**COMMENTARY**

**Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism,** by Miranda Joseph, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, *xxii* + 218pp., US$XXX (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8166-8744-2

**Call and response: A reflection on Miranda Joseph’s Debt to Society from Aotearoa New Zealand**

In the Māori artform of *karanga*, female tribal elders or *kuia* will call visitors on to the *marae* space in a ritualised and skilful performance of greeting, paying tribute to the dead, and laying out the reasons for the current engagement. The *kaikaranga* is answered with a similar skilful call by a *kaiwhakautu*, on behalf of the guests or *manuhiri*. Multiple women engage in this call-and-response until the *manuhiri* stop in front of the meeting house to continue with the rest of the *pōwhiri* welcome ceremony and subsequent meeting or *hui*. Like these guests, in this reflection on Miranda Joseph’s book *Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism*, I am called over a distance into Joseph’s space. If Joseph’s work is a skilful performance of the academic ritual of the monograph, I am the responding caller, and in this piece I record my iterative responses as I respectfully and slowly move closer to a meeting across difference and similarity.

**Call and ResponseI: Those that have gone before**

Joseph invites us to enter her world by first paying respect to those who have gone before us in the analysis and critique of capitalism and capitalist social forms: her introduction features Marx of course, but also Louis Althusser, Lauren Berlant, Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Mary Poovey. Joseph’s intellectual world is haunted by the work of these and others, even as Joseph offers a more ‘open’ and ‘diverse’ account of the social and economic structures informing and informed by our particular moment in the history of debt. While critical of abstraction and quantification, Joseph is not dismissive of it; instead she explains how she seeks to ‘instantiate’ it, to show how statistical abstractions are ‘lived particularly and concretely’ (2014: xx).

I greet Miranda Joseph and hail her from the antipodes, where we have an awkward sort of relationship with the processes of accounting and debt in the US. In some ways, Aotearoa New Zealand adopts particularities of neoliberalism with rapid and even excessive efficiency, perhaps due to our small population. But in other ways, we hold out against abstraction, maybe because we are likely to have only some two degrees of separation between us and any other person on the street. I also acknowledge Joseph’s intellectual ‘ancestors’ and list some of my own: most relevant here is JK Gibson-Graham, whom I draw on as a member of the Community Economies Collective. We therefore share a Marxist, post-structuralist, feminist and materialist ‘ancestral’ connection, despite our different geographical localities. While I appreciate the linkages that Joseph makes to what these shared intellectual ancestors have said about quantification, abstraction and statistics, I found that their words sometimes amplified and sometimes interrupted Joseph’s own voice – in fact, in a way reminiscent of the *karanga* on which I have based my review structure. I add Xin Liu as another who has gone before us, in his work examining the socialities produced by statistics in China’s recent history (Liu 2009). He had to work hard to convince his English-speaking audience of the global relevance of China’s quantitative revolution. Situated as she is in North America, at this point in history, Joseph need make no particular arguments for global relevance. She writes about the US, and those of us elsewhere devour it, just as our governments and businesses eagerly take up the strategies of accounting originating there and elsewhere (despite little evidence, as Joseph notes, of it increasing wellbeing). At this point in my reading, I reserve judgement though – will the book travel beyond the US in relevance?

**Call and Response II: On what debt produces**

In the first substantial chapter of the book, Joseph begins to ‘account for debt’ theoretically. She asks us to consider debt as *constitutive* of new social processes rather than destructive of sociality *per se*. Even as debt requires an abstraction, it is still something particular that must be enacted. Joseph frames her work as investigating that particularity – *how* is debt instantiated and what *new* socialities does it produce. In order to answer the questions framing the Occupy movement (How to be together in a unity that is not simplistic and oppressive, but complex and emancipatory?), we must ‘recognize the social constructive particularizing power of capitalism as well’ (2014, 19). Debt, in this reading, is not just lack. It is, to cite Roitman as Joseph does, a ‘plenitude’ (2014, 19). Furthermore, Joseph suggests that the narrative of debt as a cause and/or consequence of a ‘loss of social relations’ may in fact contribute to the *spread* of debt/credit relations. What else does debt produce? One example explored here by Joseph is the production of a racist ‘disrespectful regard’ in the form of predatory loans: both to particular US communities defined by race and to particular nations via the IMF.

I pause in my response as I deliberately call to mind Gibson-Graham’s work on the politics of the subject. What pushes back at us when we try to change our/another’s economic subjectivity? I feel resistance to the idea that debt produces anything good, but I acknowledge the spirit of the late Julie Graham, who gently reminds me to begin in a place of not knowing. What would it mean to put aside what I think I know about debt, and to take up what Joseph is saying in a spirit of generous possibility? What does Joseph’s open approach to social relations produced by debt *enable*? On my second reading, I feel less resistance. I, too, am interested in the questions of Occupy. I, too, am interested in the particularities of debt(s), and in diversifying our understanding of the economy to differentiate between different kinds of debt on the basis of what they enable and produce. Indeed, the recent expansion of the diverse economies framework to include diverse forms of finance alongside transactions, labour, enterprise and property (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013) is a partial response to this possibility.

**Call and Response III: Taking back accounting?**

Next, Joseph begins to ‘account for justice’, asking us to consider what kinds of social formations are engendered when justice is understood in accounting terms. Joseph traces the history of justice as a process of increasing abstraction, understood by some as more equitable. Previous indicators of creditworthiness in the US, for example, were narrative in nature and focused on the moral qualities of the applicant. Early systems of justice imprisoned debtors who could not repay – if they were of a certain class, that is. The shift to abstracted, numerical credit scores based on debt repayment histories separated morality from creditworthiness and opened up credit to any who could repay. Justice was standardised too, but with the spread of new forms of capitalism, debt came to be seen as a necessary risk, and failure to pay was not considered as ‘criminal’ as other types of wrongdoing. The social relations engendered through this ‘accounting for justice’ lay the groundwork of the capitalist entrepreneur subject, discussed in later chapters.

Joseph also discusses the specific technologies of accounting that were used to justify and abstractify the continued oppression of freed slaves during the Reconstruction period in post-civil war US. Double-entry book-keeping was used in the South to ‘re-enslave’. This was done through elaborate records that were ‘primarily detailed notations of deductions of various amounts from the payment due to the worker, not only for materials and cash advances but also for time’ (2014, 53): sickness or idleness were penalised at three times the normal rate, for example, and the law upheld these documents of debt in court. Through detailing how accounting has been used for *injustice,* Joseph asks us to consider how it is ‘valuable to attend to the procedures of abstraction and particularization by which particularities are articulated in, through, with generalized laws’ (2014, 55), arguing that if ‘the circulation of capital and the elaboration of the liberal state operate through racializing technologies of accounting that simultaneously deploy abstraction and particularlization, then we recognise that each is not likely to pose much of a barrier to the other’ (2014,55). That is, it is pointless to pit the abstract and the particular against each other as we try to enable different, potentially non-capitalist, social and economic relations. And more than this: Joseph asks us to consider that:

…the centrality of accounting suggests that epistemological interventions are possible, that alternative writings and readings might produce alternative particularizations and abstractions, might bind subjects differently or not at all (2014, 55).

That is, if accounting can be used to actively wreak injustice, can it also be reclaimed in the name of justice?

In our *karanga* call and response, this is perhaps the most difficult chapter for which to form an adequate reply. Joseph calls in a dialect far removed from my everyday and academic life. Yet as I disentangle and dwell in her words, I start to see how what she is doing resonates with my own project (and that of the CEC more generally), which is finding glimmers of possibility where something other than capitalism might be produced (Morrow and Dombroski 2015). I am compelled to not just consider, as I usually do, all the postcapitalist and noncapitalist and alternative capitalist class processes that are simultaneously going on (Gibson-Graham 1996). I am also compelled, as I begin to listen to Joseph’s iterative argument, to consider how even the capitalist accounting processes might be somehow transformed into sites of ‘a postcapitalist politics’(Gibson-Graham 2006). I cannot yet see the practicalities of it. There are glimmers in the storytelling mode of restorative justice and the use of social accounting to attribute criminality (or at least immorality) to the problematic accounting practices of multinational corporations. There are glimmers in the clever turn of phrase – rather than thinking of criminals as having a debt to society, how might we consider the debt society owes them for not providing conditions for thriving?

In the same way as the civil rights movement and the second wave feminist movement used ubiquity as a basis for diverse strategies that resulted in society-wide changes, perhaps we, too, can turn glimmers of possibility in accounting into the beginning of society-wide changes. I am therefore hopeful that different forms of accounting might spark transformation of society in favour of social and economic justice. In fact, CEC work is beginning to act along these same lines: in a recent bookGibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013)provide toolkits of alternative ‘people’s accounting’ for ‘taking back’ work, business, market, property and finance. I imagine a comparable ‘people’s accounting’ toolkit Joseph might develop for ‘taking back justice’ – what would this entail?

**Call and Response IV: On entrepreneurial subjectivity**

For now, one of Joseph’s main ‘tools’ is dialectics. In the chapter ‘Accounting for Time: the entrepreneurial subject in crisis’, Joseph invites us to consider dialectically what the *negation* of the capitalist entrepreneurial subjectivity would look like, and how this negation or failure of capitalist entrepreneurial subjectivity in some people is necessary to the constitution of the capitalist entrepreneurial subjectivity in others. The entrepreneurial subjectivity is primarily about accounting for one’s time as an investment and asset, and Joseph implies that for as many people who ‘successfully’ inhabit such an ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’, there are as many who cannot. Joseph attends to the details and diversity of these subject positions, showing how the capitalist entrepreneurial subjectivity is out of reach for so many, even as it works to blame the poor for not doing things properly. What stands out in this chapter is the staccato quality of the *karanga*, as Joseph reflexively displays the breaks in her own entrepreneurial subjectivity (which is so desired and promoted by the neoliberal university in which she works) by commenting throughout the chapter on interruptions to her time – ‘self interruptions, tangents off the direct path toward professional advancement’ (2014, 81).

My response is again preceded by a long silence. I, too, was interrupted in writing this section, not so much by breaks in my entrepreneurial subjectivity, but by the performances required to maintain it. The same week this piece of writing was due, so too was my promotion application. I spent time constructing and evidencing a timeline of academic ‘success’ even as I was quietly becoming more aware – and disturbed by – how much of an entrepreneurial subjectivity I have embraced. The exercise highlighted my privileged status among women with small children, because my husband takes on the majority of childcare. Despite breastfeeding and pregnancies and such child-bearing related disruptions to paid work, I am released from much of the other reproductive labours of life. How easy it is to start congratulating oneself for success, despite its dependence on the labour of others! How easy from there to slip into condemning those who fail or refuse entrepreneurial subjectivity as ‘irresponsible’ or ‘irrational’ (Joseph 2014, 88), despite the role of structural, racial, gender and class processes in this failure or refusal!

Feeling bad about our attachments to certain kinds of privileged subjectivities is not enough. My question is how do we then do the difficult work of producing in ourselves and others different kinds of subjectivities, that can desire and perform something other than capitalism? This is where the work of the Community Economies Collective steps in, with experimental performative action research that attempts to call into being and ‘cultivate’ the ‘reluctant subjects’ of diverse economies (See examples in Gibson-Graham 2006). It is in this transformation of subjectivity that social change might become more possible.

**Call and Response V: Gendered Finance**

In the chapter ‘Accounting for Gender: Norms and Pathologies of Personal Finance’, Joseph articulates the ways neoliberal discourses of personal finance pathologize women, through drawing on gendered norms to mark the boundaries of acceptable or normal entrepreneurial subjectivity. She writes:

… gendered norms play a key role in articulating neoliberal norms more broadly. Specifically, negative, pathologized portrayals of women as impulsive shopaholics on the one hand and paralysed non-investors on the other indicate the boundaries of responsible entrepreneurial subjectivity (2014, 92).

Gendered differences in personal financial management, Joseph argues, are described in neoliberal discourse as psychological differences or problems, which may then be experienced as ‘aspirational models or ideals that are lived in the mode of failure’(2014, 97). In this way, the entrepreneurial subject is normalised and women – particularly poor women of colour – are pathologized, with no mention of the structural and social processes that give women and men different opportunities with regards to earnings and finance.

Despite all this, Joseph observes a discursive shift during the Global Financial Crisis towards women’s financial styles: men were framed as risky over-investors and women as pessimistic realists. But again the winner is entrepreneurialism – women are praised for not panicking, leaving their money ‘in the market’, which does its ‘natural’ thing, while men are criticised for (shopaholic) over-trading, driving up costs and lowering returns. Gender is in discursive service to neoliberalism. Joseph finishes with a gesture towards the Occupy movement, who sought to ‘stay’, ‘remain immobile’, and to also argue that this ‘feminine’ action is in fact the norm for the ‘99%’.

As our call and response continues, I move closer to the space Joseph is holding open, a forecourt or *marae* where hosts and guestsexchange skilled oratories. Of all the chapters, this was the easiest for me to read, as well as having the most underlinings and scrawls in the margins. I thought of how ‘mumpreneurs’(Ekinsmyth 2011) and ‘Māuipreneurs’[[1]](#endnote-1) (Keelan 2010) have been incorporated into the service of neoliberalism in the UK and NZ respectively. I thought of how birthing and breastfeeding serve as markers for the ‘boundaries’ of humanity, as women’s bodies may be feared for their apparent lack of solid boundaries (where does mother end and baby begin?) (Longhurst 2001). Yet women are just over 50% of the population. If you add in others who don’t fit the ‘normality’ of the entrepreneurial subject – refugees, those on welfare, the working class, stay at home parents, children, the retired, subsistence farmers, people living on tribal lands or isolated communities … – well, it’s not hard to see that while we might not get to 99%, ‘we’ can certainly claim a majority.

While I sometimes employ the 99%/1% or ‘majority world’/’minority world’ dichotomies for specific purposes (such as challenging undergraduate students to consider their own ‘minority’ status globally), at heart I am more interested in employing strategies that show diversity. The work of the Community Economies Collective is sometimes critiqued for seeming to ignore gender in imagining new forms of economy (Bauhardt 2014), yet close reading of Gibson-Graham’s work reveals an ongoing project of normalising the diversity of economic activities that come to light when we deliberately pay attention to what *women* are doing. As Gibson-Graham argue in their contribution to the *Women and the Politics of Place*  project, (Gibson-Graham 2005), highlighting the ubiquity of women and their diverse (capitalist, alternative capitalist and noncapitalist) economic activities is part of the inspiration for claiming that capitalism is much smaller than it is made out to be. These supposedly ‘feminine’ ways of being in the economy are potentially the basis of a new normal for all. Mapping beyond the borders of an ‘acceptable subjectivity’ thus seems like a worthwhile project.

**Call and Response VI: For Slow Scholarship?**

Joseph shifts focus to the university with the final chapter, ‘Accounting for interdisciplinarity: Contesting value in the academy’. She hits home hard with a quote form Meyerhoff *et al.*:

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 (2011, 493, cited in Joseph, 2014, 120).

Hence, Joseph argues, ‘all of us’ in the academy need to be the ‘social movement that keeps the pressure on our “leaders”’ (2014, 120), despite our tendency to ‘freely’ regulate our behaviour to meet the measured goals laid out by our employers. And of course, what is measured is generally what *can* be measured, which may not represent our complex work adequately. Yet Joseph counsels continued struggle with measurement, asking us to recognise that the ‘current regime of accountability is the *non-inevitable* outcome of struggle and strategy’ (2014, 143, my emphasis), and therefore, we too might intervene and manipulate modes of accounting and accountability, and ‘reshape what counts and who gets to count’ (2014, 143). Joseph tells of proposing a ‘social network analysis’ type diagram to account for interdisciplinarity (rather than graphs ranking disciplines on their engagement with private enterprise), which was dismissed as too difficult, but was perhaps worth fighting for – since she suspects the arts, humanities and social sciences might do well in that measurement. And further struggles lie ahead: not just struggling for ‘our’ value to be recognised in the university, but imagining and struggling for a public mode of accounting *for* justice, as in, on behalf of justice? Joseph returns to her themes of debt, crime, critical abstraction, social hierarchy and racial formation in her last pages, asking, finally, might ‘we’ as academics be hailed in the process of creating this accounting for justice?

Joseph’s voice trails off rather suddenly – where are the answers to the questions so provocatively raised? I guess, like the *karanga*, the end of the call is supposed to be the beginning of the real discussion. In the wake of her provocative silence, it is my turn to respond on behalf of others. This is what I ask: Who will now be gathered in the *wharenui* or meeting house for this *hui* and debate? How do we now collectively go forward to develop new accountings? How do we do this in the places where we live and work?

Just this week, I have attended troubling meetings where neoliberal university measures were imposed on a postgraduate student; I was certainly operating less-than-radically as I sat in silence. But I have also organised a discussion of a paper enticingly titled ‘For Slow Scholarship’ by the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective (Mountz et al. Forthcoming). While the paper is not developing alternative measures, it does start a discussion among some of us as how we might do that. The authors actually cite their own reviewer, who turns out to be at another New Zealand university, where the neoliberal accounting practices required of the geography department are actually harnessed in the name of conviviality:

… professors in [the] programme group converted the process of individual portfolio production into a collective, community-building activity. The faculty went on a day-long retreat to one professor’s home where they workshopped portfolios, shared food, and then stayed on for more food, wine and music … This process involved mentoring and collective critical reflection on how to measure and frame productivity, enhancing collective identity and reducing the anxiety of the review process (Moutnz *et al.* 2015, 1243).

Likewise, right now in an Italian *convento*, other members of the Community Economies Collective have gathered for the second time to work on articles and publications that advance our collective theoretical work. Sometimes, they literally prepare ‘slow food’ gathered from within a few kilometres of the site, while they practice the ‘slow scholarship’ of savouring and creating work for ‘pleasure *and* productivity’ (Nairn et al. 2015, 596).

Although I find the slow scholarship movement and the antipodean examples of convivial reworking of academic productivity and accounting practices inspiring (Mountz *et al.* 2015, Nairn *et al.* 2015), Joseph is right in pushing us towards developing concrete alternative tools for accounting. Yet I suspect it is in these convivial settings that our resubjectification is nurtured, and thus where new ideas and tools for measuring may develop. The time is indeed ripe for new abstraction and accounting that co-constitutes different kinds of subjects: not just through our customary practice of cultivating different discourses, but through ‘people’s accounting’ practices where new measurements and visualisations put debt accounting to the service of society rather than the other way around. One such example is the Social Return on Investment (SROI) measure, which attempts to quantify the social and environmental considerations of an investment. Further quantification work could also be done on the Community Economies Return on Investment suggested in Gibson-Graham *et al*.’s *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013).

In this review, Joseph’s book is one side of a *karanga* calling us to engagement with accounting practices, and my response is that of just one *Pākehā[[2]](#endnote-2)* woman of Aotearoa New Zealand with ties to the Community Economies Collective. The international *hui* is open, and some of us are already gathering here. Our agenda is to reframe accounting and its attendant subjectivities for a better, postcapitalist world, ***mō tātou, ā, mō kā uri ā muri ake nei*** – for us and our children after us[[3]](#endnote-3).

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1. **Notes**

   ‘Māuipreneurs’ is term coined by Terongonui Josie Keelan, reinterpreting the mischievous behaviour of legendary demigod Māui as ‘entrepreneurial’ and as a model for young Māori entrepreneurs. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Pākehā* refers to New Zealanders of European descent. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This *whakatauki* or proverb was chosen by the Ngāi Tahu tribe of the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand to describe their approach to investing their treaty settlement monies.

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