Siting Futurity

Susan Ingram

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Preface

This project was decisively shaped by the experience of thinking about the distance between Vienna and the York University Senate Chamber in Toronto. Austrian Airlines used to run a wonderful direct flight between the two cities, and the proximity of York to Toronto’s Lester B. Pearson Airport meant that it was a relatively comfortable overnight experience after an early afternoon class. That distance was much further for the undergraduate students who, during the longest strike in Anglo-Canadian academic history — the 2018 CUPE 3903 strike, spent over two months in York’s Senate Chamber in support of the precarious teaching force that delivers at least half of their classes.¹ For many at York, Vienna exists rather nebulously and for the most part only discursively, in so far as they encounter it in class or on a screen. My attempt here is to elucidate and build on the connections I see between these two spaces, which are two of the most profoundly charged and potentially progressive po-

¹ The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is Canada’s largest union and represents nearly three-quarters of a million workers in such crucial areas as education, health care, social services, and transportation. CUPE 3903 represents nearly three thousand precarious education workers: teaching, graduate, and research assistants as well as contract faculty. That it is the largest union at York is indicative of the high percentage of teaching done by non-tenure-track faculty.
political spaces I have encountered, spaces which provide answers to the urgent issues of unthinking sovereignty and practicing collectivity in the face of increasingly ingrained neoliberal intransigence.²

The 2018 CUPE strike was a marked departure from previous York strikes in the Employer’s intransigence and usurping of the power of Senate, the body where academic governance is mandated to happen by the York Act. Senate Executive mandated that the university remain open during the strike, a decision that created all manner of havoc and that was condemned in a series of hortative motions on the part of many of the university’s academic units. The blatant insistence on running a “business-as-usual” regime, which involved an authoritarian takeover of the purportedly “public” news spaces of university representation, such as York’s campus newsletter, the Y-File, and the screens located all over campus, had created an atmosphere in which undergraduate students had felt it necessary to take some kind of action to voice their protest. After a shockingly violent Senate meeting in March 2018, when a student senator was brutally barred from entering the Chamber by private security hired by the administration, a group of students decided not to leave until a list of demands had been met. They established an impressive social media presence and quickly shifted from calling themselves an “occupation” to a “reclamation” as those among them with affiliations with First Nations felt uncomfortable siding with occupiers, while reclaiming land in the aftermath of the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline resonated more with them.

On August 9, 2018, the day after CUPE 3903 formally dropped their unfair labor practice suit against York and less than three weeks after the union had been ordered back to work by the newly elected conservative government of Doug Ford, five union members (all PhD students) and three undergraduate members of RECLAIM YorkU, all of whom had been highly vis-

² Matt Hern offers a good summary of these issues in Chapter 4, “The Kindness of Neighbors” of What a City Is For (Hern 2016).
ible during the strike on social media, were singled out by the university and charged with complaints regarding the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities. The students responded by establishing a Twitter handle (@8Defend), a Facebook presence, and a website, “Defend Student Activists at York U!,” where statements of support, a petition, a “GoFundMe” campaign, and information about events could be accessed. The five PhD union members were then confronted with a lengthy, punitive tribunal process controlled at every level by the administration, something they took the university to court over. On June 18, 2019, the Ontario Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students and quashed the sanctions that the tribunal had tried to impose on them, finding that York did not have jurisdiction to use the student code to discipline student-employees for actions related to their employment and that their rights to procedural fairness and natural justice had been violated in the process of the tribunal.

The three goals for this project come from the experience of the 2018 CUPE strike and its aftermath. My first goal is to provide “a guide for navigating the distrust and loneliness of capitalism” (@antalalakam, Aug 21, 2018). One of the Reclamationists underscored the need for such a thing in a tweet during the traumatizing remediation period that followed the end of the strike as the Employer implemented punitive policies to make the lives of the first- and second-year CUPE graduate students, who had held out against them, as difficult and uncertain as possible. Given Boltanski and Chiapello’s assessment over a decade ago of “virtual stagnation when it comes to establishing mechanisms capable of controlling the new forms of capitalism and reducing their devastating effects” (2007, xvi), and the perceived need for what Émile Durkheim called “collective effervescence;” that is, “the energy that people share when they’re bound together by a common focus, especially if it includes some challenge” (Mann 2018), it seems more important than ever for academic work to function as this kind of guide.

My second goal comes from my work in Urban Studies and is a response to Matt Hern’s important question in What a City
Is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement. Hern asks “how to establish solidarity across difference when our shared histories are so dominated by violent violations of trust?” (Hern 2016, 98–99), and his answer, which motivates his methodology of talking to as many people involved in the area he is working on as possible, is “to find ways to enact trustworthiness repeatedly and deliberately and consistently” (ibid., 99). As I share Hern’s love of the idea of thinking and acting “a material commonality” and “radically abandon[ing] the ‘law of scarcity’” (ibid., 99), I too went looking for “some inspirations, some new ideas in action, where imagination meets struggle” (ibid., 100). Unlike Hern, whose focus on new ideas leads him to ways to rethink “the city as postsovereign space” and “urban land beyond property” (ibid., 233), Vienna sprang to my mind as an apposite lens with which to focus on imaginative struggle in the context of urbanism.

This leads to my third goal: “to identify problems and topics that clearly communicate why the humanities matter in contemporary society” (Apter 2013, 5). I take this challenge from Emily Apter’s Against World Literature, a text I was looking forward to teaching in a seminar on Comparative and World Literature when the 2018 strike intervened. As an Anglophone comparatist at a Canadian university that only allowed a graduate diploma of Comparative Literature to be established when it was bundled together with a graduate diploma of World Literature, I am sympathetic to Emily Apter’s arguments against the increasing monolingual hegemony of World Literature, especially as David Damrosch and Martin Pichler have been institutionalizing it at Harvard with the formation of an annual world literature summer institute, on the one hand, and moocs (Massive Open Online Courses), on the other. This liberal retrenchment serves to fix “literature” in its eighteenth-century meaning of imaginative fiction by excluding the theoretical notions of écriture and textuality that have been hallmarks of Comparative Literature since that discipline helped to usher French theory into the North American academy in the 1970s. This retrenchment is part of the larger, dual backlash we are currently experiencing against
not only the humanities in general on the part of a threatened, Anglophonic, STEM-oriented society desperate for employment but also against “postmodern” theoretical orientations on the part of those in the humanities that seek protection against cutbacks by retrenching into an elitist, now neocolonial insistence on the type of education the humanities has traditionally provided for the formation of an educated citizenry dominated by primarily cis white males, for whom Jordan Peterson has become a patron saint. It would likely surprise both branches of this onslaught against “theory” that Vienna, of all places, would have something to offer in support of the type of scholarship that the Sokal hoaxes were intended to throw into disrepute.  

I consider it important to write about Vienna and its surroundings for a number of reasons, which I discuss in the introduction. Other places no doubt have similar histories that lend themselves to a similar kind of locational analysis. The fact that I am as unfamiliar with them as many of the Toronto-based faculty and students I encounter are with Vienna points to the need for this study. Here I take my cues from two studies I greatly admire. Just as Boltanski and Chiapello defend the “limited scope of [their] analyses, restricted to France” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, xxi) as “a manageable level” that prevents globalization from being presented “as the ‘inevitable’ outcome of ‘forces’ external to human agency” (ibid.), so too is my limited scope

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3 The first Sokal hoax was perpetrated by Alan Sokal, a physics professor at NYU, who in 1996 submitted an article to Social Text entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” which he had written as a parody of what he considered to be the style of postmodern cultural studies to see whether it would be published (Sokal 1996). In 2017, a group of academics concerned with eroding criteria for academic publications conducted a similar experiment, submitting bogus articles with non-existent authors to journals in cultural, queer, gender, fat and sexuality studies, some of which were accepted for publication, and in one case even awarded. The scandal became known as “Sokal Squared.”

4 Vancouver and Hong Kong are two such places that, because of the vagaries of my rather peripatetic experience, I know lend themselves to such analysis. There are no doubt others.
intended to support my study’s goals. I also share Claire Bishop’s not unrelated skepticism about the “the world is my oyster” approach, in which authors attempt to gain an omniscient overview of practice globally” (Bishop qtd. in Eschenburg 2014, 177). Moreover, just as Boltanski and Chiapello hoped “that future work, with a similar methodological approach, will make it possible to enrich a fine-grained vision of the way in which, under the impact of local variables, new constraints have been established that local economic and political actors can, in all good faith, have a sense of being subjected to from without, as if they were forces that it was difficult — even impossible — for them to oppose” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, xxi–xxii), it is my ardent hope to initiate a discussion that demonstrates the importance of humanities-based academic work for the sustenance of equitable societies worth fleeing to and that helps to make available further material for countering the political forces gaining momentum that are bent on turning those societies into exclusive, hierarchized places of masters and servants.

Special Thanks

It is very important to me that this book is appearing with punc-tum books, an independent, open-access publisher that prides itself on operating in the same radical spirit as the material I deal with here, and I am very grateful to Vincent and his team for the great expertise and care with which they made this volume a reality. Because its point is to offer an updating of what is known about Vienna in English on the basis of little known, and often hard to access, material, the original German has always been included together with an accompanying translation, which unless otherwise indicated, is mine. Most of the chapters are based on material presented at conferences that was later expanded on for publication. My heartfelt thanks also goes to all the organizers that made these sessions and projects possible. Without the important feedback I received during these processes, my work would not have taken on whatever nuance it has. How this core material has been refocused and developed
to draw attention to how it illustrates my argument here about locationality is acknowledged in each chapter.

Finally, as in all my work I am profoundly grateful to the Reisenleitners, through whose eyes and hearts I have had the immense privilege of seeing and experiencing Vienna over the past two decades. I dedicate this book to them and especially to Hardy, who sadly is no longer among us to see it in print, but whose warm, unconditionally supportive presence and keenly historical aesthetic sensibility remain in his subtle photography just as they do in the fond memories of many I am proud to know.