

# Is Nothing Sacred?

## Coming to Terms with the University and Other Spiritual Crises

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**ABSTRACT** If the twenty-first-century university is to repent of its racist past and present in order to become something other than an instrument of late capitalism, it will need conceptual space and language that break from the neoliberal and Enlightenment frameworks many faculty have internalized. The apocalyptic crises that came to a head in the United States in the summer of 2020 and built to January 2021 can help us make that break. Writing from the “red state” of Tennessee, which was “purple” in living memory, on a patch of university earth that is the ancestral home of the Cherokee, Yuchi, and Muscogee Creek Nations, the author claims the university as sacred space in order to name what is both radical and sustainable about the university. This frame organizes the university around the concepts of place, truth, and love to reorient the public understanding of higher education away from a process of fitting students for the existing economy and toward the work of mutual survival in a democratic society.

**KEYWORDS** university, neoliberal, sacred, democracy, humanities

In this apocalyptic moment, how might we hold imaginative space for the university of what playwright James Ijames, in *TJ Loves Sally 4ever*, calls “the dope-ass future?”<sup>1</sup> That may sound gratingly optimistic as the bombshells of our times explode around us, most obviously in the form of the January 6, 2021, siege on the US Capitol, COVID-19, climate chaos, the deaths that catalyzed the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise of autocracy globally. These are indeed apocalyptic in the disaster movie sense, but *apokalúptō*, from *ἀπό* (*apó*, both “off” and “from”) and *καλύπτω* (*kalúptō*, “I cover”), first means revelation, an unveiling, a moment of clarity. To get to something like the “reparative university” that Michael Meranze calls for, a university that could help heal a broken society and planet, we have to challenge the transformation of all relations into market relations, starting at home.<sup>2</sup> I won’t recapitulate here Christopher Newfield’s explanation of the “unvirtuous

cycles” that functionally privatized public higher education after the 1980s, though I note that the rhetoric of educational return on investment, the spread of the “para-university,” and the uncoupling of teaching and research faculty through adjunct labor, has left us with conjoined identity and spiritual crises under the political theology of neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> The endless culture of audit, accountancy, and efficiencies that lead but to the grave also represses, as Frederic Jameson, Wendy Brown, and theologian Kathryn Tanner have variously argued, all other possible values and forms of relationship.<sup>4</sup>

The deadly cosplay of January 6 in Washington, DC, is unreadable unless we understand how imagined market freedom has become part of a symbolically dense religious structure of feeling. In this neomedieval morality play, the insurrectionists were cast as persecuted martyrs and holy warriors fighting for jobs stolen by nebulous liberal elites who drink the blood of infants, nonmetaphorically, and who have infiltrated the government to undo the will of “the people.” History repeated itself as farce in this violent pantomime of democracy, acted out by deluded extremists as a front for those who are destroying what remains, however imperfect, of American democracy. Their exit strategy, rapture from a planet they have trashed after a civil war instigated by “Second Amendment people,” confirms the nihilistic death pact that unites this coalition. It also highlights academia’s curious role as the demonic “elites” in this mock-epic. We take the fall for late capitalism’s destruction of middle-class jobs (because people majored in English?) and stoke the zeal of the zealots, who rally against the “Godless heathens” bent on taking away their faith. If the surreal disinformation culture we now inhabit has taught us anything, it is that insisting on facts, science, and reason more loudly is not sufficient to the deprogramming task ahead. Being right does not win the day, and exposing an opponent’s errors does not lead them to reform. These are especially painful lessons for academics.

If we want to imagine (or to prophesy) this yet-to-be university, perhaps we should start talking about what we hold sacred, what must be set apart from market relations in order for us to sustain communities. The sacred made quite a comeback on January 6, when a (white) capitol officer politely asked (white) rioters to leave the Senate chamber because it was “the sacrest place,” and in subsequent denunciations of the desecration of the “temple” of democracy.<sup>5</sup> I take these as signs of the ongoing purchase of the sacred to name that which markets cannot digest (reflected in the humble aphorism “Is nothing sacred?”) and to form communities out of the affective remains of place, truth, and belonging.<sup>6</sup> As Wendy Brown notes at the close of *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, “To date, these remains have been activated mostly by the Right. What kinds of Left political critique and vision might reach and transform them?”<sup>7</sup> After all the critiques of the Enlightenment

narrative, it may now be time to let go of the remnant belief that knowledge is ever-progressing secularization. Universities, which include some of the oldest continuous institutions on the planet, remain, in significant ways, places set apart (*sacrarium*) that retain the capacity to reorient a global society rife with conspiracy theories and hatreds to love. And if all this religious language makes you uncomfortable, well, as we say in the South, buckle up, buttercup, because this is going to be a bumpy ride. What has been revealed already, apocalyptically, is that the dominant stories of higher education, either as a private good or as the triumph of technology over nature, are traps, and they are killing us. What language shall we borrow to rewire, for the public, the Orwellian short-circuit of thought that makes privatization and market value the answer to everything and, in so doing, makes demons of us all?<sup>8</sup> It must be a language so scandalous that even we could begin to believe in it.

### A Place for Us

The University of Tennessee is a land-grant university that was not recognized as such until seven years after the 1862 Morrill Act because Tennessee's confederate center in Nashville fought having its university in the union East. Like most American universities, it is built on someone else's sacred ground, in our case, the Cherokee and Yuchi peoples', at the foot of the Great Smoky Mountains. That ground is a few miles from Dayton, TN, home of the Scopes monkey trial, in which young science teacher John Thomas Scopes was prosecuted for teaching evolution, but also a few miles from the Highlander Center, where Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, and Martin Luther King Jr. trained in nonviolent protest. The land grant, the gift, was always already someone else's. The public university as *khora* (Jacques Derrida's riff on this word includes "place without age . . . irreplaceable place . . . 'before' the world") is meant to be a place like no other, set aside from the logic of private ownership.<sup>9</sup> Armed with this framework and the knowledge of our disorienting place in history, we can lean into the paradox of the land-grant space of the university, stolen to be given but never owned, bought, or sold again. It orients us to this land aspirationally to work for economic justice within and beyond the academy. To live up to that old, unfulfilled Reconstruction promise of access made necessary by the sins of colonialism and racism, sins that are carried along in the cargo hold of the present, we have to be willing to tear down some walls like standardized test (SAT and ACT) scores, the traditional timetables that slam doors on adult learners, and condescension toward community colleges.

The barely suppressed histories of race and power that have been exploding into view on campuses, including my own, in the form of swastikas, blackface incidents, and anti-Muslim taunts (Gramsci would call them "morbid symptoms") are fueled by real racial anxieties and hatreds, which must be denounced, full stop.

But consider how the material and imaginative conditions of space sit at the heart of ideas about safety and human freedom, from calls for “safe spaces” to battle cries for “blood and soil.” What Wendy Brown has called “the vaporous powers of finance, which rule everything, but live nowhere” also cast those without attachment to place (those David Goodhart calls the “anywheres”), who flow like and with money, as a threat to those who lack mobility and have consequently attached more deeply to nation, family, place, and whiteness, “the somewheres.”<sup>10</sup> Such a frame can help us understand that they come for us because we *are* a third space, the site of cohabitation that makes possible what will be for many the first independent experience of loving an other outside the policing network of kin. Poet Aaron Kunin’s brilliant, queer, book-length meditation on Anglican poet George Herbert’s “Love Three” provides an example of what I mean. Herbert’s poem begins “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back” and ends with the sacramental-erotic pickup line of the seventeenth century: “You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat. / So I did sit and eat.” Kunin’s subsequent dialogue with Herbert maps out a third space, a nonbinary space fraught with power, bodies, struggles, doubts, and revelations.<sup>11</sup> The university is such a third space of embodied encounter with strangers who do not remain strangers, and it can still be a fulcrum, force, and foretaste of the Beloved Community, MLK’s vision of a society based on economic and social justice. The dorm room, the classroom, the library, the Zoom room, and all the spaces mapped by “conditions of precarity and disenfranchisement” are also the places from which we are called to imagine conditions of welcome that make solidarity possible.<sup>12</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic presented us with a koan about how we think about our space: is a university a university when it is not a place? Like Joe Pitt walking into the Hall of Justice on a Saturday in *Angels in America*, we have seen our halls and classrooms emptied, and whether the sight provoked terror or giddiness, the empty space mirrored the exilic crisis of the *demos*. Disruption, now no longer the corporate-speak of “innovation” but the material effect of a virus that is the consequence of human erosion of animal habitats, is the heavy-handed parable for our times, bare life in the face of late capitalism. Academics from a range of disciplines have a call to address the communities that they too inhabit: in local papers, at schoolboard meetings, when K–12 as well as higher ed funding is on the line, and through voter registration drives. Professors and instructors also need to be public educators about how online teaching opens doors for place-bound future students but also about our need to be face-to-face as well for the purposes of collaborative inquiry, lest this pandemic teaching moment become an argument for further defunding and privatization of public higher education that ghettoizes poor students in online-only courses.

The university has the capacity to heal another wound that majority-rural states suffer within US politics: the loss of young people from “red,” or Republican-leaning, states who move to cities and “blue,” or Democratic-leaning, states. As states became “redder,” they accelerated the experiments in dying of whiteness cataloged by Jonathan Metzl.<sup>13</sup> But place also ties us to histories of the human, the nonhuman, and the land in the late Anthropocene in ways that can be reparative. Regionally, we are seeing a repopulation of progressive young people who left for New York or San Francisco, drawn back by the cost of living and broadband accessibility but also by their love of mountains and their thousand shades of green, to make queer homes and Affrilachian collectives, start small businesses, and engage in environmental activism within and for the love of this space.<sup>14</sup> University faculties can continue to foster that sense of space and belonging after graduation by imagining and actively shaping forms of continuing education through collaboration with nonprofits, extension offices, and regional alumni in those sectors. As a past faculty senate president who pressed administrators to restore our legislatively defunded Office of Diversity and Pride Center, I know it matters that all states have a university that models a welcoming intellectual community for the sake of students’ present and future relation to the university. Yes, such offices and spaces can offload responsibility for meaningful change, commodify diversity, or even become part of para-university bloat, but to be paralyzed by such internal critiques is to risk prizing purity over people who desperately need a place.

### **Bearing Witness**

From the space of the university, we bear witness to truth. Beyond critiques of scientific thought as an instrument of empire, or of Enlightenment knowledge as dominance, Timothy Snyder’s simple and chilling “Post-truth is pre-fascism” should ground our pragmatic, nonnegotiable defense of truth in this age of conspiracy theories.<sup>15</sup> And in spite of our compromised public reputation and our proclivity for circular firing squads, universities can convene groups in ways other institutions cannot, to work on wicked problems and existential crises like pandemics, water pollution, addiction, homelessness, wages, and criminal justice reform. Judith Butler argues, “Our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. So as soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity, it ceases to be existential.”<sup>16</sup> In articulating those existential claims and reframing what we do as bearing witness (to history, to sea levels, to wildfires, to gun violence) we make it possible to move, in Bruno Latour’s words, “from matters of fact to matters of concern,” and even past Butler’s and Latour’s differences about the nature of critique.<sup>17</sup> Bearing witness is a model that puts knowledge

in community; it includes an address to an other who also has an embodied relation to what is witnessed, as Butler concludes in her reconsideration of the organic and inorganic in early Marx: “As mediated, as species, we are always more and less than this body, and this body extends to others and to the conditions of life itself.”<sup>18</sup> Authoritarians and their propagandists put these bodies and the planet that sustains them at risk by encouraging people to believe everything and nothing. The university must answer with truth and love, insisting on matters of concern in an apocalyptically cynical age.

The monumental work of nurturing an ethical imagination, which can be done especially well through the humanities, involves a great deal of risk, beginning with the risk of our own further demonization. Academics, especially humanists, are already an affront to *Homo economicus*. We seek knowledge over profits. We are more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated. We tend to do things we find personally rewarding rather than because of a clear financial incentive or punishment. Our low wages become further proof that we must secretly be “Soros-funded” elites out to destroy America by corrupting its youth and undermining individual liberty;<sup>19</sup> otherwise, we just don’t compute. Our expertise and our existence, however, make more sense when we frame our work as “for the sake of”: a just future; a sustainable planet; or a literate, compassionate society. To do so, we will have to further efface the boundary between teaching and research by developing public humanities, ending contingency, rewarding teaching across all ranks, and involving our students and communities in shared inquiry. This is not the end of specialized research, expertise, or the humanities, but it does spell the end of the disengagement compact that some research faculty members tacitly sign in exchange for being left alone. Putting university knowledge and inquiry in the service of communities can counteract what Kathryn Tanner calls the “deforming effects” of capitalism on our relations to ourselves and to others.<sup>20</sup> When we reframe knowledge as social rather than individual; as stewardship for survivance rather than triumphant discovery; as care rather than mastery, we risk turning our disciplines inside out, but that is a risk we need to be willing to take to realize Meranze’s reparative university. Theodor Adorno addresses the moral imperative of philosophy (and, by implication, the larger educational project) in similar terms, as bound not only to address but also to redress suffering: “Thought that does not capitulate before wretched existence comes to naught before its criteria, truth becomes untruth, philosophy becomes folly. And yet philosophy cannot give up, lest idiocy triumph in actualized unreason.”<sup>21</sup> Taking such a goal seriously could start with changing the university’s reward structures to encourage (or at least not discourage) public education and community partnerships. In this revised landscape, humanistic knowledge would play a significant role as a field of empathetic and sense-making narratives that frame human action.



## Love

The condition of democratic freedom requires not just knowledge but a commitment to the other, and it ends, in the words of Jack Halberstam's prelude to *The Undercommons*, with love.<sup>22</sup> Citizenship, a term hijacked by conservative nationalists, is at its most capacious the shared project of framing a collective good by first imagining the good of those we know, and then moving outward to the good of those we do not know. It ties our own experience of flourishing to the flourishing of others, a tie that universities have an obligation to iterate and reiterate. The university's future orientation in what is not yet known is grounded in the belief that knowledge could lead to states of justice, well-being, and peaceful cohabitation that have not yet been, and that we seek this for ourselves but also for others we do not yet know. Defensive defenses of the university shut down that future by falling into fearful nostalgia for an educational system that was less accessible. Such nostalgia, whether inside or outside the university itself, feeds the present moment's unchecked cycles of contempt, which Schopenhauer defined as "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another."<sup>23</sup> Contempt reproduces and renews a culture of fear, shame, and rage, in which a legitimate address to the other, conversation, is impossible. It is no coincidence that shame often connects back to early schooling, where gendered, classed, and racial norms take their initial public form, where "the surfaces of bodies 'surface' as an effect of the impressions left by others."<sup>24</sup> What we do in the classroom matters not just because it helps produce an informed electorate but because it engages our students, as and where they are, in the lived experience of learning something that will change them. That experience of the contingency of the self is the unsettling and necessary condition for empathetic encounters with others in a democratic society.

Informed by hope, because we can afford nothing less, and the knowledge that we might be wrong, skeptical but not nihilistic, we model an approach to things and people we do not yet know with curiosity rather than fear. University teaching in the COVID-19 era has included apocalyptic revelations of students living in their cars, of food and housing insecurity that include our own instructors, and education that is inaccessible in communities without broadband. Compassion and, yes, love, transform such knowledge into a call to action. Free public higher education, student loan forgiveness, actively antiracist policies, planetary stewardship, and universal health care are all necessary practices to get us there, and they depend on a reasonably educated electorate in a functional democracy. Though Tennessee has a wretched record on health care and environmental regulation, it has recently led the nation on undergraduate access with two years of free community college for all high school graduates and a full ride for all admitted to the University of Tennessee with household incomes below \$60,000, currently over half the state's population. These initiatives are a rare example of bipartisan coop-

eration in an age of fracture, a beginning, an opening through which we might profess a faith in a future university that is defiantly for the *public* good. We can see that a management-heavy replica of the university, like Borges's map, has covered over what we had imagined the university was. We will have to prophesy something different, using a beautiful, offensive, arresting, and indigestible conceptual reservoir of what we yet hold sacred about this place, the university as *khora*, to break through the hermetic seal and water the withered ground beneath. Prophets do not predict; they warn, but they also imagine other possible futures, where justice rolls down like water, a living stream.

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#### Notes

1. Ijames, *TJ Loves Sally 4ever*. This play premiered at JACK in Brooklyn in January 2020.
2. Meranze, "For a Reparative University."
3. Newfield, *Great Mistake*; Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*.
4. Brown, *In the Ruins*, 28–30; Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 102; Tanner, *Christianity*, 24–30.
5. Mogelson, "Reporter's Video"; Judkis and McCarthy, "Capitol Mob."
6. See Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, 14–15. Note also Judith Butler's description of religion's function as "embedded framework . . . and embodied social practice" ("Is Judaism Zionism?," 72).
7. Brown, *In the Ruins*, 187–88.
8. "Neoliberalism makes demons of us all, confronting us with forced choices that serve to redirect the blame for social problems onto the ostensible poor decision making of individuals. This strategy attempts to delegitimize protest—and ultimately even political debate itself—in advance by claiming that the current state of things is what we have all collectively chosen" (Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 2–3).
9. Derrida, *Rogues*, xv.
10. Brown, *In the Ruins*, 184, 187; Goodhart, *Road to Somewhere*, 4.
11. Kunin, *Love Three*, 1.
12. Butler, *Notes*, 66.
13. Metz, *Dying of Whiteness*, 2.



14. Blow, "Second Great Migration."
15. Snyder, "American Abyss."
16. Butler, *Notes*, 119.
17. Latour, "Critique"; Butler, "Inorganic Body."
18. Butler, "Inorganic Body," 15.
19. Brown, *In the Ruins*, 11.
20. Tanner, *Christianity*, 7.
21. The above translation of Adorno's words comes from Zuidervaat, "Metaphysics after Auschwitz." E. B. Ashton's translation renders the passage somewhat less lyrically in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 204.
22. Halberstam, "Wild Beyond," 2.
23. Arthur Brooks quoted this observation of Schopenhauer's, from *Essays and Aphorisms*, in a February 6, 2020, prayer breakfast message about forgiving and loving enemies, to which Trump replied, "Arthur, I don't know if I agree with you." See Thomas, "It Might Be Time."
24. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

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