

## Part One: Foundations and the Proliferation of Contract

By Karen Gregory

Part Two, on the social logic of the derivative and the role of the digital, will be posted tomorrow.

First, I would like to say thank you to all the forum participants—Angela Mitropoulos, Robin James, Anne Boyer, Constantina Zavitsanos, Patricia Clough, Aren Aizura, and Mark Gawne. You really outdid yourself in this series of incredible posts, which taken together give a reader of *Contract and Contagion* much to consider and think through. Thank you for your time, your energy, and your willingness to write in public. I know that many of us, as students, researchers, scholars, writers, and readers, appreciate this willingness and are grateful to be able to learn from one another in such a format. In the same vein, many thanks to Angela for her willingness to participate in the forum and for writing *Contract and Contagion*. It never fails to impress me how much generosity goes into academic work. This forum was made possible by the very kind of unpaid and often overlooked labor that its writing seeks to address; yet, I hope, in coming together through this writing we are finding and creating a necessary space for thought and questioning. Each post this week had me wondering what might be possible in our own lives and as educators if we not only turned to one another actively to reject the exploitation of our generosity—and demand access to the contract and the wage—but if we also turned toward one another actively to create, as Anne suggested, something more like “leaky mega-oikos, contagious with care, ready for riot.”

I’m very aware that working collectively and “online” or digitally in no way puts us beyond the politics of measure that surveil and often determine the very shape and content of academics, yet at the same time I have been curious to find ways to work collaboratively on projects that draw our academic attention to the notion that “we are how we live.” In a time when the university feels like failure all around, forums like this are an attempt to connect more gently to the work many of us desire to do. Posing the question to faculty, I’ve asked what [“takes care of you”](#) in this moment of academic precarity/expansion, and each of the forum posts this week has raised for me the question of how we might imagine our labor, not to seek new foundations but rather to move toward the infrapolitical, or “promiscuous infrastructures,” as *Contract and Contagion* (as well as [Harney and Moten](#) ) points us toward. “Infrastructure,” writes Mitropoulos, “is neither the skilled virtuosity of the artisan, nor the regal damask, nor the Jacquard loom that replaced, reproduced and democratized them, but the weave” (118). Yet, in considering the weave, I am curious about how the digital and the algorithmic are being woven into life itself. Given that capital, as Nigel Thrift has written, wants to “run at the rate of life” and is continually seeking out what he’s called an “expressive infrastructure,” I wonder if we can rely on the “swerve” of contingency to remain uncaptured.<sup>[1]</sup> Still, what I take from *Contract and Contagion* is a deeply valuable reconfiguration of thought toward limits, ratios, and the power of excess to refuse the imposed futurity of foundation. *Contract and Contagion* is a wonderful, complex exploration of Western capital’s fight to control uncertainty—but it is also a beautiful reminder that nothing is ever completely within its control.

*Contingency Is the New Normal*

Many of us work in a social institution that seems to refuse the future: relying on short-term, precarious work arrangements; high turnover among both faculty and administrators; academic projects built to last merely a semester; and institutional investment seemingly in anything other than students and teachers. Yet at the same time, the University is an institution pressured to act as a reparative agent in the wake of economic “reskilling.” The tension between contingency and reparation is palatable, yet in many fantasies of the supposedly flexible, digital university to come (as well as the nostalgic fantasies of the meritocratic, pluralistic university) the university is imagined as a site of reinscribing lines of contract and mobility (or the transference of wealth). Much talk of the university is entangled in a sense that previously education served as a transformative link between the household or private family and the market (although we should certainly question the historical reality of that conceptualization, as Roderick Ferguson does in *The Reorder of Things*) or that it operated as a hedge against insecurity. This notion of a transformative link no longer exists, and we continually hear that this is because of a “broken social contract” between government, employers, and workers.

Superficially, it seems the University is in the throes of its own soul-searching for its social function, but while it wrestles with that, most of us have become downright exhausted by the question of which disciplines are dead, which are zombies or vampires, and which are the new promising babies of entrepreneurialism. Yet when looking through a lens of contractualism we can see that the University, far from being lost, operates within and through a proliferation of contracts—namely contracts of debt.<sup>[2]</sup> A jobs crisis has only exacerbated, for some, the need to go into debt for a degree and to become indebted to the University’s sociality. As *Contract and Contagion* shows us, crisis is always good for the project of recalibrating the “good” and “proper” foundation. As Mitropoulos writes: “The intimate performativity of contact and genealogical lines of *oikonomia* were, then, elaborated in the encounters with plagues” (48). This is why some calls for “access” to education are really attempts to inveigle more attentive (or hapless) eyes into an indebted arrangement.

If the very sociality of contract relations are predicated on a boundary-marking performance of exclusion, which marks those who can speak and be recognized and those who may not, then we might, as Anne and others are suggesting, embrace a radical refusal of contract through new alignments of care. This might entail a refusal of the University altogether. As Constantina writes, “fuck an equal brother and the estate.” When I read that, I thought of something someone said my first week of college: “*Here, for the next four years, men and women will be the most equal they will ever be.*” This was a tremendous lie, of course, but it did go a long way toward adhering to what Mitropoulos might call a “moral” affectivity of the project of liberal education—a state of equality can only be guaranteed by such an investment.

The University as it is currently organized is basically a glue trap left out overnight, tantalizing with the very promise of contract’s articulation. Signing on all the dotted lines (I agree to attend, to pay attention and dollars and “sense” to keep true to the project of articulation this signing entitles me to) is akin to getting caught in the very desire to speak or be recognized as an equal. This is no small desire. Furthermore, sociologically, the notion of college *as education* continues to position itself as the single most important mediator of economic “security.” The University is in the insurance business, even though it has never had to account for any of its policies. In spite of talk of broken social contracts, thinking through the University as an extension of *oikos*

is to see that the contract is not broken, as much as it is dispersed—or made derivative. The University has refoundationalized itself by bundling together the morality of contract with risk, debt, and speculation. What seems like contingency and chaos from one perspective is a lucrative ground from which to resituate the conservative law of the household, which states that contract must be valorized and the transmission of wealth made to feel necessary for life itself, while at the same time requiring the naturalization of indebtedness to the system. This is why we see, on the one hand, the expansion of higher education as a supposedly reparative agent while simultaneously we can have conversations about limiting the enrollment of graduate cohorts—all while the University itself “restructures” toward a more “productive” balance of future figureheads.

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[1] Nigel Thrift (2012) writes in his article “The Insubstantial Pageant: Producing an Untoward Land”: What I have particularly tried to suggest is that the underlying model of what constitutes ‘econ omy’ is changing to what might be termed a ‘natural’ model. This is not a natural economy from which money has been banished. Rather, it is a natural economy because it resembles the process of terraforming in that it drives practices of worlding that are concerned with producing environments (or rather, as I have tried to make clear, proto-environments), which do not just provide support for a way of life in the way of infrastructure, but are a way of life: infrastructure cannot be separated out since it too has become expressive. In these worlds, every fibre of being is bent to producing landscapes that confirm each and every moment as what will happen. This is an econ-omy that has gone beyond ideology or hegemony in their stricter senses in that it is pre-emptive and makes its moves before the event has completely unfolded.

[2] While I’m sure little Louis will find his [“full college experience.”](#) it’s not without some irony that Gary Becker, the grandfather of human capital theory, has to urge his grandson to see the value in an education.

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