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Free Space in the Academy¹

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Abstract

What we have called academic freedom is often academic toleration, in the liberal tradition of toleration. Toleration is at best the prelude to freedom, and is often a zero-sum proposition—freedom for one means duty or restriction for another. This essay advances the idea that freedom is the production of Gilles Deleuze’s idea of the “virtuality,” which the article frames as the creation of the “activated concept,” or the concept that opens up the potential for new structures, practices, or institutions. The author gives several examples, from South Africa and elsewhere, and finishes by suggesting several ways that virtualities are or can be derailed.

Who Doesn’t Love Academic Freedom?

Academic freedom is one of those virtues that everyone in democratic countries claims to support. Many nations, including France, Germany, the Philippines, and South Africa, have legislation or a clause in their constitution supporting academic freedom. South Africa’s constitution, for instance, includes academic freedom as part of the general freedom of expression, in section 16(1):

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes ... (d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

On one level, we might wonder why we are still talking about academic freedom. If everyone is on board with the basic concept, any differences should just be a matter of implementation, not an argument over basic

¹ This is a revised version of the annual D. C. S. Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture at Rhodes University in South Africa, presented in September 2015.

principles. And yet, just because almost everyone thinks that academic freedom is a good idea, it does not follow that everyone agrees on what that is, or how it relates to other values in the university, such as the respect for consensus of scientific knowledge, or even what real freedom in scholarship and creative work looks like. In the United States, the Discovery Institute, a supporter of creationism and opponent of evolution, has an “Academic Freedom Act” that it wants to have passed. The text would guarantee the “full range of scientific views regarding biological and chemical evolution.” What this means, of course, is the defense of teachers who want to teach creationism as if it were science. Students for Academic Freedom, an organization headed by conservative activist David Horowitz, promotes an “Academic Bill of Rights” that would extend to students the rights of academic freedom professors already have. It would allow students to be protected if they object to something a professor says or a text he or she assigns. The bill is meant to prevent “indoctrination,” a term most critics see as directed at any view other than a conservative view.

The line is short and direct between this and the current chill in the American university climate and elsewhere, in which trigger warnings and overreactions by administrations to faculty speech are becoming prevalent. We have seen faculty fired for swearing in class, “unhired” (as in the case of Steven Salaita) for Twitter messages about Israel and Palestine, or subjected to interrogations and public shaming for perceived transgressions of rhetorical and ethical space. We have seen scholarly journals pressured to remove parts of essays because they “damage the university’s brand” or offend potential donors or funders. All actions, and all reactions, claim the moral high ground. All actions and all reactions claim that they champion academic freedom, in the short or long term. Administrators, for example, may argue that in policing statements they are ensuring that a climate conducive to academic freedom is being protected. George Orwell was prescient in his observation that language can come to mean its opposite over time—academic freedom and the restriction of speech can come to amount to the same thing.²

In other words, there is a long history of talking about academic freedom. Everyone claims to support it, and few think that its time has passed. We think we know what it is. What more is there to say?

This essay takes a transversal approach to these issues. I want to argue that what we often call academic freedom is better termed “academic toleration,” along the classic liberal meaning of toleration. Toleration, I

² Clearly “academic freedom” does not mean the same thing to everyone, even if most argue for it. There are, however, a few who do argue against it. Sandra Korn (2014), in the *Harvard Crimson*, suggested we abandon academic freedom in favor of academic justice. She argues that we have reached a consensus on issues such as racism, classism, and sexism, and so to promote racist or classist or sexist views under the guise of “academic freedom” is to ignore a higher standard and, more important, to ignore the fact that academic freedom is always couched in political realities and is never the dispassionate exercise of reason and the pursuit of knowledge. Since it always serves an agenda, it should serve the agenda of justice, particularly justice for disadvantaged and marginalized people.

will maintain, is a prerequisite for freedom, but it is not the same as freedom. My interest here will be in what freedom in the academy actually looks like. I will make the case that it has to do with “virtualities,” that is, moments in which the creation of new concepts allows a new problematic (that is, new kinds of questions and the intellectual structures around them) to take hold. These virtualities change the intellectual playing field, and ultimately are a better case for academic toleration than the liberal case that has undergirded most discussions of academic freedom to this point. I will give several examples of these virtualities and finally consider ways virtualities are often undermined and thwarted before they can take hold. The place to start this discussion will be to think about how concepts have their places, and why place matters.

Philosophy-in-Place

I work on what I call “philosophy-in-place” (Janz 2009; Janz 2015). Philosophy has theorized place, but it has rarely taken its own places seriously. Taking our places seriously means to ask how and where thought is nurtured, supported, scaffolded, and prodded, as well as how it is thwarted, ossified, idolized, programmed, or consumed. Taking our places seriously means asking who our knowledge is for, where it came from, and who the audience is, what interests our knowledge serves. It means asking what the unintended consequences of our knowledge are—not to stop inquiry, not to make us second-guess ourselves at every turn, but to make our questions richer. Place is not destiny or necessity, but freedom is also not placeless action.

Part of doing philosophy-in-place is to think about two things: the provenance of concepts and the currency of concepts. Provenance refers to not just the origin but also the path that a concept has taken. It recognizes that words are not concepts and that our concepts come into being because of a question or set of questions that makes them viable. They also change over time, and concepts bear the marks of those changes. So, the “real” concept is contained not in its origin story but in the places in which it has had currency. And there’s the second issue: the currency of a concept. Like currency as commonly understood, as a means of monetary exchange, concepts can be exchanged within places. Some currencies are valid in some places but not others. Some words look like they are universal, but this disguises the fact that several concepts use those words. So concepts have currency, and what gives them currency is their activation, that is, the scaffolding of institutions, practices, language, and so forth that make the concept something other than an object of intellectual curiosity.

The philosopher’s tendency is to look for the “real” meaning of a concept. Of course we recognize that concepts might vary, but for many philosophers that is irrelevant. We start with the assumption that concepts are universals and that their production as concepts is irrelevant to their universality. This is one of those footnotes to Plato that Alfred North Whitehead described Western philosophy as being. Philosophy-in-place argues that we strive for universals but that we live in particulars, and that includes our concepts, along with

the way they come into being and interact. That tension between universality and particularity is philosophical space, even though philosophy may not lay exclusive claim to that space. And so we need to think about how these concepts work, to find some new potentialities in them, and perhaps create new ones if we are given that opportunity. Put another way, we are looking for activated concepts as opposed to abstract ones.

African philosophy is an especially rich site for examining the emergence and development of concepts. This is in part because the rest of the world has characterized Africa as a place devoid of concepts, or at least its own concepts. So, philosophy-in-place is not only about examining the development of concepts in the past but also about considering the subtleties of concept creation in the present and future. African philosophy, far from being derivative, stands as a model to the rest of philosophy of a creative and vibrant mode of thinking. Many of us from outside of Africa simply haven't yet caught on to this. Academic freedom might not seem like a concept embedded in African philosophy, but the lesson here concerns the ways concepts emerge. African philosophy gives a model for this, one we can apply to academic freedom.

Academic Freedom as Academic Toleration

We think of academic freedom as largely a negative freedom, that is, a freedom *from* something, in this case, a freedom from censure or consequence when a scholar is pursuing his or her areas of research. Framed this way, we can quickly see the questions that might arise. In an increasingly interdisciplinary academic world, what constitutes someone's "area"? Who does the duty of observing and ensuring this freedom? University administrations? University boards? Governments? Potential donors or funders? Other academics? The public? Who has the obligation to not censure? What counts as censure? Is disagreement of any sort tantamount to censure? Does the imperative to act on some issue imply censure, because discussion must be stopped in order to initiate action? At what point does the resistance to censure amount to a restriction on someone else's academic freedom or freedom of expression? And, can the intent behind the ideal of academic freedom, to provide a safe space for knowledge creation, end up being the enforcement of no safe spaces at all, as all space must at least in principle be contested or contestable space?

We can quickly see that a large number of abstract questions might be raised here. The question of *what* we are free to do is less clear. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1989 [1859]) argues that clearing away impediments to the proper exercise of reason is the thing to be pursued, not describing the contours of freedom itself. Freedom is the ability to choose whatever you want, and toleration is the prerequisite for that.

Note that I just used the word "toleration." What we often think of as academic freedom is closer to academic toleration, of the sort Mill and John Locke talked about, at least at the level of the activated concept. We have, in other words, a classical liberal frame for the question of freedom that relies on setting the stage for freedom to be exercised. As such, this is a concept that has a place, that is, it is an answer to a

set of questions asked within their places over time. It is not, in other words, a kind of ideal that floats above all other ideals, timeless and universal, despite its own claims about itself. Toleration, as with freedom, has a history and a place.

Of course, over time the concept of toleration has drifted. We now use it to describe relations between people, and we speak of “zero-tolerance” as an approach to policing and sentencing. Toleration is not a supreme right. It exists in relation to other rights, particularly justice. And, at least rhetorically, it is not always a positive—we look down on governments that “tolerate” negative things, such as sexual abuse or human trafficking. Academic freedom, like this version of toleration, also has its limits—we are not free, for instance, to fabricate data and call it an exercise of academic freedom, or for psychologists to aid the US military in breaking prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and call it academic freedom. There are limits for academic freedom, but those limits are precisely the limits we have for toleration.

Toleration’s provenance in the modern era is religious. For Locke (1963) it focuses on the question of whether those who hold a different religious faith can be forced by the state to change. Religion goes deeper than other issues—it is not a choice but part of one’s character. This is in line with early Protestant thought, that faith is a matter of following an inner light or a divine logic and is not the same as a superficial difference or a matter of preference. This is what one must tolerate—a deep matter in which conviction and intellect, or will and reason, meet. The path from political toleration to what we call academic freedom is a clear one, when we think of most versions of academic freedom within the academy as in fact academic toleration. For Locke, if we get toleration right, we are then freed to be free. We then have the ability to exercise our will, to use reason to overcome and direct our passions.³ The vast majority of current discussion about academic freedom, especially in the popular press, is reducible to toleration. That is the activated concept. This is true in most places where academic freedom is a matter of live discussion, even when the contours of the debates are different.

When we hear about academic freedom, in other words, what we almost invariably hear about are the threats and limits to freedom. *We do not hear about freedom itself but about the prelude to freedom, the conditions of freedom, the task of clearing the way and laying the foundation for freedom.* This is what we have come to call “negative freedom.” But once we clear the ground for freedom, what comes next? Are we simply free to exercise our will, as Locke assumed we would be? Do we continue with a version of the self in which our flourishing is guaranteed by our ability to exercise our reason, to bend the world to our will either materially or

³ It is worth noting in passing that Locke’s toleration also had its limits, even in the religious framework. He didn’t, after all, mean Catholics, since he thought their true allegiance was to the pope. For him that was a bridge too far.

intellectually? If we start with the assumption that the world is full of barriers to freedom, are we not also committed to the rest of the liberal project of subjectivity, social order, and so forth?

Freedom as Virtuality

I think that the version of freedom that I have just described has dominated the discussion for too long. It does not deal with freedom at all but only with the prelude to freedom. The version of freedom I want to argue for is adapted from Gilles Deleuze (who got it from Henri Bergson) and is called a “virtuality” (Deleuze 1991; Deleuze 2007). It emerges from the conditions of place. Place is often seen as a set of limits, both material and temporal. Places have histories and traditions. We think they have borders (although that might be a better description of space than place). Freedom means to bring something new into reality or, to use other terms, to actualize a virtuality. What does this mean? Think about how we charge particular kinds of distinctions and identities with meaning. Race, gender, ethnicity—all of these activate a whole set of other meanings. They define boundaries, both of action and thought.

Let’s start by considering an example of a concept that has not been activated. Think about something like handedness. It was once the case, at least in some places, that being left-handed was quite literally seen as sinister. That is, in fact, what the Latin word *sinister* means, and it can be contrasted to the Latin for right-handed, *dexter*, the root for the modern English word *dexterous*. And yet today, being left-handed barely activates anything at all, at a cultural level, although there are many scientific studies. It has not produced any real virtuality. It is not a concept with currency, at least not in the sense that it activates a set of borders, relations, practices, language events, performances, institutions, and so forth. Few would imagine that we should divide society primarily on the basis of handedness. And yet, there is no reason in principle why that could not have been activated, had historical events been otherwise.

Now, had handedness been invested with meaning, many things would have happened. No doubt discrimination would have continued. At the same time, energy would also have been invested in investigating the shades of experience of handedness. There would have been a whole group of ways in which handedness expressed itself in aspects of human experience seemingly distant from it. We might have had institutes of cultural handedness, academic programs, government agencies, grants, and fellowships. We would have had festivals, podcasts, and public service announcements. We would have called out those in the past who had forced children to use their right hand. There would have been apologies, and also defensiveness—it was another time, we didn’t know better, everyone was doing it. There would have been a great deal of discussion about the relationship between the biology of handedness and the culture of handedness. We would have by this point queered handedness, recognizing it as performative rather than biological, and celebrated the wide range of ambidexterities and transdexterities. And of course, it might not have been “transdexterity” at all but

“transsinisterity,” since of course language matters. There would be handedness-rights groups. The cultural construction of handedness would become apparent—the world is, after all, clearly designed largely for right-handed people. Culture has expressed, or perhaps mandated and reinforced a preference, and some benefit and others do not. And, we could have continued to attach moral, political, and religious content to the phenomenon of handedness, just as happened in the past.

But we don’t do any of that. Is that because handedness is intrinsically less important than gender, race, and so forth? No, it is because we have invested a great deal in those other things, and not this. *The investment we make is also the freedom we make.* Obviously, in the case of gender, race, and so forth, it is also the lack of freedom for many. This happens with any activated concept—we get both the potential for creativity and the potential for oppression. But we don’t think about handedness as having anything to do with either freedom or its lack. It has not activated anything. Note that I am not saying that these categories and distinctions are all as insignificant as handedness. It is rather the opposite—they are significant, and they are so precisely because of this phenomenon of virtuality. These concepts have currency and have activated a range of human experience. They have made possible both free expression and also the assault on free expression.

The temporality of virtualities is also relevant here. Time is not a constant. It does not flow as the clock ticks, beat by beat. It surges and lags. It gets caught in eddies, and then jumps. It doubles back on itself, repeating what came before, only not quite the same. In South Africa there was a time when it was almost inconceivable that anything but an apartheid state could exist. Any alternative seemed utopian at best—until it wasn’t. In the United States, gay marriage was unthinkable for decades—until it wasn’t. There were constitutional amendments in many states to prevent gay marriage from ever happening—those turned out to be a final desperate gasp rather than a manifestation of widely held sentiment. How could we have known at the time? We couldn’t have known in advance, even though many might have hoped it was the case. The Confederate flag, emblem of the racist slaveholding southern states, continued to be an unassailable symbol in many of those states—until it wasn’t. A symbol that some argued had nothing to do with racism but only with states’ rights, or pride in the South, or something like that—the tipping point was reached, and the lie was exposed. All it took was a mass murderer entering a church service, sitting down with a group of black parishioners, talking with them for an hour, and then murdering most of them. The United States is full of mass murders, but this horror sparked a specific change.

And there is also the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa, which has spread to Oxford and elsewhere. It was started by Chumani Maxwele in March 2015 at the University of Cape Town—a free act, a *cri de coeur*, a raging, shit-throwing, Dionysian event caught the moment in time when it could be noticed. It was hardly the first stand taken against inequality in South Africa, much less the first reasoned statement or moral plea. What if it had not been the social disruption that it was—would it have been any less? Rosa Parks

in the Montgomery bus boycott was not, after all, the first person to refuse to move to the back of the bus. And hers was not a spontaneous act—it was discussed and planned in advance. Was it any less effective for that? Hardly. These acts are virtualities, making apparent the potential of the moment.⁴

My observation here is not merely the banal truism that everything that happens changes things. Of course it does. My observation is that a virtuality was created, something never before seen even though some similar elements might have been in place previously. Even though everything that happens changes things, some of those changes matter and some don't, and some prepare the way for mattering later, and some simply reinforce the status quo. My point is that some things that happen activate new concepts, and some don't.

Here's another example: In the United States recently, in the wake of killings of black men and women while being arrested or in custody, the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements have emerged. The history of violence against minorities, particularly blacks, by various actors in the US government has been long and shameful and brutal, and for various reasons has been getting worse. A few seminal events coalesced this virtuality—the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman (who was not a state actor but someone who was able to use Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law to avoid being convicted of murder); the 2014 killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City; the 2015 death of Sandra Bland in custody in Texas, and many others, including the supposed suicides of some in solitary confinement. Again we have a long history of abuse by authorities, a long history of protest by individuals and groups, but finally a virtuality is reached and the spark is lit. Twitter handles take hold; rallies spring up; pressure mounts; officials respond, in more or less useful ways. Intellectual scaffolding is erected. All those who went before were part of that spark, nascent embers that made it possible, but for them the virtuality had not yet arrived. Now Black Lives Matter is a force to be addressed in presidential campaigns.

Is the story over in any of these examples? Is a virtuality the same as the solution to a problem? Of course not. Time never gives guarantees. But we can leverage it. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987: 112–48) speak of "deterritorializing," by which they mean the act of changing the path of thought or action based on the pushes and pulls of the moment. We find ourselves in a rut sometimes, time cycling over and over and over, and then a disruptive moment happens. A perturbation in a system seems ordered but is really chaotic, a strange attractor. The wolf walks a path through the woods—we might suppose that we could, at least in principle, describe its actions, based on its biology, evolution, and so forth. We might suppose that it's all already there, *rationes seminales*, traceable back to some simple building blocks and starting points or, if we're

⁴ For Deleuze, the virtuality is always an actualization, it is not potential. I use the term *activate* as opposed to *actualize* to distinguish between the actuality that a virtuality is and the structures built around a concept that allow, in Deleuze's terms, a "line of flight."

so inclined, the mind of God. We might think that. But you know, we have a hard enough time describing a current in a river, and the river as a flow of water doesn't even have biology or evolution (although it certainly contains biological beings). What makes us think that we know the first thing about the wolf? What we do know is that it responds, that it makes itself anew based on a thousand environmental factors and a million epigenetic expressions.

This is where freedom lives. It is not a property of humans, or of constitutions or states or cultures or even academics. It is not a commodity. It is virtual, the space where human action finds or falls into or creates a disruption in time, one of those eddies or surges or lags. It is the very meaning of an event. It is the fork in the road, the moment that changes a direction and in so doing opens a new door.

A virtuality is not a heroic version of history, one in which the Great Person comes along and through sheer force of will, overwhelming intelligence, or charisma makes something happen. There are no world-historical figures here. On that day in March 2015 at the University of Cape Town, it was not that Chumani Maxwele rose above all else, saw more deeply or felt more purely, and acted in a manner to singlehandedly produce the Rhodes Must Fall movement. His actions would not have meant anything without those other prior actions, those moments of resistance, questioning, answering back. And yet, there was a virtuality, a moment of disruption in the flow, a crack that let the light in, as Leonard Cohen once said. The world that I want is the world of a thousand virtualities, coming from all those who can find a way to think or create or speak or dance. And I want the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Likewise, academic freedom does not mean clearing the barriers so that the academic superhuman can exert a world-defining intellectual power. Freedom in the academic world is about recognizing the disruptions in thought, in social order, in our worlds. We all are trained to use our tools and methods, but we don't always use them to advance freedom. It is easier, and more conducive to contemporary university definitions of productivity as defined by metrics, to think of our task as adding another brick to the disciplinary cathedral, rather than as preparing for and activating virtualities.

The freedom I want to see in academia is creative, and not merely analytic or descriptive or even juridical or emancipatory. It is creative of new concepts, new experiences, new mechanisms. What I want is the surprising, the unexpected. I want the disruption. I'm not talking about having a fight—I'm talking about a shift in my perspective, and that of others, based on new information, new experience, new methods. I want Hannah Arendt's (1961: 153–54) idea of freedom as virtuosity, without the Aristotelean undertones—freedom as action that opens up new creative space. I want the marketplace of ideas, not the mall of ideas. I want the agora in its best classic sense, the space not just of ideas but of experience and perspective. I want the space of Zulu *isibongo* praise poetry, similar in intent to the medieval European Feast of Fools, the space of reversal, disruption, and artful talking back to the existing structures of power. I want the place where it is

safe to be queer, that is, it is safe to perform a range of surprising, shocking, sublime, and profane identities and affects. I want the place where it is safe to be black, and not just safe but exhilarating and a new opening to creative possibilities. I want a thousand tiny sexes; I want a thousand tiny races. I don't want to teach the controversy, if that means boiling things down to opposing positions and forcing people to choose between conservative or liberal, past or future, PC or Mac. That's just a tamed and toothless virtuality. Academic freedom for me means looking for the new thing, the new virtuality, with everyone present and accounted for.

Virtualities That Lead to Free Thought and Action

Here are some examples of the kind of virtualities I have in mind. Many others could be chosen that involve the academic world in one way or another.

Susan Brownmiller, among others, chronicles the history of the concept of sexual harassment in *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (1999), and Miranda Fricker analyses this history in detail in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007). It had been recognized for a long time that sexual violence against women was rooted in the assumption that women, like slaves, were closer to being property than autonomous beings, and that placed violence against women, like violence against slaves and non-Europeans in general, on a different level than violence against white men. Because of this, it was very difficult to speak about women's daily experience before the concept of sexual harassment became available. Not that no one spoke about these experiences before—of course they did, in all sorts of ways. But this concept gave both social and legal standing to the conversation, and moved legislation and a host of other things. It reified a set of experiences that previously were easy to dismiss, on the grounds that women were considered irrational or self-interested or otherwise unreliable. That is what comes along with being considered closer to property—one does not participate in the uniquely human capacity of reason. So, every single report from any particular woman was in principle questionable—until this virtuality happened, and then there was a new standing. Was everything solved? Are women now treated as equals in America or anywhere else now that we have this concept? Of course not. But the discussion changed after that point. That was the creation of a concept in a place, the very thing that we claim to value in universities, and it opened up a new problematic, that is, a new field for exploration and discussion of experience. This was not the last concept created or needed: there is no intersectionality here; this is solidly a second-wave feminist moment. The problem was not solved but redefined, and uniquely academic skills could be brought to bear on this new problem. A free space has been opened up, and it was not a zero-sum trade-off, because freedom from fear of violence for women (and anyone else) is freedom for everyone.

It is worth noting that, even though academics had a hand in this new problematic, it was by no means only academics who were responsible for its emergence. Activists, legislators, lawyer, jurists, students, victims, and victim-support groups were all part of this shift. These virtualities do not come solely from academics sitting in their offices and thinking up new concepts. They come from the intersection of skill sets, circumstances, and passion. They come from new and unexpected encounters. They come from a willingness of everyone to say, we cannot continue with business as usual. This new activated concept became the sort of thing that philosophers could and have analyzed, and as such, it became an abstract concept also. Activation came before abstraction, not the other way around, as we often think it does or should.

Consider a different kind of example: digital humanities is in the business of surprises. It has looked for new things. It has, for instance, redefined what counts as a text. It is no longer just a book or a poem—it might be an author's entire oeuvre, or an entire culture's literature, or the sum and interaction of all tweets. We have added middle reading and distant reading to the skills of close reading. This is pushing disciplines to rethink what they formerly considered to be their objects of investigation. What is a text when it's not just something between two covers on a library shelf? We find ourselves in a time when the potentialities of the humanities are being reformulated. For DH (the common way to refer to the digital humanities), I would argue it is not very consciously or deliberately done yet. These virtualities we can see on the horizon, but they have largely not yet arrived.

One place we do see some of these virtualities beginning is in the open data movement (and along with that, open publishing, open source, open tools, and so forth). In Africa, there is a group called Code for Africa (www.codeforafrica.org), with a subgroup called Code for South Africa. They are laying the groundwork for new possibilities by making data free and available on issues ranging from local municipal laws to medicine price registry to a site that charts who shows up in the news in South Africa, to a site that maps protests across South Africa in 2013–14 and what caused them. Another form of open data is the production of on-the-ground data that groups like Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.com) have pioneered. This initiative sprung up in Kenya during the election violence of 2007, with a mission to chart the location of violence across the country using e-mail and text messages, to give a real-time picture of what was happening. Efforts like these change the ways that current events are represented. All these initiatives require a great deal more development, but like the early days of the formulation of sexual harassment as a concept, the components are gathering to reframe debates in Africa and around the world. We see virtualities coming that will produce new problematics, that is, spaces in which to ask new kinds of questions.

Another example: Stephen Bantu Biko. Biko is well known as a proponent of black consciousness. He is often described as an existentialist who looked to Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre for his inspiration. This is certainly true, but he was also a tactician and organizer. It is important to understand why black

consciousness emerged when it did. In 1960, after the Sharpeville Massacres, the apartheid government shut down the African National Congress, the Pan-African Congress, and the South African Communist Party. By the Rivonia Trial in 1963–64 there was a change in the political landscape. Black intellectual life had previously been channeled through the parties, but that was no longer possible or feasible in any official sense. The logic had been that the apartheid regime had to be met on the political field, party against party. That was no longer possible.

Biko recognized this change, and that in part accounts for the rise of black consciousness. It was an intellectual movement (and more) that was not tied to the party structure. It was not, as Biko called it, “‘comfortable’ politics, between leaders” (Gerhart 2008: 29). In effect, the problem was redefined. Biko read white power, and he knew how and where to intervene to produce perturbations in the system. He used whites’ misunderstanding of black consciousness and politics against them. His virtuality was in transforming black intellectual life from something located within parties to something ontological. Rather than trying to reconstitute party power through other means, he used the existing momentum to move the center of activity to student groups, townships, and other places that the parties had barely reached. Leadership rotated often, which spread risk and also made the movement much less invested in a single charismatic figure. Again, this was not a magic solution. Many, including Biko himself, were murdered. Had the debate remained one of party politics, though, it is hard to see that the same kind of mobilization would have happened. This virtuality redefined the problem, and in doing so suggested a different range of approaches.

A final example: the virtualities that can occur at the edges of disciplines. There is justifiable skepticism on the part of many people concerning interdisciplinarity, and yet it is also clear that there are many forms of interdisciplinarity, and a wide range of curricular and research initiatives. We do not often think of interdisciplinary space as directly related to academic freedom, but that is because we think of freedom not as virtuality but as toleration. We also tend to think of interdisciplinarity as at best a progressive enterprise, one in which methods of two or more disciplines come together to produce something new. It is, in other words, at best part of the productive machine of the university and at worst an administrative strategy for intervening in the processes of scholarly cognition.

But it need not be that. Theorists of interdisciplinarity such as Julie Thompson Klein (2010) and Jill Vickers (2003) emphasize the potentially transgressive and transformative nature of interdisciplinarity. Klein (2010: 25) discusses “Critical ID,” a version of interdisciplinarity that interrogates disciplinary structures with a view to identifying new questions and new theoretical paradigms. While she does not use the term *virtuality*, much of what she describes fits well within what I have described. Mieke Bal’s (2002) “traveling concepts” is another example of the ways virtualities can happen when concepts act as disruptors and attractors in new spaces.

The freedom here is in creating new problematics. Each of the preceding examples might, in fact, be seen as an instance of this kind of interdisciplinarity. “Sexual harassment” as a concept creates a conceptual bridge from the personal and shared experience of women to the bureaucratized world of policy and law. It is a forensic concept, translating one domain of experience into another, and as such it opens a new space of thought. The digital humanities similarly redefine objects of humanistic investigation, appropriate tools, and reliable methods, and in so doing they potentially open up new spaces for dialogue across disciplines. And the strategic moves of Steven Biko and others in the 1960s and after created a new way of imagining ways of being black and African in the world. Universities were central to this revolution, although they were by no means the only space of resistance—not only were their apartheid structures in South Africa challenged, but their role in the creation of knowledge was challenged. There were protests, but there were also those who were rethinking what the university was for, how its scholarly cognitive practices both reinforced racist forms of knowledge and might imagine new ways of producing knowledge. This is a struggle that continues to this day, in South Africa and elsewhere.

Monkey Wrenches into the Freedom Machine

In its ideal state, the university should be a freedom machine. By this I mean that it should be a space where the interaction of concepts and experiences creates virtualities, which creates new concepts adequate to a new set of circumstances on a continual or at least regular basis. But as we all know, that ideal often remains unrealized. Why? We have not circled back to the question of academic toleration but instead are focusing on the ways the chances of a virtuality’s forming are drowned out.

One way that virtualities are drowned out is through the managerial or bureaucratic university structure. When something good happens, when new concepts come into being and change peoples’ lives and produce new ways of being in the world, our tendency is to try to replicate that success. Bureaucracies, as Max Weber eloquently described, are modern mechanisms for doing just that. They resist older forms of social organization based on nepotism, they create efficiencies, they coordinate action at a sophisticated level, they provide stabilization over time in the midst of changing political structures. But the impulse to harness and replicate past successes leads us to overturn the conditions for those successes. It is a little like Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of the priest’s version of Christianity—they took the joyous affirmation of life represented by Jesus, codified it, turned it into coercive theology, and in so doing negated it. The *jouissance* was lost even as the form was replicated.

In the university, as with any large bureaucratic structure, positive action tends to be incentivized. “Positive,” in this case, means putting something in place that was not there before: a procedure, a rule, a form, a new office. No administrator is rewarded for doing nothing, even when doing nothing is the best

option. So all these positive actions are all done with the best intentions, to maximize the space that faculty and students have to operate, and yet they can have the opposite effect. The proliferation of structure is both the necessary prerequisite for and the opponent of the virtuality. It incentivizes productivity at the expense of creativity.

A second way that virtualities are undermined and subverted can be seen in the transformation of the university into a corporatized space. This manifests itself in many ways—the increase in casual labor, the increasing use of “metrics” that lead to the same kind of short-term thinking and control structures we see in business, the increasing distance between administrations and both academic staff and students. The harm to educating the whole student is well understood, if widely ignored, but I want to bring out another aspect of this—the ways this rationalization tends to diminish the spaces in which virtualities might appear. Creativity is closely circumscribed and, ideally, programmed; difference is celebrated but tamed, and as such negated. It becomes difference within an acceptable range, by the right people, using the right words, wearing the right clothes, and as such it is no longer difference at all. The students and professors who succeed are the team players, the ones who fit into the corporate/university culture, and if some of them are brown or black, all the better. This is no longer the sort of diversity that will lead to virtualities; instead it is the kind that will contribute to the corporate brand.

A third phenomenon that subverts virtualities can be seen in an essay by the cultural critic and journalist Vivian Gornick called “At the University, Little Murders of the Soul” (1996). She describes the affective experience of the university, the habitus that emerges over time. She writes poignantly of the ways academics make each other less free, quite apart from external bureaucratic, legislative, or social pressures. She uses a series of short stays as a visiting writer at a number of universities to examine the ways academics compete, close each other off, fail to hear each other, undermine each other. Her essay is a master class in the subversion of virtualities, in the ways the *jouissance* of exploration can be undermined from within rather than without. She describes an academic world without freedom, because nothing is worth writing about anymore, and no one around really cares. What is the point of having academic freedom when the affect and interaction of everyone around reinforces the lived reality that there’s nothing worth doing, not really, not for any reason higher than a promotion?

A fourth reason we find that the university does not live up to its potential as a freedom machine comes much closer to what I’ve called academic toleration. It is that we mistake creativity for destruction. At its best, the university exists in a kind of tension between unity and diversity, between the universal and the particular. Our tendency is to try to resolve that tension. Tension, after all, produces anxiety. We are faced with the tension that comes from holding particularity and diversity (what William James called the “blooming buzzing confusion” of the world) in one hand and some version of universality in the other. And so, in the university,

we have built disciplines and programs that define and refine our objects of study, that set up approved methods, authorize gatekeepers, produce incentives, and generally uphold standards. In short, we build disciplinary “homes.” We think of those homes the way heads of households think of their homes—they are our castles, they are our own safe spaces. We solve the problem of anxiety by resolving the tension in favor of one side—the side of the universal. We imagine that we have harnessed the world under a few clear categories. We say that we have academic freedom in this model, when what we really have is a set of subtle and not-so-subtle influences toward conformity. What we have actually done is to miss the creative potential in the blooming buzzing confusion.

Final Thoughts

The concept we usually call academic freedom has been activated as academic toleration; to consider true freedom we need to consider virtualities, that is, the moments in which our frameworks for the world change and new possibilities become apparent; these virtualities have their own ways of being deferred, derailed, or thwarted. None of this means that we should not continue to take traditional academic freedom seriously, and watch for external threats. And the imperative of equity and representation must be followed to its end, for without that, these virtualities will not come to pass. But I continue to be haunted by the question—once we have secured the conditions for the possibility of freedom for all, once the threats to free inquiry have been resisted and all the voices that ought to be part of the conversation are there at every level and in every department—what does it mean to be free in the university? If we start with that question, rather than seeing freedom as just a residual act of academic toleration, I think we have a different and more productive conversation.

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