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Curiosity and Anti-Economy: A Response to Florian Jatón

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Like Florian Jatón (2022, 2021), I don't have a lot of time for experiences that can't be scrapped for parts and exchanged for healthcare benefits and other requisites to bare life. The book is as battered as he imagines, and dirty—I read a lot of it on the floor of my apartment, which reminded me of reading when I first learned to read—and I was grateful for a project that consigned me to it. Those outside the academy would be surprised at how little academics actually read, at least once grad school is over. We feel bad and blame the neoliberal university; all the while, the encounter lives in a different place. Even when it's our job, reading is separate from duty. To do it is to concede that no other activity loses and finds you as it can. It's hits of acid on cheerless days, and not in doses that boost your work ethic.

But academics have to write. There's a problem here. To write is to deceive, but we're professionally obliged to the truth. My understanding of deception goes beyond the poetic license of the scholarly essayist who cares a bit for literary flourishes. It's the departure from truth entailed by reading in any genre, since reading blinds us to the distance between truth and fiction. The problem is that academia can't shake its allegiance to the former. To really read anything, even a scholarly book, is to seal oneself off from the world, or the province of the verifiably true. The process helps you inhabit someone else's imagination. This is why academia disenchants: we read to instruct others on the bond between words and truth. Year in, year out, we betray the encounter.

As an undergraduate, I studied literature, and came to appreciate that truth can be both groundless and internally consistent. Today, I work across the disciplines of philosophy and STS. Sometimes I have to explain why passages like the following, from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, aren't fiction:

... on being confronted with a complete machine made up of six stones in the right-hand pocket of my coat (the pocket that serves as the source of the stones), five stones in the right-hand pocket of my trousers, and five in the left-hand pocket (transmission pockets), with the remaining pocket of my coat receiving the stones that have already been handled, as each of the stones moves forward one pocket, how can we determine the effect of this circuit of distribution in which the mouth, too, plays a role as a stone-sucking machine? ¹

The Constitution of Algorithms (2021) didn't give me such a headache. That doesn't mean it was easy to write about. The author may not "police interpretations," but there are still false steps to be taken. Thankfully for me as the reviewer, curiosity has the opposite effect on each. Both are adventure books in the sense meant by Jatón, but Deleuze and Guattari need the reader to humor them. From its opening sentences (which are too vulgar to reproduce here), the writing warns you not to ask where it's going. Their strangeness-as-method could only come from fascination so intense it breaks the rational mind. Jatón's curiosity, on the other hand, speaks to the order implicit in a labyrinthine research initiative. The precision and

¹ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (New York, NY: Viking Press), 3.

patience with which he breaks down technical topics for non-specialists tells of a sincerity uncommon to academic work. (I'm sorry). When I started it, I was struck by his efforts towards interdisciplinary accessibility. By the end, I understood why he engaged so many different kinds of readers.

I teach courses in technology ethics. Sometimes I ask my students, mostly computer science majors, if coding makes them curious. They assume the more contextually appropriate of the word's two meanings—you should reflect on whatever you do repeatedly—but I think about both: curious also meaning strange. Writing cultivates and feeds on an unusual state of attention, one that's incommensurate with the world-involving consciousness one needs to stay alive under advanced capitalism. When the poet Anne Boyer declares that “not writing is working,” and that a lot of “not writing” comes from “cynicism, disappointment, political outrage, heartbreak, resentment, and realistic thinking,” she's proposing, by means of negation, something similar: an ontology of the practice of writing.² Whatever writing is, it dislocates us from the places where we must work to survive. This is the case for writing in all genres, but I'm not sure if it applies to writing code.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that computer science is a capitalist discipline.³ From my experience, an uncynically curious/economically useless consciousness is helpful for seeing politics in algorithms. With that said, it'd be dangerous to accept this suggestion, since it means capitalism won't die until we kill the computer, which will never happen. I agree with Jatón that computers now do more world-building than books, and I agree with the premise of his book, which is that we should care about those worlds. I wonder what algorithms would constitute if they came from poetry's anti-economic visions.

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² Boyer, Anne. “Not Writing.” *Bookforum Magazine*, July 22, 2015. <https://www.bookforum.com/culture/not-writing-14813>.

³ As they write: “the most shameful moment came when computer science, marketing, design, and advertising, all the disciplines of communication, seized hold of the word concept itself and said: ‘This is our concern, we are the creative ones, we are the ideas men! We are the friends of the concept, we put it in our computers.’” Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), 10.