Still Thriving: On the Importance of Aranye Fradenburg

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When I chose the title for my comments some months ago, I was motivated by the thought that Arany Fradenburg’s scholarship counts under the rubrics of both “provision” and “provisionality.” Which is to say, by the first word, that her books and articles, her talks and her pedagogy, sustain: they are provisions, victuals, supplies one packs for the journey, intellectual food-stuffs, nourishment laid in for times of want. And, by the second word, that the knowledge she’s produced
always comports itself in recognition of its partial-ness, its own provisionality; she opens what she knows to the fact that it is conditioned and conditional, contingent in the last instance—because as she writes in her essay “Driving Education,” in her book Staying Alive, as “mortal creatures,” we never get to the bottom of all “the forces that have formed us,” and thus we have a “responsibility . . . to keep our knowledge disciplines open and unsettled.”¹ Or, as she memorably wrote in Sacrifice Your Love, “group norms of our technique . . . both structure our desire and produce what counts as knowledge, as well as providing the seedbeds of change. But there is no other kind of knowledge than this; this is what knowledge is, and we make it.”² Help for the future and openness to what comes—provisional provisions, we might call it, or sustaining openness; I carry her work with me: a paperback, battered photocopies. I carry her insights in mind as I make my way forward.

The terms “provision” and “provisionality” also strike me because they abut the territory of need—which in today’s discourse of neoliberal austerity has become, as it were, the safe zone. If you are declared needful, requisite, de rigeur,

then you’re safe; you won’t be cut from the budget; you won’t be quietly starved off the rosters. (In a crisis, we are told, everything but the few necessary provisions will count as provisional.)

The important matter, then, lies in how our needs are foreseen: who determines what is and will be required? “Provision” and “provisionality” derive from the Latin verb providere: to see in advance, to see beforehand, to take precautions. And this is the root of divine providence: that mode of foresight that would completely saturate time, contingency, and lack. The term “provision,” then, moves along two vectors: nourishing and open, as well as providential and paranoid: Aranye has been involved with the critique of the latter, and the practice of the former.

Within higher education, it is increasingly technocratic administrators who assign to themselves the task of mimicking providence’s totalizing scope. From a perspective that is “free” from the bias of any particular department, any singular liberal art, university administrations assert their executive authority to act in times of crisis and to determine what is actually needful. Of course, what is most often propagated is the institutionalization of this necessity for providential foresight itself—as in the widely disseminated graph marking the point in April 2011 when senior administrators in the University of California system came to outnumber faculty.

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3 See “UC Administrators Crossed the Line,” Keep California’s Promise, September 19, 2011: http://keepcali
The highly articulated, though ultimately untenable, distinction between need and desire, between the minimum necessary for survival and the excess wasted on pleasure and enjoyment, has long been the object of Aranye’s analyses. In her 1999 discussion of “Needful Things” in *Piers Plowman*, she wrote, “The concept of need does much of its ideological work in the context of the severance of the law from desire. The distinction between need and desire permits the association of desire with superfluity and the law with necessity.” 4 This cutting the distinction between need and desire ever closer to the bone is perhaps the primary gesture of austerity, the act that the perception and the experience of crisis provokes.

“Today, all around the world, the future of the humanities stands on the edge of a knife,” Aranye writes on the first page of *Staying Alive*. She continues, “The value of the liberal arts—its generous range of subjects and methods, its emphasis on teaching students how to think—seems to have plummeted.” Part of the business of Aranye’s book *Staying Alive*—as well as her recent essays like “The Liberal Arts of Psychoanalysis” 5—is to

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5 Aranye Fradenburg, “Frontline: The Liberal Arts of Psychoanalysis,” *Journal of the American Academy of
offer *alternatives* to the neoliberal valorization of the vocational; that is, to describe the *thriving* that is fostered by speculative thought and by play: to provide a vocabulary for perceiving and recognizing modes of value that differ from market logics. It seems to me that developing such a rhetoric is essential—especially because the discourse of austerity does not propagate itself exclusively at the level of rational arguments, and therefore it cannot be countered exclusively at that level. Austerity’s propagation also has a powerful affective dimension.

I will cite again Aranye’s essay on “Needful Things,” but in place of “the testing, disciplining, and managing of the poor” that she writes about there, I am going to read the sentence as though it were about education: “The testing, disciplining, and managing of education (and of the humanities in particular) becomes a way to test, discipline, and manage the structuring of the subject’s and community’s relation to its jouissance, its ‘inner antagonism’; is a way, in short, to *endure*, to surmount loss, to attain the fantasy of superexistence.”

It will never be enough to poke holes in the claims of austerity. It is important to generate the means for alternative forms of “groupification,” alternative provisions for the communities we seek to realize, and this is one of the reasons why I find Aranye’s recent writings so important and

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timely, such an important provision in the long “crisis” and the neoliberal forms that perpetuate it. Indeed, in preparing my response chapter for Staying Alive, I was struck by the fact that academic-activist reflexivity makes up a vital part of contemporary humanistic practice. By “academic-activist reflexivity,” I mean the claims about higher education currently being made, and made public, by students, teachers, researchers, administrators, and alumni, often writing in a variety of formats, from Twitter to journalism to mass-market books. While these proliferating accounts of higher education differ from one another, they manifest a shared sense of dissatisfaction with neoliberal changes to academic life, or the ways in which higher education has been rendered increasingly amenable to, if not indistinguishable from, commercial and financial markets.

These writings are activist insofar as they seek, explicitly or implicitly, to mobilize a collectivity or to catalyze institutional change. They pursue these ends in part by giving an account of the kind of thing that higher education is right now—what configuration of persons, practices, moneys, attitudes, affects, and technologies. Considered as both acts of information and of rhetoric, activist-academic writings, I would argue, offer counter-examples to the rebuke of scholarly “critique” proffered recently by, say, Bruno Latour, or Sha-

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Academic-activist reflexivity is occupied with revealing the unacknowledged circumstances that determine knowledge production—yet it does so with an expectation of helping to materially transform those circumstances. Its flexible decorum and range of media imply that higher education’s archive of self-awareness is in effect constructing something new—new and still inchoate collective subjects of address. This archive is pluralizing and expanding what we talk about, and who we talk to, when we talk about higher ed.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” remains the most powerful challenge to scholars’ apparent faith in the efficacy of critical knowledge. This famous essay is, among other things, a call for the tactical analysis of how knowledge empowers the particular communities we belong to, or fails to empower them. The queries Sedgwick posed deserve to be asked anew: “What does knowledge do—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and

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effects?“⁹ The recent wave of activist-academic self-articulations, in which Aranye’s writings participate, moves toward what seem to me the right sorts of answers to Sedgwick’s questions: answers that are local, affective, provisional, and tactical. In a climate of generalized crisis, these speech-acts speculatively address new constituencies for higher education.

I want to close by thanking Aranye for the intellectual provisions that her thought and work have been, sustaining victuals for the task of thinking—and to thank her for that self-aware provisionality that acts to hold her works open to new readers and new futures. I also want to express my support for the project of activist-academic writing in which her most recent work participates, and the new and newly mobilized communities of higher education that the discourse promises to constitute.

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