



## **Abstract**

Taking as his theme the management of higher education as it is increasingly transformed by administrative rather than academic professionals, Newfield examines the establishment of a partnership between leadership groups at Yale University in the United States and the National University of Singapore (NUS), in which a new college for East-West liberal arts and sciences instruction was formed outside traditional disciplinary boundaries. The creation was a two-step process. First, the institutional deal was negotiated and signed, with nearly no prior participation from the faculty members of either institution, and with later fierce opposition from some Yale faculty members inspired by their critique of a managerialist exclusion of faculty and their collegium-based traditions of self-governance. Second, the first group of permanent Yale-NUS faculty members spent a fully-paid year designing the curriculum from scratch. Form and financing were established by management, and then curricular content was provided by faculty.

The division of labour reflects the traditional structure of American university management, in which professorial authority extends to teaching, non-sponsored research, the departmental governance that supports these activities, and nothing more. Is this divided authority good enough to enable academic freedom at Yale-NUS in the traditional sense? Could it overcome the initial Yale faculty opposition to the project as complicit with Singapore's restrictions on speech and sexual identity?

# Arts and Humanities Education as Neo-liberalism Comes Unglued

## CHRISTOPHER NEWFIELD

Christopher Newfield is Professor of Literature and American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Much of his research is in Critical University Studies, which links his enduring concern with humanities teaching to the study of how higher education continues to be re-shaped by industry and other economic forces. His most recent books on this subject are *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Harvard University Press, 2008), and *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980* (Duke University Press, 2003). A new book on the post-2008 struggles of public universities to rebuild their social missions, called *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*, was

published by Johns Hopkins University Press in November 2016. He also writes about American intellectual and social history (*The Emerson Effect*, University of Chicago Press, 1996), and has co-edited *Mapping Multiculturalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996) with Avery F. Gordon. He blogs on higher education policy at *Remaking the University*, and writes for the *Huffington Post*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He teaches courses in Detective Fiction, Noir California, Contemporary US Literature, Innovation Theory, and English Majoring After College.



*Sheldon Adelson Casino, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore. Photograph by Christopher Newfield.*

**W**HAT WILL A NEW LIBERAL arts university be like if it is instituted as a collaboration among donors, top government officials, and senior managers with only *post facto* input from professors and practitioners?

This paper is about one such experiment, in which the leadership teams of Yale University in the US and the National University of Singapore (NUS) created a new college for East-West liberal arts and sciences instruction that rejected some traditional disciplinary boundaries. The creation was a two-step process. First, the institutional deal was negotiated and signed with almost no prior participation from the faculty members of either institution, followed by fierce opposition from some Yale faculty members inspired by their critique of a managerialist exclusion of faculty and their collegium-based traditions of self-governance.<sup>1</sup> Second, the first group of permanent Yale-NUS faculty members spent a fully-paid year designing the curriculum from scratch. Form and financing was established by management, and then curricular content was provided by faculty.

The division of labour reflects the traditional structure of American university management, in which professorial authority extends to teaching, non-sponsored research, the departmental governance that supports these activities, and nothing more. Financing and budgeting are generally held to be a function of senior administrative expertise, where senior administrators may consult with faculty bodies at their discretion. In the case of Yale-NUS, the governing academic ideology, or at least ethos, was also decided on in advance of the work of the faculty members on the curriculum as such. Faculty members would design the curriculum and then administer their own daily affairs, as is the US tradition. But they had not established the college's ground rules, either financial or educational. Would this divided authority be good enough to enable academic freedom at Yale-NUS in the traditional sense? Could it overcome initial Yale faculty opposition to the project as complicit with Singapore's restrictions on speech and sexual identity?

To see whether faculty could make a managerial difference, two colleagues and I spent a fortnight interviewing higher education officials in Singapore. We arrived there in the summer of 2013, just as the liberal arts college Yale-NUS was welcoming its first cohort. Before I arrived, I was aware of at least two things.

First, I would witness the results of a royal marriage: Yale is one of the two or three most prestigious universities in the United States, and about the most exclusive, with a regular undergraduate application acceptance rate of only 5.3 per cent.<sup>2</sup> The National University of Singapore is commonly ranked among the top three in Asia and is in the *Times Higher Education's* top 25 global universities. Rankings are bunk, but along with selectivity rates they do signal status. The union of Yale and NUS produced a college that is even more exclusive than either parent, with a claimed 3 per cent acceptance rate in 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Yale-NUS formally rejected the model of the American overseas campus made infamous by New York University and other elite private universities. That model is to open a foreign campus staffed by a few tenured faculty from the home campus and large majorities of contingent faculty from elsewhere. The elite brand would veil educational quality problems, and both labour exploitation and academic freedom restrictions would be excused on the grounds that they reflected local politics and

culture.<sup>4</sup> In the case of NYU-Abu Dhabi, the press discovered that labour exploitation was the hallmark of the physical construction of the campus, where migrant workers toiled under appalling conditions for little pay while confined to labour camps.<sup>5</sup> When confronted with a report documenting the exempting of one-third of NYU's subcontracted employees from local labour regulations, NYU president John Sexton pleaded ignorance.<sup>6</sup> Concerns about the campus's lack of academic autonomy were confirmed when the UAE government prevented a prominent critic of the overseas campus, NYU American Studies professor Andrew Ross, from travelling there. Students were not exempt from the rip-off ethos either: the overseas campuses reflected an enrolment management strategy in which NYU would admit first-year students but not allow them to attend NYU, the actual university located in New York City, and charge them full tuition as though they were in New York while in reality they studied for their first two years overseas. NYU was effectively offshoring half of its BA instruction for many of its students. NYU did in fact get sued by its former students – for breach of contract at its Singapore arts campus.<sup>7</sup> Never mind: Yale-NUS would be the opposite of all this. It would be a premium American-style liberal arts college, where education would be conducted with regular tenure-track faculty, working in a purpose-built campus with moderate teaching loads to enable active research, in order to deliver the ideal student experience.

1. Sleeper, Jim. "Yale has gone to Singapore, but can it come back?" *The Huffington Post*. 4 May 2012. See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-sleeper/yale-has-gone-to-singapor\\_b\\_1476532.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-sleeper/yale-has-gone-to-singapor_b_1476532.html) (Accessed 2017-04-12.)

2. See <https://www.ivycoach.com/2016-ivy-league-admissions-statistics/> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

3. See <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/newsroom/yale-nus-college-welcomes-more-than-170-new-students-to-the-class-of-2018/> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

4. Marans, Daniel. "What One Professor's Travel Ban Says About The UAE's Influence On U.S. Universities". *The Huffington Post*. 3 September 2015. Section Politics. See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/andrew-ross-nyu-uae\\_us\\_55e6419ce4b0b7a9633acc8e](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/andrew-ross-nyu-uae_us_55e6419ce4b0b7a9633acc8e) (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

5. Kaminer, Ariel, and O'Driscoll, Sean. "Workers at N.Y.U.'s Abu Dhabi Site Faced Harsh Conditions". *The New York Times*. 18 May 2014. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/nyregion/workers-at-nyu-abu-dhabi-site-face-harsh-conditions.html> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

6. Nardello & Co., "Report of the Independent Investigator into Allegations of Labor and Compliance Issues During the Construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi Campus on Saadiyat Island, United Arab Emirates, n.d. See <http://www.nardelloandco.com/pdf/NYU%20Abu%20Dhabi%20Campus%20Investigative%20Report.pdf> (Accessed 2017-02-20.); Saul, Stephanie. "N.Y.U. Labor Guidelines Failed to Protect 10,000 Workers in Abu Dhabi, Report Says". *The New York Times*. 16 April 2015. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/nyregion/nyu-labor-rules-failed-to-protect-10000-workers-in-abu-dhabi.html> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

7. Redden, Elizabeth. "Ex-Students at Singapore Branch Campus Sue NYU". *Inside Higher Ed*. 6 October 2016. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/quick-takes/2016/10/06/ex-students-singapore-branch-campus-sue-nyu> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

## I

On site, we were struck by the continuous presence of Yale-NUS's mission statement: "A community of learning, founded by two great universities, in Asia, for the world." The College, which in the American sense is a university focused on undergraduate instruction and bachelor's degrees, would combine East and West, offer arts, humanities and sciences together, combined with a low student-faculty ratio that would allow continuous individual feedback to maximise student development. It would also offer that distinctive feature of the residential liberal arts college – the intellectual intensities of a "community of learning" descended from monasteries and the medieval university through the church-founded seventeenth- and eighteenth- century US colleges that evolved into the present model, represented by such selective, insufficiently diverse, intellectually effective places as Amherst College, Oberlin College and Reed College. Yale-NUS was to be the best of all these possible educational worlds – multi-lingual, interdisciplinary, and cosmopolitan, offering cross-training in a variety of qualitative and quantitative skills of the kind urgently needed to face the enormous challenges of the contemporary world. The faculty had gone through a year of curricular planning in which a wide range of differences and possibilities had been carefully worked through. The result was a kind of best-case liberal arts powerhouse. If Yale-NUS could not push back the darkness, what could?

By *darkness* I refer to a political and an economic force, each considered the opponent of liberal arts *Bildung* and social progressivism. The first consists of Singapore's restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, including expression of homosexuality. The second is neo-liberal capitalism, in which

*All images of Yale-NUS campus and its construction by Christopher Newfield.*



the political sphere submits to economic factors, among other things I'll examine in more detail. The question on most observers' minds was whether a liberal arts college could have a real intellectual or ethical autonomy in contemporary Southeast Asia – or North America. Could it steer its own course?

Regarding the first force, many Yale faculty members felt that Yale-NUS was a standing violation of core principles of academic freedom and self-governance because it was the project of a state that had proven itself hostile to academic freedom in particular, and freedom of expression in general.<sup>8</sup> These concerns were confirmed, as my colleagues on that visit, Petrus Liu and Colleen Lye have reported.

*In the short time since the college's opening, a series of episodes has placed on trial Yale-NUS's pledge to guarantee its students and faculty the same freedom of speech as exercised by those in New Haven. These events include criticisms of the Yale-NUS administration's effort to secure permission to screen Tan Pin Pin's To Singapore, With Love, a documentary banned in the country for "national security" reasons; enquiries from the Media Development Association about the proposed use of The*

8. Sleeper, *op. cit.*

9. Liu, Petrus and Lye, Colleen. "Liberal Arts for Asians". *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* No. 2. 2015. doi: 10.1080/1369801X.2015.1126194.

10. Schiermeier, Quirin. "Sacking of Prominent Geoscientist Rocks Community". *Nature News*. (Accessed 2016-12-11.) doi: 10.1038/nature.2016.21095; Roth-

berg, Michael. "Essay on the Salaita Controversy after One Year and Continuing Concerns about Academic Freedom". *Inside Higher Ed*. 31 July 2015. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/07/31/essay-salaita-controversy-after-one-year-and-continuing-concerns-about-academic> (Accessed 2017-02-20.)

11. Personal interview, National University of Singapore, 8 July 2013.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Satanic Verses after the college library added the title to its collection; an open letter from Yale–NUS faculty in response to NUS Professor Khairudin Aljunied’s posting of two Facebook blogs likening lesbianism and “liberal Islam” to “cancers” that must be cured “through education and reasoned arguments”; protests against the perceived political motivations behind the negative tenure decision of Cherian George (an outspoken government critic) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU); Yale–NUS Professor Robin Hemley’s resignation from the panel of judges in protest at the National Library Board’s removal of three children’s books “with homosexual content”; and concerns that Yale–NUS College’s academic freedom was under attack when the Office of Housing Services removed student-created posters in support of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution, news of which spread “like wildfire” among the student body “within minutes”.<sup>9</sup>

These episodes are very troubling, and can inhibit intellectual and artistic development. Although some may see these issues as growing pains, they are most likely constitutive and structural. Western democracy is not Singapore’s model or destination.

That said, we should remember that adopting Western-style academic freedom would not usher in unqualified freedom of speech or inquiry. The Western versions of these freedoms are also contingent, qualified, and in continuous danger. Leaving aside national security and surveillance issues, the North Atlantic version of academic freedom has been impaired by managerial authority, as in the recent rescinded hire of an American scholar for tweets critical of Israel and of a firing of a senior Danish geological scientist for what appears to be acts of encouraging candid assessment of his university’s management.<sup>10</sup> It has also been impaired by a subtler “chilling effect” in which criticism is discouraged by subtle forms of internal retaliation and shunning, in which taking the wrong attitude towards department chairs or deans can mean being left out during the secretive distribution of resources



and influence. This is not to let the Singapore system off the hook, but we should recognise that the liberal arts in both East and West exist within *variable* regimes of *managed* speech. Liberal arts universities do not have the power – and their leaders seem not to have the will – to exist as exceptions.

The second force the liberal arts confront is economic. Decades ago, the Singapore government began to shift economic policy towards a knowledge economy model, and the Ministry of Education (MOE) has aligned educational policy towards the enlargement of a “creative class”. One senior official was particularly explicit about this:

*We no longer think that all our highest-testing students should go into the Big Four professions [law, business, medicine, and engineering]; we realize that we need strengths in the arts, humanities, design, and related fields. Yale–NUS is an experiment in this line. We will learn from it, and learn what we want – I can tell you that I don’t know exactly what we are looking for. We will see how the experiment turns out.*<sup>11</sup>

This official might also have said “experiments” plural: the Yale partnership is part of an extensive long-term state strategy that included joint operations with other leading American universities like MIT, Duke, and Johns Hopkins, as well as the creation of a fully-developed art and design educational sector.<sup>12</sup> Our interviews with senior policy-makers in Singapore confirmed their interest in the



liberal arts as a next generation economic strategy, which has been under discussion since the 1990s. A major policy decision in 2008 finally ushered in the generous but small-scaled investment in Yale-NUS in one piece of NUS's real estate holdings on the tiny island.

## II

Singapore has inspired some particularly good research on the relationship between culture and economics, including the interaction between culture and neo-liberal forms of globalisation.<sup>13</sup> This research explains how the liberal arts could be embraced and encompassed by and for neo-liberal economic management. C.J.W.-L. Wee notes that Singapore's first phase of industrialisation assumed that culture was not economic and irrelevant to economic development, but that this began to change, particularly after Deng Xiaoping's policy changes in mainland China in the late 1970s. In that period, top Singaporean officials increasingly stressed the

*“Sinic” qualities of New Asia’s capitalist identity; this was the romance of “network” (guanxi) capitalism. Even high aesthetic culture was incorporated (admittedly slowly) as part of the state’s development agenda formally from 1989. While an Asian modernity was asserted, the state simultaneously supported a universal form of free-tradist and neo-liberal economics that became dominant after the USSR’s collapse.*<sup>14</sup>

Since “modernisation theory from the 1960s already contains, within its conceptual framework, the possibility of sociocultural difference and thus creative adaptation in the modernizing process,”<sup>15</sup> state cultural policy could support or even accelerate economic growth. The Singaporean government tried Confucianism as a cultural framework in the schools in the 1980s, but withdrew the policy when it turned out to be divisive in Singapore’s diverse society, and came to support more complex cultural experimentation. By the mid 2000s, Wee was describing an artistic “double consciousness of being local-global inside a statist local-globalism with a more narrowly functional economic outlook.”<sup>16</sup> He argued that “in the place of state-sanctioned passivity is now a new official desire for ‘messy’ creativity, for something less conformist that can spur Singaporeans’ ability to maintain the city-state’s ‘hub’ status within global capitalism.”<sup>17</sup> Yale-NUS is likely to make exactly this kind of contribution to a paradoxically functionalist creativity. The liberal arts can help finesse local-global identity tensions with a flexible polyglot, multicultural consciousness.

13. In addition to Liu and Lye, I’ve benefited particularly from Chua, Beng-Huat. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London and New York: Routledge. 1995; Ong, Aihwa. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006; Wee, C.J. W.-L., *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 2007; Kong, Lily. “From Precarious Labor to Precarious Economy: Planning for Precarity in Singapore’s Creative Economy”. *City, Culture and Society*. No. 2. 2011. pp. 55-64; and, in a different register, Waterson, Roxana, and Kwok, Kian-Woon (eds.). *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press. 2012.

14. Wee, kindle location 328.

15. Wee, kindle location 455.

16. Wee, kindle location 2222.

17. *Ibid.*, kindle location 2331.

18. Ong, cited in Liu and Lye, *op. cit.* p. 6.

19. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books. 2015. p. 84.

20. Liu and Lye, *op. cit.* pp. 13-14.



Another key point is that functionalist creativity is not actually paradoxical in neo-liberal capitalism. On the contrary: it expresses precisely what Aihwa Ong has dubbed “technopreneurial citizenship” as demanded by a post-industrial, service-oriented, tech-design-based economy.<sup>18</sup> Neo-liberalism uses knowledge in an economically defined governmentality that strips problems of political dimensions in order to define them as technical. The neo-liberal actor is not a rights bearing political subject engaged in a participatory definition of a life in common, or even a liberal *homo oeconomicus* seeking to maximise his self-interest. On the contrary, *neo-liberalism* requires that the subject adapt his or her interests to the *economy's* interests. In Wendy Brown's terms:

*Rather than each individual pursuing his or her own interest and unwittingly generating collective benefit, today, it is the project of macroeconomic growth and credit enhancement to which neoliberal individuals are tethered and with which their existence as human capital must align if they are to thrive. When individuals... constitute a drag on this good... they may be legitimately cast off or reconfigured – through downsizing, furloughs, outsourcing, benefits cuts, [etc.] At this point, the throne of interest has vanished and at the extreme is replaced with the throne of sacrifice.<sup>19</sup>*

Singapore policy appears to implement this project of encouraging each citizen to contribute to the contemporary economy by maximising their own human capital (rather than autonomous self-interest), and to understand this maximisation as often requiring liberal-arts style creativity. Liberal arts education and creative capabilities lead to the expansion of a “creative class” that advances economic development. Yale-NUS could be seen as an important tool in the neo-liberal creativity box.

We have some preliminary evidence that the College is functioning in this way for its students. When Petrus Liu, one of the authors of *Liberal Arts for Asians*, taught a course on “Modern Chinese film

and literature” that included a trip to an underground queer cinema festival in the Dutch embassy in Beijing, he was somewhat nonplussed to discover that the students' interest in “creative license”, which they exercised in their final projects, was not matched by a stress on “critical independence”. It seems that “nurturing precocious and creative minds through ‘liberal arts practice’” does not as such generate critiques of global capitalism or neo-liberal subjectivity. On the contrary, the liberal arts may actively encourage the idea that global capitalism is free self-expression's greatest support.

Perhaps this leads to the conclusion that Yale-NUS students “were sold on a liberal arts education not *despite* New Economy discourse but *because* of it.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, they did see Yale-NUS as a site to cultivate their personal creativity, but this did not lead to criticising the technocratic or neo-liberal premises of the New Economy but to adapting to them. Is this a good resting place for my argument – that neo-liberalism has managed to extract innovative capacities from the social and cultural critique previous central to small-scale liberal arts education?

### III

Pulling back from the Yale-NUS and Singapore contexts, I would like to ask about the roles literature and instruction in literature play in this story of neo-liberal absorption of higher education. I think Liu and Lye have identified a central *institutional* role for literary study, in which it produces creative capabilities that fit well with normative modes of economic performance and assessment. This institutional role reflects explicit policy design and perhaps university administrative goals. And yet the texts of literature and critical theory go in quite different directions.

First, critical theory long ago rejected the traditional base-superstructure model of the relation between economics and culture that saw economics determining culture and subjectivity in a fairly linear way. Second, theory also established that an entity like

“neo-liberal subjectivity” is an unstable construction that must be continuously made and remade. Third, many forms of literature, particularly the Western novel that includes ample tracts of free indirect discourse, offer what I think of as literature’s equivalent of Big Data about psychology: “subjective empiricism”, in which an individual’s consciousness is detailed on the basis of the author’s almost unlimited number of experiences, conscious and unconscious. Fourth, literature is particularly good at what Fredric Jameson termed structural causality, which includes multiple, contradictory, and *indirect* causes. Literary knowledge unveils internally contradictory forms of structural causality, in preference to the reduction of forces to linear causality as may occur in other disciplines. Literary knowledge helps people through *all* the entanglements, and so to explain to someone the economics of our weak recovery – or the Syrian civil war – you find yourself, pretty soon, speaking some kind of novel.

Finally, literary knowledge of the economy will analyse and express the economy’s internal contradictions. It will unveil incommensurabilities – for example, the incommensurability between the economic demand that one adapt one’s human capital to the economy and the subjective process of forming that human capital itself. In other words, a liberal arts student may consciously seek to develop her creative capabilities to better fit with the knowledge economy, and yet have an intellectual life that does not fit this, except when coerced through direct economic pressure.

A prime example is a novel about neo-liberalism in the music industry, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). It returns us to the Western version of the crisis of creativity in the contemporary economy – the Yale side of the equation, if not exactly NUS. I apologise for being unable to identify the relevant Southeast Asian literary example. This reflects the limits of my own knowledge. I do think Egan’s novel could be taught in a Singapore-based course for students interested in entering a creative

industry upon graduation. Egan’s novel analyses the experience of writers, musicians and their professional colleagues before and after neo-liberalism’s entrenchment in the 1980s.

The hallmark of the music industry in this work is the failure of anyone in authority to nurture any musician, ever. There is no university-style cultivation of talent anywhere in view. Most of the main characters grow up together in San Francisco in the 1980s, after the social movement basis of the music scene has disappeared. The “real musician” in the group spends most of his adult life as a low-income outsider. The big success story from the group, named Bennie, is an agent and executive, in a state of deep confusion bordering on self-loathing, and in any case not a “creative” at all. Bennie’s brother-in-law, Jules, is a serious journalist who gets shunted into celebrity coverage as newspapers get disrupted by Internet-based new media. One day he is forced to take a 19-year old rising star named Kitty Jackson to a fancy lunch to interview her for a puff piece. After a completely empty interview, he decides to get her out of the restaurant for a walk in Central Park, one block away, in what he calls “an attempt to salvage this assignment and, in a larger sense, my once-promising, now-dwindling literary reputation.” Jules’s effort to rescue some non-commercial artistry leads to an impulsive sexual assault on Kitty Jackson, which also fails. Jules is arrested, tried, convicted, and imprisoned, his career and identity both permanently destroyed. At one point in prison, he describes his sexualised homicidal rage against a young woman whom he could have read as something of a fellow-victim of neo-liberalism: the celebrity order is neo-liberalism in action, requiring the maximisation of the self’s human capital for the industry’s process of translating artistry into a quantified return on investment. But Egan goes out of her way, in a couple of violent passages, to describe the extremity of Jules’s inability to consent to doing his job in this sense. His identity is essentially annihilated in the presence of a celebrity like Kitty Jackson, in which he becomes “indistinguish-

able (...) from every other non-Kitty Jackson” – a pure nonentity.<sup>21</sup> Jules has killed his neo-liberal self. Egan, the author, seems to be saying that the artist can escape neo-liberalism by insuring that he will never be allowed to function as an artist again.

Obviously this is a stupid solution. But *Goon Squad* is full of stupid solutions – attempted rape, recorded death through self-induced illness, homelessness, kleptomania, serial betrayal – which all signal determined attempts to evade neo-liberal subjectivity. Egan would seem to agree with Brown, Ong, Wee, and others on the basic parameters of neo-liberal subjectivity. She then focuses on the incommensurability between the system’s demands and a liveable self. The effect of the novel, judging from my experience of having taught it five times to undergraduates, is to assure the reader that neo-liberalism is an imposed identity. Where identity has something to do with creative aspiration, it is not an identity at all.

#### IV

And yet at this point in the history of capitalism and critical theory, incommensurability may strike most of us as an inadequate strategy. It points out that creativity and human capital are not the same, and are for most people mutually exclusive, without providing grounds for an alternative. *Goon Squad* does offer few characters creating their own *homo non-oeconomicus*. For example, Sasha, Bennie’s former kleptomaniacal executive secretary, stages a successful escape to a largely self-made world as an artist and mother in the California desert.<sup>22</sup> Scotty, the real musician, having played in obscurity his whole life, finally gets an audience for his outsider music and is at least temporarily celebrated for his genius. But none of these solutions are particularly satisfying, and none will work outside of individual contexts.

Whether intentionally or not, Jennifer Egan has written a novel about creativity without criticism. It is about creativity in a neo-liberalised culture industry, which means that the traditional demand

for continuous competition – assessed by revenues – is accompanied by a newer demand for continuous self-development without industry support. But *Goon Squad*’s characters never discuss the business structure or neo-liberal rules of the music industry. None of the characters has an analysis. The partial exception is Jules, and his critique is driven by the need to explain the sexual assault that ensured his self-destruction. The novel avoids putting psychological, artistic, and economic issues together. Because it does not introduce what I would call literary knowledge of economy, the novel offers two spheres in static juxtaposition: a culture industry focused on discovering (not cultivating) individual talent, and the individual miseries of the people who either do or don’t succeed.

But artistic and economic issues work together as they help form the socio-political world. Splitting them in serious fiction makes as little sense now as it ever did. Although there are many reasons for this artificial bifurcation, one we shouldn’t overlook is an operational branch of neo-liberalism: the steady privatisation of higher education institutions in the US, UK, and elsewhere. Privatisation’s key premise is that a bachelor’s degree is a private good that increases individual salary, and any spillovers to society are incidental. This is factually incorrect: the non-market, indirect, and social value of higher education is somewhere between a half and two-thirds of its value, and the salary increment on which policymakers focus is the (large) tail that wags the dog, and not the dog itself.<sup>23</sup>

The private-good understanding of the university is the proximate cause of the student notion of personal creativity that Petrus Liu encountered at Yale-NUS.

21. Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. London: Random House. Kindle Edition. (2010-06-03.)

22. Cohen, Margaret. “Gothic Marxism”. In *Profane Illumination. Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1993. pp. 1-16.

23. McMahon, Walter W. *Higher Learning, Greater Good: The Private and Social Benefits of Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2009.

It is not only that Yale-NUS is an exclusive private college charging very high tuition, but also that it is a prominent new member of a global sector, higher education, whose leaders have pushed the public-good understanding of learning to the margins. For several decades, universities have sold their value to policymakers via metrics such as number of discoveries they patent and commercialise, the size and growth rate of their fundraising programmes, the gross revenues from their research contracts, and the return on investment represented by their graduates' adult incomes. They have lost interest in explaining the most basic feature of thought itself: very little of its added value is internalisable by the university that created it, and nearly all of it exists as "spillovers" to society as a whole. A simple example was the polio vaccine, which Jonas Salk put directly into the public domain, which allowed tens of millions of units to be administered not many months later.

Selling universities as private goods for graduates (via greater human capital) and business (via licensed intellectual property) is the great mistake in university policy of the past half century.<sup>24</sup> It naturally trains students to misrecognise their learning as an investment in marketable skills, leading to uncritical personal creativity as a function of self-advancement.

## V

And yet, this is not where the story ends. The private good model is being unravelled by three international developments. The first appears in Singapore: the creation of Yale-NUS reflects public higher education policy rather than a business initiative. The policy makes explicit the value of Yale-NUS to Singaporean society and to the wider region. The resulting College thus enters the realm of politics as such. Though little of the government's real thinking and strategising has seen the light of day, and though the experiment seems an elite sidelight to major national issues, the principle of Yale-NUS's public value ushers in the potential for excavation and national debate, and new future directions for the College.

The second development involves arts and humanities instruction, where "liberal arts" are increasingly seen as "practical arts" that must be taught in immersive *and* interdisciplinary modes. Art and humanities students should develop their skills in a sufficiently intense or well organised university course, and also understand the industry that they want to enter: its rules, its main institutions, its current players, its past and current trends and the systems that make those trends.

I have been teaching "business culture" to literature students for many years, which allows me to introduce some basics of neoclassical economics coupled with analysis of new economic conditions and their impacts on culture industries. Recently I taught the Egan novel in conjunction with Scott Timberg's *Culture Crash* (2015), about the financial world's destruction of decently-paying stable cultural jobs, Rana Foroohar's *Makers and Takers* (2016), about financialisation's war on productive enterprise, and Douglas Rushkoff's *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus* (2016), about the need to transcend the terrible limits of financialisation as expressed in monopoly-oriented digital capitalism.<sup>25</sup> The students' final individual paper was to use these works to diagnose a central problem in a sector they wanted to enter and then to do a collaborative project to come up with a solution.

The collaborative projects all involved institutional redesign. In other words, the literature students took their artistic ambitions, asked what kind of economic and political structure they required, and then offered models of structures that would work better. This meant a comic book industry freed of its current monopoly distributor, an online magazine for unpublished writers who would give and receive feedback as they are starting out, a taxation scheme to put Silicon Valley windfall profits in the service of the public arts, among others. In short, once literature students make neo-liberal economics visible to themselves, they could think coherently and interestingly about how to extract non-neo-liberal institutions from their current situation.<sup>26</sup> It

is one step at a time, but literature students are able to take these steps.

The third development returns us to the question of neo-liberalism as a formation that needs continuous reinforcement to survive. The political theorist William Davies has helpfully broken neo-liberalism down into three phases, the most recent, starting around 2008, being “Punitive neo-liberalism”. The system now seems to be operating outside of the norms of rational discourse, with the core symptom being support for policies like health-care austerity that function less as a stabilisation programme than as punishment for programme recipients. “Neo-liberalism has become incredible,” Davies writes, “but that is partly because it is a system that no longer seeks credibility in the way that hegemonies used to do, through a degree of cultural or normative consensus.” Instead, he concludes, neo-liberalism increasingly operates as an exercise in sovereign power.<sup>27</sup> I interpret this resort to sovereignty as an act of desperation. As neo-liberalism becomes increasingly unglued, it attacks its professional and artistic personnel rather than hegemonising them (with secure jobs, increased funding, and the like).

Arts and humanities programmes will not be post-neo-liberal until the administration of everyday education extends to collaborative control over financial and policy systems. Western higher education offers tenure-track faculty members a range of professional freedoms whose scope it

sharply restricts. The years of austerity that coincide with the transition from Davies’s “hegemonic” to “punitive” neo-liberalism have severed immediate educational practice, which carries on, from the financial management that defines its scope, quality, and effects. Yale-NUS was an interesting experiment in that it combined high liberal arts ambitions with the denial of constitutive power to its academics. More accurately, it assumed a sharp divide between two kinds of constitutive power: one the immediate curriculum for undergraduates, the other the financial and institutional systems that would define the college’s relation to society (and control its official image). This division between managerial and academic authority has been in place since the nineteenth century, in part because it has worked equally well with industrial and flexible post-industrial modes of knowledge production.

But the division has no conceptual necessity, and it is not particularly efficient. In my experience, there is no natural division of competence between artistic and financial institutional issues. Teaching across it is clearly possible, meaning that one can teach financial and artistic competence at the same time to the same people. There are no guarantees about where such teaching would lead, but there are obvious pleasures in seeing the connections between specific artistic competencies and intervention in education’s political economy. We can use that pleasure as a guide in exactly these kinds of interventions.



24. Newfield, Christopher. *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2016.

25. Timberg, Scott. *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2016; Foroohar, Rana. *Makers and Takers: The Rise of Finance and the Fall of American Business*. New York: Crown Business. 2016; Timberg, Scott. *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*. New edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2016.

26. To put this another way, the economic lesson of the course is that students will be required to engage in lifetime *Bildung*, but this *Bildung* will be collaborative and, ideally, democratic.

27. Davies, William. “The New Neoliberalism”. *New Left Review*. No. 101. September-October 2016. p. 134.