of the “creative”/entrepreneurial class ecosystem, we prefer the democratic dissonance of noise (“dissensus” [Rancière, Dissensus 37-38]) and privilege the classroom as the site of its production. In a university whose architectural template is the “built pedagogy” of its flagship Business School (Sturm and Turner), which also has a one-billion-dollar building programme, which also sits within a Auckland City’s newly devised “learning quarter,” which also dovetails with Auckland City’s vision, which also reflects the national government’s management of the country as investment space, we teach, above all, the university (see Williams).

Against research, at once utopian and utilitarian, we emphasize the enduring value of the classroom, the “factor[y] of the future” (Flusser 49-50) and producer of “publics and counterpublics” (see Warner). The pedagogy of corporate capitalism, and its arsenal of econometrics, makes of the university a combat zone. In our own teaching, we cross the science-arts divide that has crippled and isolated “literarity” (Rancière, “Dissecting” 115), or literary reflexivity (language about language, we stress, doesn’t stop at “literature”). We advocate Writing Studies as an ur-discipline that takes in the entwined history of writing technologies and accounting; we teach “seismotics” rather than semiotics (with a view to our earthquake-ridden local landscape and the recurrent shocks of the world finance), an alertness to the way place and its peoples are shaped by geopolitical rumblings from afar. We have no room here to detail such initiatives, but we are concerned to reclaim place from colonisation: it is our claim that people live in a place, not in the air, or airport lobbies, or the airy conference centres of “transcendental capital” (Hage 4; de Cauter 273). We are particularly interested in occupying these techno-spaces to pervert their protocols and confuse their logics. To use against itself the apparatus of econometric education, haloed as it is by global technophilia, we seek the commotion of thinking together using whatever technological means our world-excellently equipped classrooms provide.

Works Cited


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