5 ACCOUNTING FOR INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Contesting Value in the Academy

If management teaches us to run things, where do we want to go and how should we organize ourselves to get there?

—Randy Martin, Under New Management

The university of the future will be inclusive of broad swaths of the population, actively engaged in the issues that concern them, relatively open to commercial influence, and fundamentally interdisciplinary in its approach to both teaching and research.

—“The University of the Future,” Nature

This chapter was originally written during my service as chair of the University of Arizona Strategic Planning and Budget Advisory Committee (SPBAC). A “shared governance” committee, including vice presidents, deans, staff, academic professionals, and student leaders as well as faculty (a majority of voting members), SPBAC is responsible for participating in institutional governance, primarily through the annual crafting of the five-year strategic plan, but also by providing budget advice, which generally means advice on how to handle relentless budget cuts. Identifying performance measures for both internal and external accountability is a routine part of the strategic planning process; in relation to the severe budget cuts imposed while I was chair, the stakes seemed to go up because the selected performance measures could, we committee members imagined, be used to make consequential decisions about which programs and departments should be cut more or even eliminated entirely. In this chapter, I explore the changing meaning and role of interdisciplinarity en route to a broader discussion of the impact of the complex and dynamic
demands for accounting and accountability and the possibilities for transformative engagement.

I undertook the original writing of this piece, amid the crazy busyness of the SPBAC chair job, in an effort to bring the critical tools available to me as a scholar to bear on the practices in which I was engaged, with which I was complicit. I hoped not only to work out a personal strategy for this participation—to figure out what to say in the next meeting—but also to help mobilize the broader discussion and engagement that might provide ballast for those of us who, in such roles, find our power as individuals to be severely limited. If I learned any one most important lesson from my participation, it is that without a faculty collective or movement to hold us accountable, the handful of faculty in “leadership” roles are quickly absorbed into the administrative team, working in alliance with the president, the provost, and their vices on behalf of the institution as entrepreneurial subject, all of us speaking and spoken by the dominant neoliberal discourse of university management. While a great deal of insightful scholarship has been published in the past few years in what has been called “critical university studies,” the need to develop a collective strategy of engagement and intervention remains urgent. Randy Martin (2011b, x) proposes that, rather than “take flight from the managerial imperative—assuming, of course, there is somewhere else to go, . . . [we] look inside this calculus and see how it might be figured otherwise.” Having inhabited “the calculus,” I share my experience here because I am persuaded that informed engagement is relevant not just for those few of us who “choose” administrative or shared governance roles but for many of us. As Eli Meyerhoff, Elizabeth Johnson, and Bruce Braun (2011, 493) put it, “Even radical faculty who seek to enact transformations outside the university find themselves performing within the university as managers not only of their own labor, but of that of their students and their colleagues.” And all of us need to be the social movement that keeps the pressure on our “leaders.”

The Business of Interdisciplinarity

“In science, interdisciplinarity is the way business is done.” Mike Cusanovich, former University of Arizona (UA) vice president for research, former interim provost, and then director of Arizona Research Labs, made this statement several years ago at an informal meeting.
called to discuss a possible conference on interdisciplinarity. What he meant most explicitly is that interdisciplinarity is the norm; as he later explained, “As a consequence of technology and the complexities of the problems scientists face, no one individual can have the necessary expertise to address the important questions” (personal communication). This view is affirmed by the editorial in *Nature* (2007, 949) quoted in this chapter’s second epigraph, which also asserts, “Many argue that in a host of areas—ranging from computational biology and materials science to pharmacology and climate science—much of the most important research is now interdisciplinary.” One might also read Cusanovich’s statement as having a second meaning: that interdisciplinarity is the way *business* is done. In the wake of the Bayh–Dole Act of 1980, which allowed universities to patent and become owners of intellectual property produced in the course of research funded by federal grants, and in the context of financial constraints that have led universities to eagerly seek new revenue sources, including those research grants, direct industry sponsorship of research, and income from the licensing of that intellectual property, interdisciplinarity has become an official priority at many research universities. But what is meant by interdisciplinarity in the context of university administrative discourse?

First, as Cusanovich suggests, interdisciplinarity means “collaboration” among scholars with different disciplinary training and expertise. But in administrative discourse it also means cross-sectoral collaboration between nonprofit universities and for-profit corporations. So, in working on UA’s Strategic Plan, I learned that local business and political leaders were explicitly enthusiastic about interdisciplinarity on the model of UA’s BIO5 Institute. The mission of BIO5, as stated on the institute’s website, is as follows:

BIO5 brings together scientists from five disciplines—agriculture, medicine, pharmacy, basic science and engineering—to treat disease, feed humanity and preserve livable environments. BIO5 creates science, industry and education partnerships to engage in leading-edge research, to translate innovations to the market and to inspire and train the next generation of scientists.

Here, interdisciplinarity does not only mean collaboration but also has a special relationship with “applied” research, where application is understood to occur through commodification: “BIO5 teams with the UA
Office of Technology Transfer to facilitate connections between researchers and industry that translate university research to the marketplace where it can directly and more quickly impact people.5

The strategic plans of several major public research universities similarly suggest that interdisciplinarity is a priority, that interdisciplinarity involves collaboration across fields but also across institutional sites and economic sectors, and that its purpose is to produce knowledge that can be commodified, often framed in terms of application to societal problems or challenges, not always quite so explicitly as translation to the market. For instance, one of four main sections of the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities’ Transforming the U for the 21st Century: Strategic Positioning Report to the Board of Regents (2007), titled “Exceptional Innovation,” is focused on interdisciplinarity. A sidebar in this section features a graphic that shows “disciplines” leading to “new knowledge,” intersected by “institutes,” with an arrow leading to “real world issues” (35).

Likewise, Purdue’s strategic plan, titled “New Synergies” (2008, 5), features interdisciplinarity as part of its overall vision statement: “Purdue University will set the pace for new interdisciplinary synergies that serve citizens worldwide with profound scientific, technological, social, and humanitarian impact on advancing societal prosperity and quality of life.”

While the issue of revenue is sometimes downplayed in the prose, it becomes clear in the performance measures associated with these strategic plans. For instance, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Academic Plan (2003) has six major “Priorities,” the second of which is “Further integrate interdisciplinary research, education and public service” (21). The Progress Report on the Academic Plan (2004) measured “funding generated by centrally supported interdisciplinary initiatives” (18).

My fantasy of interdisciplinarity—from my perspective as a cultural studies, women’s studies, queer studies scholar—far from being “the way business is done,” has always been “no business as usual” (meaning, “interdisciplinarity is the way capitalism is critiqued and disrupted”). And the ongoing downsizing and financial impoverishment of the humanities in general and, to some extent, our interdisciplinary fields (though the funding dynamics for women’s studies and ethnic studies are not the same as those for the traditional humanities disciplines) make it easy to believe that our work takes place at some
distance from the market, a belief affirmed in the groundbreaking research of Sheila Slaughter, with Larry Leslie in *Academic Capitalism* (1997) and with Gary Rhoades in *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (2004), which traces the shifts since the 1980s in resources (human and financial) across fields and institutional units according to proximity to the market (the spatial metaphor is theirs).

(No doubt you are already irritated by my reference to our work. I choose this term deliberately, although I am uncertain of the referent and will discuss differences among us shortly. I do so in order to invoke the sense of “us and them” that too often structures our relations with our science colleagues, a sense that I would suggest needs to be disrupted.)

Where, according to the strategic plans I have mentioned, practical application is identical with commodification, by contrast, it is precisely in the moment of claiming practical application that Stuart Hall (1990, 18), describing the imaginary of early cultural studies at Birmingham, notes—with what? regret? pride?—that distance from the market:

We tried, in our extremely marginal way up there on the eighth floor in the Arts Faculty Building, to think of ourselves as a tiny piece of a hegemonic

struggle. Just one tiny bit. We didn’t have the illusion we were where the
game really was. But we knew that the questions we were asking were of
central relevance to the questions through which hegemony is either estab-
lished or contested.

The fantasy that cultural studies is distant from the market has been
most famously challenged by Bill Readings. In *The University in Ruins*
(1996), he identifies “excellence,” a management discourse that circu-
lated widely in the academy in the 1990s and early 2000s, as a ration-
ale of bureaucratic accounting that is indifferent to particular cultural
content, concerned only with performance indicators that abstract from
and make equivalent (commensurable) any particular content. He ar-

gues that where the university once functioned to create a national
culture, it now supports globalization through this empty discourse
of excellence. And he argues that the institutionalization of cultural
studies, a field that he defines as coherent insofar as it exists to con-
test the centering of high national cultures, has been made possible
by excellence—the loss of any cultural center to contest—and in effect
subtends that discourse.

Whereas Readings clearly means for us to be scandalized by the re-
semblance between and participation of cultural studies and/in global-
ization, Ira Livingston, in his book *Between Science and Literature*
(2006), offers us a different possible response. Livingston notes that
new theories of nature developed in biology and physics—theories of
autopoiesis, of complex self-organizing systems—are often presented
in metaphors borrowed from and underwriting globalizing capitalism
(138–40). One might, and Livingston does, point out that the resem-
blance among contemporary conceptualizations of economic, biologi-
cal, and physical phenomena as complex, open, self-organizing systems
extends to the concepts produced by interdisciplinary humanities
scholarship, which has “increasingly recognized the interdependence
of identities . . . and . . . begun to treat them as emergent and internally
heterogeneous constellations in ongoing ecologies” (110). Livingston’s
argument suggests that we are “where the game really is” to a much
greater extent than Hall thought (or most of us feel—but we might
want to make a distinction between being “distant” from the market
and being in a failing business). But rather than trying to “restore the
sense of scandal” (138) regarding what is, Livingston asserts, an ir-
resistible epistemic shift toward a paradigm that sees both science and
capitalism as “participating in what they represent” (139), in which
“we come to recognize self-organization because we as a global species have attained it to some critical degree” (140), he proposes instead that we “argue about its terms” (141). And I propose that rather than get hung up on “complicity,” we extend his nonscandalized reaction to the recognition that interdisciplinarity is, after all, business as usual and forge ahead with our critical analysis and intervention.

In fact, we might need to recognize that our implication in the game implies responsibilities to actively take up the hegemonic struggle; we are not made innocent by our marginal location on the eighth floor of our local ivory tower. Livingston argues that being in the game is not the same as changing it: “The interrelationality and plurality of all formations are good places to start and ongoing axioms in an argument, not the payoffs of one” (110). Those payoffs, he says, “had better be sought in the creative and counterhegemonic possibilities of their pluralities and contradictions” (110).

Livingston’s approach itself resembles Marx’s argument in the “1857 Introduction” to the Grundrisse (discussed at length in chapter 1). There, Marx (1973, 104) seeks to explain the ability of Adam Smith to conceive of “labor in general” precisely by suggesting that the generalization has been achieved in reality:

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. . . . On the other side, this abstraction of labour . . . corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.

But then, Marx neither simply accepts the notion of labor in general as a natural empirical category nor rejects the notion of “abstract labor” because it has been enabled by capitalism itself. As I argued in chapter 1, Marx rejects the version of abstraction that involves stripping away history and specificity to identify a common core. Likewise, he rejects a version of empiricism that conceives of the concrete as “given [and] observable” in favor of a notion of “complex” or “differentiated” “unities,” which are a “rich totality of many determinations and relations” (Hall 2003, 129). The task then becomes a different kind of abstraction, the grasping of the “abstract determinations [that] lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought” (Hall 2003, 129). This methodology, which among other things enables the identification of contradictions, rather than interdisciplinarity per se (or
challenging national cultures), is the distinctive meaningful feature of cultural studies as a critical enterprise. As I have been arguing in various ways throughout this book, such critical abstraction provides a strategy for both understanding and intervening in the ways we do business and the ways we account for ourselves. But I am getting a bit ahead of myself.

University strategic plans, like the mission statement of BIO5, consistently claim that interdisciplinarity is meant to solve “societal grand challenges” (Purdue University 2008, 14). Bringing knowledge to market as private property is often presented as the only path by which knowledge can be “applied” in the “real world,” a cause for concern, especially but not only because much of the research behind this intellectual property is paid for by the federal government, and thus this commodification entails an enclosure of public goods; likewise, one might have concern regarding the faith, apparent in many of these projects and programs, that technology is, by itself, sufficient to solve these great problems. However, it is also worth noting the proliferation of programs related to the environment, sustainability, and climate change that explicitly bring together physical, biological, and social sciences, emphasizing the importance of “ecological, economic, and socio-cultural factors” to, for instance, “the complex problems of sustainability of arid lands.”

The claim that this work will feed the hungry, preserve the environment, improve health care, and so on suggests that our interdisciplinary science colleagues share some of the concerns of the scholars in interdisciplinary humanities/social science fields. That is, we too like to think that our work addresses “real-world issues” and great social problems, although (and this is no small difference) we tend to articulate those problems in terms of generative systems of meaning and power (gender, race, and so on) rather than the immediate empirical manifestations—poverty, illness, environmental degradation. On the other hand, at least one side of a debate within our fields values “translating” (or immediately producing) our knowledge for use in practices and policies to address precisely those empirical manifestations. I sometimes think that we may not have adequately explored potentials for alliance and collaboration, although the epistemological difference is a huge challenge to any collaboration. And while I acknowledge that it is hard to imagine (and, for some of us, to desire) “selling” our work...
for practical use, I note that the project of “translation” is not always obvious even in technoscience fields: the University of Arizona held a symposium on translational environmental research (TER), titled “Making the Connection,” that aimed to “build capacity” through, for instance, a session called “Paired Researcher and Stakeholder Point–Counterpoint: How Does TER Really Work?”

However, it has been not so much in attempts at translation or application as by virtue of our interdisciplinarity itself that some of us have imagined we might change the game, wanting to believe that our scholarly practice is itself a political practice insofar as transforming the structure of knowledge contributes to transforming the social hierarchies sustained by knowledge production. One of our central projects has been to show how social hierarchies are created and sustained through the interplay of economic, political, and social/cultural processes, describing, among other things, how the separation of those domains (and the division of knowledge production about them into distinct disciplines) works to naturalize those hierarchies.

Hall (1990, 12) casts the project of cultural studies as, originally, an attempt “to address the manifest break-up of traditional culture, especially traditional class cultures . . . [and] the fluidity and the undermining impact of the mass media.” He casts this set of concerns as directly opposed to the then-dominant perspective in the humanities: “The humanities . . . were conducted in the light, or in the wake, of the Arnoldian project. What they were handling in literary work and history were the histories and touchstones of the National culture, transmitted to a select number of people” (13). So, according to Hall, the initial project had to include the demystification of the disciplines, to show “the regulative nature and role the humanities were playing in relation to the national culture” (15). But then, in developing a positive agenda—the study of the “concept of culture,” “contemporary cultural forms,” “the political questions, the relationships, complex as they are, between culture and politics”—the cultural studies project involved not “a coalition of colleagues from different departments” but “a series of raids on other disciplinary terrains. Fending off what sociologists regarded sociology to be, we raided sociology. Fending off the defenders of the humanities tradition, we raided the humanities. We appropriated bits of anthropology while insisting that we were not in the humanistic anthropological project and so on” (16).

I do not, by the way, mean to suggest that interdisciplinarity in the
sciences is by contrast with “ours” merely “a coalition of colleagues from different departments” or that the scientific disciplines have not themselves been transformed. A quick review of the websites of various interdisciplinary scientific endeavors at my university suggests that they too entail politically significant transformations of the structure of knowledge and, implicitly, the social categories upheld by those knowledge structures. Meanwhile, although the notion that interdisciplinarity implies the transformation of disciplines and not merely collaboration between disciplines is central to some of “us,” “we” are riven by differences, including—but by no means limited to—the extent to which we are invested in a critique and transformation of the disciplines (not to mention the identities and social hierarchies that some of us think are upheld by the disciplines). It is no accident that I have, so far, located my argument in Stuart Hall. While I might, of course, have found scholars of women’s studies or ethnic studies or queer studies to cite on behalf of my fantasy of interdisciplinarity, I would feel truly presumptuous (or, rather, simply incorrect) making broad epistemological claims for women’s studies or ethnic studies. I experienced those differences between us as a practical constraint in one of my earlier university-level service projects:

During a previous bout of downsizing and reorganization, called Focused Excellence, the president and provost, for the most part, took it upon themselves to discern where to cut or invest; however, in four areas they put faculty committees to work to sort out what to do. Of the four, only the one I cochaired, the Cultural, Ethnic, Gender and Area Studies Study Team, was outside the sciences. (The CEGA Team, as we called it, included representatives from Mexican American studies, Latin American studies, American Indian studies, Middle East studies, Africana studies, and, in my body, both women’s studies and LGBT studies, plus a few others whose representational role was less clear.) And while the other three teams were meant to develop new interdisciplinary initiatives (and one did lay some of the ground for the BIO5 Institute discussed above), ours was, I have always assumed, meant to negotiate/neutralize politically difficult waters in the hope that we might voluntarily come forward with some sort of money-saving proposal for combining units.

Initially, I took the formation of the team to be an extraordinary opportunity. In my experience, the units represented on the team en-
gaged in notably little collaboration; the fact that we were going to have to work together seemed to open the possibility for moving beyond political and historical divides, such as that between area studies, rooted in Cold War government funding and still international in orientation, and U.S. ethnic studies, rooted in political struggles oriented to the nation-state, and—underwriting as well as crosscutting the others—the fundamental political and epistemological differences between those of us oriented toward applied social science and those with some combination of roots in the humanities, poststructuralism, and left/progressive political commitments. As our work proceeded, we were, in fact, able to support each other in practical ways, putting the whole team behind the requests of particular units for lines and other resources and engaging in crucial information sharing and strategizing vis-à-vis policies that would affect us all (though there were holdouts to the last). However, we failed to bridge or even create spaces for bridging the historical, political, and epistemological fault lines among the units.

We produced a principled thirty-page report full of specific proposals for simultaneously respecting the autonomy of and strengthening the individual units while building structures for collaboration such as interdisciplinary programs and centers. We tried to make audience-based arguments, articulating our proposals in terms of “excellence,” which we interpreted to mean being on the cutting edge intellectually, being nationally or internationally recognized (we especially emphasized our responsibilities as an Association of American Universities institution), and, of course, being fundable by foundations, government agencies, and private donors. (It is important to note that our interpretation attempted to shift the meaning of excellence away from the meaning Readings had identified and back toward traditional qualitative professional standards.) With a price tag of a mere two million dollars (one-twentieth the size of the proposals made by the science teams), ours was received as a doable modest proposal—until, nearly simultaneously with our receiving a very encouraging official response from the provost, the next round of budget cuts was announced. Adding insult to injury, at least from my perspective, while telling us that our proposals would have to be deferred to some future in which the budget would be better (i.e., never), the provost invited the CEGA Team to write itself into the margins of a health sciences funding request by adding some language about ethnic
and gender health disparities and the cultural competencies needed by health professionals.

The CEGA Team responded to this situation in several ways. First, we took up the invitation to supplement the health sciences funding request. Given that several of the units involved could benefit substantially were the request to be funded due to their own emphases on applied social science of health, there was no way to say no.

At the same time, we responded by making an array of astoundingly conservative arguments for the humanities (and I played a central role in crafting this particular memo). We argued that money should not be allowed to be the mission of the university, that we have an ethical responsibility to pursue an educational and scholarly mission and to find the money to do it; and we suggested that our mission could be articulated in terms of the national security concerns that were a hot issue both at the state level in the form of an anti-immigrant voter initiative and at the national level in the form of a reckoning with the “intelligence” failures that had enabled 9/11—I quoted Porter Goss, then nominee to head the CIA, regarding the necessity of training in languages and cultures. (Was it inevitable that in arguing for what I called in this context “humanities and humanistic social sciences,” I would simultaneously invoke nationalist arguments?) But at the same time, we tried to learn, really learn, that what is valued is money: we rebudgeted our proposals at twenty million dollars. And we got a commitment from the president that he would bring (some revised politically palatable version of) our proposal forward as a state budget request. This went nowhere, as such requests depend on support from the governor (then a Democrat dealing with a Republican legislature), and our governor, we were told, was unwilling to take even a politically sanitized version of our proposal to the Arizona legislature.

Our flailing around for arguments on behalf of our proposals (and the fact that we ultimately found that we were subject to a political arena) raises the larger issue: To whom are we accountable and in what terms?

Modes of Accountability

There are three modes of accountability that are relevant to those of us in interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies. First, professional accountability: the formal peer
review processes that determine publication, tenure and promotion, and honors and awards but also, more informally, the respect of colleagues, our reputations, the impact of our scholarship on others in our fields. Second, political accountability: to various degrees we hold ourselves accountable for the extent to which we are contributing to a political movement, creating knowledge that is useful for policy, will change lives, change the perspectives of our students or a larger public. And third, as I have already suggested, institutional and public accountability with regard to money and productivity, which takes the form of an array of performance and financial measures that shape the institutional conditions within which we seek professional and political achievement. A component of what has been called “the new public management” (see, e.g., Pollitt 1995; Lorenz 2012), the neoliberal governance technology that pushes state agencies to operate like private businesses, in fact privatizes government functions, and manages through measurement of outcomes rather than substantive direction, this third mode has gained institutional, state, and public prominence and for that reason has taken up increasing space in the consciousness of the faculty as well.

The tensions between the first two modes of accountability—professional and political—have garnered substantial attention within women’s studies and cultural studies.8 Responding to an array of “laments” bemoaning a greater emphasis on professionalization as against feminist activism, supposedly brought on by the very success of women’s studies in gaining institutional space and legitimacy, Robyn Wiegman (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2004) has taken up the issue across several important essays.9 Wiegman notes that the critiques of the institutionalization of women’s studies call for accountability to real women, a call often staged against theory (engagement with which is cast as professional co-optation). Wiegman argues that this demand for accountability produces epistemological constraints, temporal and spatial. Building on Jane Newman’s “The Present in Our Past: Presentism in the Genealogy of Feminism” (2002), Wiegman (2002b, 21) argues that the imperative to be accountable to the feminist movement requires that the measure of all knowledge be its present usefulness. This “presentism,” she argues, is enacted “in the figure of the live, suffering woman for whom academic feminism bears its guilty obligation of justice; in the rhetorical gesture toward the priority of discerning the materiality of the everyday; in the live encounter between researcher
and researched” (2002a, 13–14), which in turn has disciplinary implications, pushing us toward “humanistic and interpretative social scientific inquiry” (2002b, 29). (I would add that there is also a version of this political accountability that drives the field toward policy-ready quantitative social science.) And this in turn actually aligns our work with the “university’s own instrumentalization of identity,” which supports the efforts of the United States to “extend its imperial mission into a seemingly ethical globalizing human rights agenda (and with it various forms of economic ‘development’ . . .)” (2002b, 22). Likewise, she argues that “Women’s Studies’ own self-defined justification as the academic arm of the women’s movement can function as a territorial one, foreclosing in the present the interdisciplinary extension of feminist knowledge into domains that will have no obvious connection to the field’s self-narration (such as the sciences)” (2002a, 5).

Wiegman’s analysis leads her to make the case that women’s studies should pursue “a non-instrumentalized relation to knowledge production” (2002b, 33), that is, an argument for what we might call “basic science.” Such an argument is difficult to make even in the sciences these days. And despite the fact that I completely endorse the effort to pry open a space for “basic science,” I am—to the limited extent that I am able—undertaking an instrumental, present, and political project here. But in doing so, I suggest a definition and temporality for the political that contrasts with the one Wiegman finds so constraining: rather than accountability to a (nostalgically remembered) political movement imagined to be by definition representational, one that would tie us to social scientific study of the live suffering woman now, this notion of the political is about ongoing struggle, requiring us, holding us accountable, to bring to bear an analysis on the conditions in which we find ourselves in order to shape effective intervention;11 our strategies—representational, methodological, disciplinary—would be contingent on our informed assessment of those conditions.

In noting the implication of our work in U.S. imperialism, Wiegman implicitly directs our attention beyond the tension between professionalization and political engagement. While she mentions the engagement of women’s studies with “the broader institutional demands about accountability and ‘excellence’ ” (2002b, 19) as one of the provocations for the laments over professionalization, I think we might take it as a provocation to political struggle. With that in mind, I want to begin to explore the demands for accountability in somewhat more detail so we might start to plot a critical intervention in the accounting of our work.
First, it is crucial to recognize the enormous number and diversity of particular sets of metrics to which any given university finds itself accountable: data about the University of Arizona are collected by the federal government (the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System established by the National Center for Education Statistics),\textsuperscript{12} the College Board (the Common Data Set),\textsuperscript{13} the state governor’s office, the Arizona Board of Regents, and accrediting bodies for the university as a whole and for individual programs. And then, of course, there are the various purveyors of university rankings. While the most notorious of these is the \textit{U.S. News & World Report} ranking system, always criticized for being largely based on reputation, others, thought to be more legitimate because based on quantifiable data, have gained currency: the National Research Council (NRC 2011) produced an “assessment” of doctoral programs based on the application of complex algorithms to an extensive set of data collected from participating institutions,\textsuperscript{14} and the Center for Measuring University Performance produces a ranking of “the top American research universities” based on nine factors (informally referred to as the Lombardi measures):

- Total research expenditures
- Federal research expenditures
- Endowment assets
- Annual giving
- National Academy members
- Faculty awards in the arts, humanities, science, engineering, and health
- Doctorates awarded
- Postdoctoral appointees
- SAT scores

In response to the threat of a federally mandated regime of accountability that seemed a clear and present danger in the context of the Department of Education, as led by George W. Bush’s secretary of education, Margaret Spellings—something that would go beyond the existing data collection to a more public, comparative, and potentially consequential collection, analysis, and presentation of data, including, most importantly, some standardized mode of “learning outcomes assessment”\textsuperscript{15}—the organizations of universities began to generate their own voluntary rubrics. These include the Voluntary System of Accountability,\textsuperscript{16} which requires use of one or another of the recently developed and more or less palatable measures of the quality of undergraduate education, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (a test of critical reading and writing) and the National Survey of Student
Engagement (not a test but rather a survey that asks students the extent to which their experiences have included certain activities and practices that are educational “best practices”).

The values that are embodied in these various sets of measures differ from each other; and, in fact, one can discern a tension that parallels the tension between professional and political accountability for individual faculty members. In this context, political accountability is not an individually generated sense of obligation but a direct imposition. Federal and state governments and the governing boards have articulated the mission of higher education principally in terms of national economic competitiveness and economic development. So “key indicators” in the Arizona Board of Regents’ “2020 Vision” system-wide strategic plan, which was developed initially to implement and elaborate a long-gone governor’s pledge to double the number of bachelor’s degrees produced by the state’s universities annually by 2020, include the following: number of degrees awarded (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral, with the explicit rationale that those with degrees have higher lifetime earnings and are potentially attractive to high-tech employers), “degrees awarded in high demand fields” (which generally means science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM, and health care, though this measure was not immediately defined), technology transfer (measured by “invention disclosures transacted”), “research expenditures,” “impact of community engagement activities” (also not quickly defined), and “total income and expenditures related to service and engagement activities.” These last three all assume that the expenditures employ people and buy things and thus multiply as they trickle out into the local economy. Although it is not one of Arizona’s “key indicators,” the value of research is often measured in terms of “return on investment,” meaning either this multiplier effect or more specifically the extent to which dollars invested by the state leverage federal or industry dollars. If large dollar numbers are better in the various research metrics, small dollar numbers are better with regard to educational activities. Accessibility, affordability, and efficiency are central in this context, thus this plan measures community college transfers and degrees awarded to community college transfers (it is cheaper to let the community colleges provide the first two years of credits toward the bachelor’s degree); number of bachelor’s degrees awarded per hundred full-time-equivalent students (a time-to-degree measure, since, again, faster is cheaper); total educational expenditures.
per degree awarded; and cost of attendance as a percentage of Arizona median family income. Finally, the plan measures the institution’s “financial health,” using the “comprehensive financial index,” calculated from four financial ratios based on the university’s audited financial statements: primary reserve ratio, viability ratio, return on net assets ratio, and net operating revenues ratio.

Meanwhile, university administrators, like faculty, are concerned with their standing among peers and thus with rankings and the measures that contribute to the rankings they value; so, for instance, when discussing what measures should be included in our strategic plan, our president inevitably suggests starting with the Lombardi measures, which, it is important to note, place very high value on funded research and faculty accomplishments by contrast with the measures related to undergraduate education that are the focus for the various governments and governing boards. In this context, National Science Foundation rankings of universities by research expenditures often trump all other measures. The conflict between the values of administrators and those of political actors was evident as I observed a monumental battle waged by our administration to have “research”—or, more accurately, “research expenditures”—be included in a meaningful way in the Arizona Board of Regents’ system-wide strategic plan. Their efforts were motivated by the assumption that these measures would be integrated into a funding formula and would thus have financial implications.

But really, what is the impact of all this accounting and accountability?

As Michael Power has argued in *The Audit Society* (1997), auditing, which might be understood as the incitement to and evaluation of accountings, can fail in two opposite ways: it can distort the substantive activity of an organization (and it might depend on one’s political perspective whether changes to the substantive activity constitute distortion or improvement), or the encounter over the accounts can take place in a kind of administrative shell at the surface of the organization that actually shields the daily work of most participants. In some ways it is clear that both of those things happen at the University of Arizona: a great deal of the strategic planning and measuring ultimately turns out to be a performance of management by the administration for the Board of Regents and other publics that have little impact on day-to-day life inside the institution, except for the drain of resources into that performance. On the other hand, the ongoing and ever-redoubled
accounting efforts do insinuate themselves in various ways. Shore and Wright (2000, but see also 2004), in a Foucauldian argument drawing on Power’s work, emphasize the shift from superficial performances of accounting to more meaningful subjectification of the institution as a whole, as it creates new procedures—record-keeping and control systems—to make itself an “auditable commodity” (72), and of the individuals within the institution, as they respond to the new panoptic technologies by “freely” regulating their own conduct to meet the measured goals (62). On the other hand, the incoherent proliferation of divergent sets of measures must undermine any intended disciplinary effectivity for both institutions and individuals, as I learned through my own efforts to govern by measurement:

When I started as a member of the University of Arizona Strategic Planning and Budget Advisory Committee, I immediately joined the “measures committee” and was struck by the disconnect between the regimes of accountability that I was familiar with as a faculty member—annual performance reviews, tenure and promotion reviews, student course evaluations—and the measures that we were discussing as the possible ways to evaluate the university as a whole. That is, none of the information that we all submitted in the form of CVs and narratives about our accomplishments served as usable data to be assessed cumulatively for the university as a whole—we simply had no mechanism for doing so; faculty CVs were not entered into a database for sorting and counting in any way. In some ways I was appalled and in others relieved to find that the regime of accountability was unable to see the real work of the faculty, that it was to a large extent irrational and ineffectual. We would measure those things for which we had data, for which we could show progress—not the things that mattered in relation to our stated mission and goals. Whether I was more appalled or more relieved in a given moment depended on who was to be held accountable: I wanted meaningful measures to hold the whole institution accountable for making progress on diversifying the faculty; and I wanted resource allocation to be made on some basis other than cronyism or mistaken prejudices about productivity and financial return on investment (for instance, good financial accounting can sometimes counteract the assumption that big-science indirect cost recovery subsidizes the rest of the university and show instead that big science is subsidized by other revenue sources, such
as tuition). As one colleague put it, decisions based on data are an improvement over the “faith-based” decision making promoted by the George W. Bush administration.

As chair of SPBAC, I found myself trying to close the gaps between what faculty actually do and what is measured, between what we as an institution say we intend to do and what is measured. At the request of our new provost, SPBAC undertook a project that aimed to select a “robust” set of measures, such that we could measure every single goal in the strategic plan and reframe each goal as a numerical target (although even the provost understood, as I had come to understand, that measuring can be an enormously expensive undertaking, primarily in personnel time, and that the value of each new metric had to be weighed against the cost). Frustrated again and again by the lack of data to support measures of the things we claimed to value, and even though I knew better, I proposed that faculty submit at least portions of their annual performance reviews online so that the information could be dumped into a database that the university could then draw on to find out, for instance, how much “public service” our faculty do (we are a land-grant institution after all) or, as an indicator of “interdisciplinarity,” how many joint and affiliate appointments our faculty have or how many are participating in grants with co–principal investigators from different departments. On the theory that what is counted is what counts, I found myself advocating for certain problematic measures simply as placeholders, as stakes in the ground for the significance of the objects imperfectly measured: so, desperate for some measure of teaching quality, against the better judgment of faculty colleagues and ultimately unsuccessfully, I proposed that we use teacher/course evaluation data. And specifically in order to preserve some of the professional power of faculty against the power of administrative management, in selecting measures, I advocated for a publications and citations measure because it refers back to peer evaluation, even though the most established publications and citations database uses only selected journals (not books) as its raw data and so undercounts in “book” fields while missing entirely the output of our colleagues in fine arts. No doubt, the commonly used measures stack things in favor of certain fields.

My sense that the institutional and state-mandated measures fail to see us, or at least fail to see us as we see ourselves, fail to value what we
value, registers the discrepancy between that regime of accountability (incoherent and contradictory as it is) and the professional and political modes of accountability that are still more primary for most of us. The disjuncture can make these newer measures feel impactful when deployed inside the institution, frightening in their potential to shift resources; and thus they gain our attention, forcing us to seek ways to defend ourselves in their terms. Sheer quantities of research dollars, student credit hours, or degrees produced can become local-level measures used to rate the productivity or “cost-efficiency” of departments or degree programs against each other. At the University of Arizona, the data collected for the new NRC rankings of doctoral programs were deployed (in conjunction with narrative self-evaluation and justification) for a review of all UA graduate programs, with an eye toward the potential elimination of programs that fared poorly in this assessment (rumor had it that a similarly consequential assessment took place at Ohio State University). And the emphasis on financial accountability likewise can be rolled down—many universities, including UA, now use some form of what is called “responsibility-centered management” or “responsibility-based budgeting,” which, despite its name (suggesting that money would be distributed based on “responsibility”—that is, role in fulfilling the mission), starts with an accounting of who is bringing in money and only then taxes this income so as to redistribute resources to subsidize units perceived to be important but not adequately revenue generating, such as the library.

As I have already illustrated in the CEGA Team story, this regime of accountability exacerbates existing differences—between “us” and the “sciences” and among us, between those whose work is visible in a given accounting scheme and those who appear unproductive by those measures, between those who produce research expenditures or commodifiable knowledge products and those who produce student credit hours and degrees (most often not the same scholars or academic units, though there is the occasional “double threat,” such as the Psychology Department at UA, which brings in very substantial research dollars and provides vast quantities of undergraduate instruction). What began to seem obvious was that the only way the CEGA Team might have made a case for anything beyond fundable applied social science of health research (the one area of cultural, ethnic, gender, and area studies that registers in terms of research expenditures) would have been to claim that we would be increasing the efficiency and quantity
of undergraduate degree production, and even then it would have been a weak claim, since we neither offer degrees in STEM fields nor train health care providers. Our knowledge production quite literally does not count.

How should we respond to this situation?

As many have noted, the most common impulse of humanities (or, more broadly, qualitative or interpretive) scholars in response to quantitative accounting is to refuse, to claim that qualities cannot or should not be counted (see, for instance, Scobey 2009). Readings (1996, 127–28) argues against the counting of “credit hours” because “the complex time of thought is not exhaustively accountable.” Poovey (2001b, 12) proposes that the humanities should refuse commodification by refusing quantification, laying claim to goods that, she claims, are not quantifiable: “the goods of living culture, which embody and preserve human creativity.” Against counting, they tend to place a great deal of political optimism on qualitative or narrative accounts of the “singular”: “Singularity . . . recognizes the radical heterogeneity of individuals” (Readings 1996, 115). In discussing the evaluation of teaching quality, for instance, Readings suggests that in place of the usual course evaluations that ask students to rate various aspects of a course on a numerical scale, students should “be required to write evaluative essays that can themselves be read and that require further interpretation” (133). Readings offers this approach as a way of accepting the imperative to evaluation—“Those in the University are called upon to judge, and the administration will do it for them if they do not respond to the call” (130)—while “refus[ing] to equate accountability with accounting” (131).21

A less reactive, potentially more constructive version of this response has been developed using the postworkerist theorization of an “immeasurable” commons of human abilities and resources (for a useful set of critical engagements with this theory, see Dowling, Nunes, and Trott 2007). De Angelis and Harvie (2009, 4–5) helpfully summarize the argument (in order, then, to contest it):

It has been argued, most famously by Hardt and Negri in Empire, that the production of things—material objects that can be counted, weighed, measured—is no longer hegemonic. Capital has invaded every aspect of human lives and production is increasingly immaterial, producing information, affects (the increased capacities of bodies to act) and percepts. . . . the skills, know-how and attitudes of workers are (re)produced by the relational
practices learnt and re-learnt in the home, from uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers, mothers, fathers and lovers. Hence, cooperation is far more likely to be of a horizontal, rhizomatic nature, organised on the basis of networks, informal workgroups, peer-to-peer relationships, and even social ties, rather than directed by the boss standing at the apex of a hierarchy. The value produced by this labour is therefore “beyond measure,” because the immaterial living labour producing value is identified with “general social activity,” “a common power to act” that cannot be disciplined, regimented and structured by measuring devices such as clocks.

This theorization suggests that one might respond to the regimes of accounting and accountability not by a retreat into singularity but rather by resort to alternative spaces of collectivity, such as the space of “study.” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have evoked in the series of essays now collected as The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (2013). This vision of alternative collectivities is crucial. I propose that an alternative “we” might be constituted not beyond measurement but rather through its appropriation and transformation.

In the wake of my administrative engagements, I no longer feel comfortable with claims that “quality can’t be counted,” or that “what we do can’t be measured.” No doubt, my discomfort with these answers finds one of its sources in the immediate personal discomfort I felt when counting and measuring were demanded and what I wanted to do was to show that we measured up. That is, the refusal of accounting puts us in a rhetorically untenable situation; it can be dismissed as the arrogant sour grapes of those who do not measure up. Describing the closely related difficulty of defending scholarship that does not produce immediately applicable knowledge (knowledge that measures up by the appointed measures), Poovey (2001a, 420) says, “It is impossible to defend reviving the values that associate learning with curiosity and knowledge with freedom by any means that don’t seem self-serving or nostalgic.”

More important, the notion that qualities cannot be counted, quantified, commodified is wrong; commodification is a process through which qualitatively distinct products are made commensurable by being considered abstractly, as products of human labor according to Marx or as marginally useful (aka objects of demand) in neoclassical economic theory and thus exchangeable (for instance, human labor is made commensurable with money). Against the hopeful claims for immeasurability, De Angelis and Harvie point out that “an army of...
accountants, bureaucrats, political strategists and others is engaged in a struggle to commensurate heterogeneous concrete human activities on the basis of equal quantities of human labor in the abstract, that is, to link work and value” (2009, 5–6). They take academic labor as a perfect example of immaterial labor. Examining the array of creative technologies of data creation, assemblage, and analysis imposed in Britain (which is similar to what I have described here but far more centralized and coherent), they show that the immaterial can be successfully articulated with quantitative measures. However, they point out that subversive efforts such as “fabrication” and “mindless ‘tick-boxing’” (14) can stymie any regime of total managerial control, creating instead a “struggle over measure” (15). And thus, rather than effective total control, the crucial issue for them is the extent to which the measures establish norms of productivity to which workers and institutions then actively aspire (18). The important implication is that we cannot assume ahead of time any autochthonous collective resistance, even among those (the most of us) for whom subscribing to the norms, to the measures, will be the self-undermining effort of the entrepreneurial subject.

I propose struggling with measure not only because it is possible but also because that struggle responds to responsibilities and opportunities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003, 44–45) offers one of the most savage critiques of empiricist knowledge production: in the context of a critique of international “development” efforts aimed at women, she argues that the production of the “generalized name of ‘woman,’” which involves the suppression of “singularity in order to establish a ‘fact,’” works to “ensure predictability in the field of women” and to create a “common currency” that enables entities such as the United Nations and the World Bank to “operate in the field of gender.” Elsewhere she states, baldly, that “positivist empiricism” is “the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism” (Spivak 1999, 255). But she also encourages us to make use of this critique with some caution: “A just world must entail normalization; the promise of justice must attend . . . to the anguish that knowledge must suppress difference as well as difference, that a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other” (1999, 199). Spivak learns from Derrida that “responsible action” requires accounting, requires deploying the “calculus” of “accountable reason,” even while we
keep “always in view” that “if responsible action is fully formulated or justified within the system of the calculus, it cannot retain its accountability to the trace of the other” (1999, 427–28). Instead of replacing accounting with accountability as Readings suggests, we might supplement accounting with accountability, push accounting to its limits as we also stake a claim to goals, to values, not currently articulated within the regimes of accounting to which we are subject.

If Spivak invokes our responsibilities, our opportunities come into view through an analysis of the determinations constituting the current conjuncture. But it might be important to first recognize that the current conjuncture is not so different from previous conjunctures as we might imagine. While faculty may experience the new public management as an alarming development, invading their time and psyches—once upon a time, didn’t we faculty just go about our business, trying to get our research done and our classes taught, leaving it to our department heads to deal with bureaucratic reporting requirements and negotiations with deans for money and faculty positions? accountability is nothing new in the academy. Hoskin and Macve (1988) note in their narrative of “the genesis of accountability”—by which they mean the deployment in large corporations of integrated financial and performance measurement that ultimately makes humans calculable—that accountability got its start in medieval universities, where new techniques for “gridding” information “plus the use of the formal examination” were first developed. And then, Hoskin and Macve claim, nineteenth-century universities were the site of the next significant development with “the introduction of written examinations and mathematical marking systems” (37). They credit the development of managerial accounting systems in the United States largely to regimes implemented at West Point Military Academy (regimes modeled on the École Polytechnique), which included extensive marking and grading (sorting into hierarchies) not only of the students’ performance (45–49) and personal finances (49n12) but also those of the instructors (59). This history suggests that rather than ignore accounting to the extent that we can, inhabitants of universities are well positioned to impactfully engage the ongoing political struggle over accounting systems that are always in flux.

Taking up this opportunity in the current conjuncture, we might note, as Christopher Newfield does in Unmaking the Public University (2008), that while the higher education mission and the forms of accountability demanded by state actors are often articulated in terms
of expanding the availability of affordable education, in fact the driver has been an attempt to control the democratizing force of the expansion of higher education that took place between the end of World War II and the early 1970s. Newfield says that the “culture wars” attacks on universities of the 1970s–90s, which focused on so-called political correctness, affirmative action, and the introduction of “multicultural” content in both curriculum and research, worked in tandem with the discourse of market fundamentalism that gained dominance during the same period to delegitimate the whole notion of racial and economic equality, narrow the mission of universities to economic rather than general social and human development (thus specifically devaluing cultural as opposed to technical knowledge), and undermine the credibility of higher education (that is, the professional authority of the faculty). This enabled funding cuts—real reductions in resources for the middle class as the cost of education was shifted from the state to individual consumers of education in the form of tuition—and, I would add, opened the way for the relentless performance and financial auditing to which we are now subject (per Power and Shore and Wright, audit performs and extends mistrust; see Shore and Wright 2000, 77).

That is, Newfield suggests that the three forms of accountability I identified earlier—professional, political, and managerial—have been played off against each other, with political attacks, deployed to undermine professional credibility (and thus confidence in the existing systems of accountability, which depended substantially on qualitative peer evaluation), legitimating new modes of managerial and financial accountability that are a Trojan horse for a political project of privatization and exclusion. Recognizing the current regime of accountability as the not-inevitable outcome of struggle and strategy—a cultural-economic project—suggests that we too might intervene, manipulate the modes of accounting and accountability, appropriate for ourselves the interpellating power of quantitative representation, and reshape what counts and who gets to count.

What would this look like? One implicit suggestion in Newfield’s narrative is that we should/could reappropriate the demands for affordable, accessible higher education and for economic development. Rather than rejecting accounting per se, retreating to professional accountability, or holding ourselves accountable to an originary moment of identity-based social movement, we might engage in a broader contestation over the scope and goals of higher education by affirming
the democratizing and developmental goals our states and governing boards have articulated but holding them accountable to those goals in ways they did not necessarily intend or envision. And that is where I landed in an earlier version of this essay:

Trying to think through how to deal internally and externally with the impending budget cuts, a colleague proposed that in order to really galvanize ourselves to fight, we might need to abandon “craven” economic development arguments for more heartfelt arguments in support of the value of knowledge itself, noting that economic development is not really what moves us and that if all we are about is workforce development, that really could be done more cheaply. But he recognized the inevitable problems—we would come across as elitist, pompous, arrogant, and, in true academic form, would wind up wanting to surround our affirmation of knowledge with caveats about its link to power. In response I wrote the following:

I don’t think that an argument for the value of knowledge per se will get us anywhere in the present political moment. However, we might ask some questions/make some arguments about the definition and scope of “economic development”: If, for a moment, we accept the notion that economic development refers only to for-profit business development, we might still ask if technoscience knowledge is sufficient in itself to drive economic development. What range of knowledge, skills and personal attributes are necessary to invent a new product or service, one that will actually meet the needs and desires of humans in their cultural, social, psychological complexity and diversity, believe you can build a business around it, sell the idea to investors, gather, organize and manage the people needed to produce your great new thing, communicate what it is, how it works and why it is desirable to consumers . . .

And, is “economic development” a means or an end? If it is a means, providing the material basis for something more than itself (let’s say relationships with—pick your favorite—other people, the god of your choice, nature, arts, the wondrous new gadgets developed by other people who are doing “economic development,” etc.), then those other areas might need some attention from educational institutions as well.

Who is meant to benefit from “economic development”? Is this about a few entrepreneurs making fortunes, while everyone else is a low-paid cog in the machine? At the national level, we’ve been hearing a lot about access and affordability regarding higher ed. Shouldn’t we be holding our elected officials accountable on this front? (The rhetoric has been about holding the universities accountable, but the politicians must be held to account as well.)
And, I would ask the question deferred above: Are for-profit corporations the only kind of activity/organization needed for economic development, or might we need expertise in public policy, social service provision, education itself? That is, might economic development mean more than business development? While our legislative leaders don’t care about any of this—they seem quite explicitly committed to reducing access to education (and the political and economic power that comes with it), preferring to incarcerate those that, if educated, might threaten them—a broader public might actually care.

But I was never entirely comfortable with that as an ending or as a strategy. Rather than answering my colleague’s question about how to galvanize us, I spoke from inside the political constraints of the moment, letting those constraints limit my own imagination of the speakable to a liberal humanism that erases meaningful conflicts and contradictions (though those are signaled at the end by my reference to incarceration). It has always struck me as more symptom than solution.

Writing my way through this book has made some other thoughts possible, though every one has dangers and impurities. For instance, we might start by taking the idea of pushing accounting to and beyond its limits quite literally. On one hand, as I suggested in chapter 4, knowledgeable intervention in the “bad science” that simply reproduces existing social categories and hierarchies is a first step. I have mentioned above that, as Newfield (2008, esp. chaps. 12 and 13) has shown, good financial accounting can counteract our assumptions about who is really responsible for various costs and revenues. Similarly, a national study of higher education finance demonstrated that in contrast to the presumptions underlying the public outcry over the rising costs of higher education, in fact costs have remained remarkably stable (especially at public institutions)—tuition has gone up because states have shifted the burden of those costs onto individual students (Wellman et al. 2008). And as the study I discussed at the end of chapter 2 regarding the impact of diminished financial aid on student engagement suggests, accountings can be (though they most often are not) designed to reveal social conflict and contradiction.

Recognizing the interpellating power of numerical representations, discussed in chapter 4, the possible creation of social accountings raises the question of how and whether we might take the risk of deploying such accounts, not to fetishize, to provoke fear or some condescending sympathy regarding a crisis experienced by others, but rather to
galvanize us, as my colleague suggested. Moving beyond interrupting bad science and the lone acts of subversion that De Angelis and Harvie describe, we might engage in collective “struggles over measure” to demand that the best, most creative sciences of measurement be brought to bear to count the things that we think ought to count. As nothing seems “beyond measure” for capital, we might appropriate such creativity toward different ends.

Both Newfield and Martin have put substantial effort into envisioning transformative engagements with (rather than rejections of) accounting and accountability. One component of their interventions takes as its premise that our problem is not so much that our products have been commodified as that they have failed as commodities. We invest in producing, but the product does not sell—the market for our knowledge is relatively small—one might even say that, in this historical context, it has little socially recognized use value; without use value, no exchange occurs, and the product does not become commensurable with other valuable commodities, with money.\(^23\) Reacting against the typical “humanities” responses described above, Newfield and Martin have both suggested that the substance of knowledge production and dissemination in the humanities needs to be renovated; it needs to integrate strategies developed at its interdisciplinary cutting edges that reconsider objects, methods, and audience, so as to produce in a way that has impact, that has value (by some measure, if not the existing measures). Newfield (2008, 147) argues that literary studies (and other humanities fields) have partially accepted “the ‘market’ as the arbitrator of the shape of the profession” insofar as they have accepted as fact reduced demand for their products (primarily publications, especially books, and Ph.D.s, which is to say professors). However, he points out that they have failed to learn the other half of “the lesson of business,” which is “how to manage markets—how to discover hidden demands, how to create demand for products one thinks are important, how to adapt the market to one’s output, how to subordinate markets to the needs of one’s ‘customers,’ not to mention the wider society” (148–49). He suggests that humanities fields and literary studies in particular might have but did not reposition themselves to be and be seen as socially relevant (145).

In “Taking an Administrative Turn,” Martin (2011a) radicalizes and elaborates this vision. Calling for “a different charge for the humanities as well as a more steadfast engagement with the administrative
decisions” (156)—and apparently taking the hint from Livingston or Marx—he appropriates the complicity of interdisciplinarity with capitalism, pointing to the similarity between interdisciplinarity and financial derivatives. Financial derivatives (but also derivative products in other fields, in the arts for instance) involve “a transmission of some value from a source to something else” (158); invented as a risk management tool, a way to hedge against unknown future price fluctuations, a financial derivative is a contract that references some set of goods or assets—by, for instance, insuring (or betting on) their future price—but generally does not exchange or use those goods directly. So the number of derivatives relative to any commodity is potentially limitless, and derivatives become mobile, commensurable, exchangeable financial instruments in themselves. Likewise, Martin says,

interdisciplinarity has certainly become expansive, even obligatory, over the past decades as a way of enhancing flexibility and embracing risk. . . . But what if the relation is more than metaphorical, what if the derivative displays a social logic—by no means exclusive of all modes of reason or exhaustive of every approach to explanation—that discloses the very sociality by which the value of our labors might be more fully recognized and placed in circulation? (159)

Against the claims for the intrinsic value of humanities objects and scholarship, Martin advocates instead for critical interdisciplinary studies that—in an echo of Stuart Hall’s (1990, 16) suggestion that we conduct “a series of raids on other disciplinary terrains”—derive value from multiple elsewheres. These interdisciplinary studies would, like financial derivatives, be valuable as sites of “engagement, affiliation, activism, and organizing,” as technologies of abstraction that enable us “to recognize ways in which the concrete particularities, the specific engagements, commitments, and interventions we tender and expend might be interconnected” (159), to see “the value of our work in the midst of volatility” (160), and to engage “the future not simply as contingent, uncertain, or indeterminate but also as actionable in the present” (160).24

Brilliantly claiming the liquidity of the financier on behalf of critical knowledge production, Martin’s vision is savvy and inspiring. And it addresses many of the issues I have raised across this book: it proposes to intervene directly in the articulation of abstraction and particularity, and in the social processes of value formation, rather than accepting fetishes produced by those processes. Moreover, engagement, affiliation,
interconnection, and organization are most certainly measurable, if we have a will to measure them. While universities employ extraordinarily sophisticated quantitative researchers in their institutional research offices, these researchers are rarely asked or allowed to do anything beyond simple counting—they are kept too busy assembling data and responding to various governmental demands by putting the best face (graph) on the institution to actually analyze anything. So, in our strategic planning process, when I proposed that we measure interdisciplinarity through a social network analysis that would map (in one of those now-familiar spiderweb-type graphs) and count meaningful inter/connections (such as faculty members’ service on graduate committees beyond their own departments or as co-principal investigators on grants outside their home units), this was rejected as too difficult. But it might have been worth struggling harder, as I suspect that we would do very well in such a measure. Similar techniques would be useful in making visible the impact of our work in relation to “real-world issues” as well. And, most important, could we galvanize new collectivities? Might we activate, by measuring, relationships that could be more potent than they are?

The question is whether we can take inspiration from Martin’s appropriation of the derivative not simply to ensure and expand our value but to imagine a mode of accounting for justice, on behalf of justice. It seems to me that the trajectory of this book has enabled some optimism about accounting for justice but also posed a daunting challenge. Can we articulate an accounting against criminalization, against incarceration, against the production—through, for example, the intertwined and divergent accountings of debt and crime, discussed in chapter 2, that critical abstraction enables us to recognize—of social hierarchy in general and racial formation in particular?

This is an immediate challenge for us here in Arizona, at the University of Arizona in Tucson; we are living and working in the wake of the passage of laws (Arizona’s anti-immigrant law, SB 1070, and anti–ethnic studies law, HB 2281, were both passed in 2010) that enhance the school-to-prison pipeline by dismantling high school programs statistically “proven” to disrupt it by improving “pass” rates on mandatory statewide tests (Cabrera, Milem, and Marx 2012) and, likewise, enlarge the immigration-to-detention pipeline by extending and intertwining criminalization and policing, meanwhile producing
“attrition through enforcement.” For high school students whose educational options have been foreclosed or for those more relentlessly and rigorously held accountable to immigration status databases, these laws have direct material impact; for many others the impacts are more indirect but still palpable and disabling to participants and participation in the multiple and overlapping spaces, institutions, collectivities, and jurisdictions across which our lives are strung.

And yet university leaders, faced with all-too-serious financial and political pressures, deny that any of this is our problem: the K–12 school district is not within our purview; there is no evidence of an impact of the state legislation on our campus climate; the decline in incoming graduate students of color is not statistically significant. Some frustrated faculty members take such statements as provocation to produce irrefutable (that is, statistical) proofs of the impacts on us, on our recruitment and retention of students, faculty, and administrators or on our climate. But such proofs might not be easy to construct: relatively little time has passed, the ns are small because in many categories we had few people of color already, and we have no information about those who simply never applied for jobs or to Ph.D. programs here; meanwhile, the climate might very well be fine for many members of the white majority. And even if some creative accounting did show direct impacts on the university, such proofs might not in themselves move the handful of university leaders to whom they would be addressed, who are constrained by endless demands to demonstrate creditworthiness through the regimes of accounting and accountability I have described, regimes to which they (if not all of us) are most certainly fully subject.

Once again it seems that intertwined but differentiated regimes of accounting particularize us differently. So when I walk into the next meeting with my colleagues—and I end where I began, with the urgency of the impending meeting—I might propose a more, shall I say, interdisciplinary approach. The stubborn numbers may refuse to speak, refuse to name a “crisis.” Might we recognize those who have gone missing from our classrooms and our faculty meetings and our provosts’ offices by accounting for that silence, as derivative, the form of appearance of determining conflicts and connections? Might we be hailed in the process?