

ON JAMMING: “STUDY” AND THE UNSTUDIED

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In the early summer of 2017, Nicola Paladin, Alice Balestrino, and I reconvened in the Brace Commons at Dartmouth College to explore opportunities and outlooks for the AISNA Graduate Forum, the network of early-career researchers within the Italian Association for American Studies to which we belong. At the peak of the intellectual stimulation and the inevitable exhaustion that characterize the Futures of American Studies Institute, we began to speculate on potential tactics to stir the proverbial pot within (and beyond) the Italian academic-scape. Among our concerns was a sense of comparative insulation, especially between early career and tenured scholars and among the fields represented within the organization (mainly literature and history) and those excluded from it. How could we get scholars investigating the American hemisphere through different disciplinary lenses to interact more, and more actively, with one another? How could we put in conversation the different disciplinary clusters operating within and without the association? How could we connect scholars across geographical and generational lines? How could we foster transnational scholarly cross-pollination? How could we overcome the alienation that afflicts early career academics and especially first-generation graduate students? It did not take us long to realize that an academic journal could both serve as the tangible manifestation of the exchanges occurring within the Graduate Forum and provide a medium to broaden the spatial and intellectual scope of the conversation taking place in the realm of American Studies in Italy.

The inaugural issue of *JAm It!* comes into being almost two years after we first lucid dreamed it on that gusty New England night. However easy it might be to fall for such a definitive mythology, allow me to clarify that its origins cannot be solely identified in the enthusiasm of three individuals, nor in a single historical event. *JAm It!* came together as

an assemblage, as what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called a “fragmentary whole,” a multiplicity in which what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what is *between* them, the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other (1994, 16). Such relations were informed by feelings, events, and relationships that unfolded and developed over a decade. For one, Manlio Della Marca’s polemic on the state of American Studies in Italy at the Centro Studi Americani in Rome in 2014. Della Marca’s call to arms to both junior faculty and graduate students, and his encouragement to try and reshuffle the hierarchies in our field of study, inspired my friendship with Marco Petrelli. Ever since, the two of us have attempted to devise ways not to merely *inhabit* but to *thrive* within a system intrinsically unable to empower and support us. The desire to retrieve a sense of the possible within an academic discourse often predicated upon a rhetoric of internal crisis and naturalized structural exploitation has also been the very catalyst for the development of a tight knit network of care in Turin, Naples, and New York City during my years as a graduate student. Within such contexts, the fellowship among the founding members of *JAm It!*’s editorial board – Claudio de Majo, Robert Moscaliuc, Angela Zottola, and Iuri Moscardi, in addition to those mentioned above – first developed. I, and we, can only hope the ethos that ensued from such spaces, and that informs our academic praxis, emerges in the pages that follow.

JAm It! aims to be yet another manifestation of the solidarity and tactics of resistance developed by and among graduate students, untenured faculty, and independent scholars locally and globally in and through their attempts to stay afloat and produce relevant scholarship within a system that works against the very conditions of possibility of their critical thinking and being. As an editorial board, as a Graduate Forum, as a network of care that stretches across continents and disciplines, we invite early career scholars in Italy and beyond to look horizontally, rather than vertically. Invoking Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the botanical rhizome to describe theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points, we promote a horizontal and non-hierarchical conception of knowledge, where anything (and anyone) may be linked to anything (and

anyone) else. As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the arboreal system that charts causality along chronological lines and gestures towards, on the one hand, an original source and, on the other, a pinnacle or conclusion. In Deleuze and Guattari's model, culture spreads like the surface of a body of water: outwards or trickling downwards towards new spaces, through fissures and gaps, eroding what is in its way. In the formal and quasi-feudal structures we inhabit as precarious scholars and workers, structures that work against the very ontology of critical inquiry, we invoke the rhizome to encourage scholars to look horizontally for spaces of intellectual development – to rely on each other and abandon arborescent conceptions of knowledge and advancement in favor of otherwise modes of looking at and through, other modes of listening, feeling, and experiencing critically.

JAm It! is thus born in opposition to conditions of academic labor that are uncondusive to what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have called “study,” a mode of critical engagement where the object of inquiry is but the *occasion* for its own existence. Neither bleak scrutiny nor quasi-religious worship of its subject, “study” is but a mean to enter a social world grounded in solidarity, intellectual generosity, and mutual conduciveness. *JAm It!* strives to achieve a kind of ecologizing with the communities it engages – a *modus operandi* discouraged (or at the very least, not encouraged) by both the “Publish or Perish” rationale that drives academia but also by the dynamics of a job market that often encourages uncritical pedagogy and production of knowledge marked by stasis and safeness. With regards to “study,” Harney and Moten write

Is there a way to be in the undercommons that isn't intellectual? Isn't there a way of being intellectual that isn't social? When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. ... The point of calling it 'study' is to mark the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. ... To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. (2013, 110)

Riffing off Moten and Harney, *JAm It!* is a kind of thinking *with*: an attempt to see the academy as a vehicle to move us and move us *through* and *into* some new thinking, set of relations, and ways of being together, thinking together.

We believe refusing the imperatives of academic capitalism is particularly critical at a time when, as Ashley Dawson eloquently phrased in his opening editorial, we are inhabiting “a state of perpetual unacknowledged crisis, one of secular economic stagnation and [...] increasingly patent ideological bankruptcy of neoliberalism” (this issue, 13). We hold our community and communities accountable to push against the logics of what Mark Fisher calls “capital realism” and the pressure they put on our intellectual praxis. *JAm It!* encourages its contributors to resist self-referentiality, production for the sake of production, and dogmatic modes of critique; in other words, scholarship induced by what Franco “Bifo” Berardi defines as “governance [that] produces pure functionality without meaning, the automation of thought and will” (2011, 138). *JAm It!* attempts to break free from conceptions of knowledge informed by the tyranny of productivity. By lowering the stakes, we acknowledge the value of (and the necessity for) failure and pleasure in scholarly research; by encouraging scholars to experiment with different intellectual, academic, and editorial practices, we hope, at least in the privileged time and space that this journal creates and occupies, to reshuffle oxidized practices and arbitrary academic hierarchies.

Through *JAm It!*, we aim to create a platform for an upcoming generation of scholars to engage with the editorial process, gain professional experience, and foster community within and across generational lines. After two years of work, we have come to think of the intellectual conversation within *JAm It!* as a set of jam sessions, of informal solos, as what in Jazz is called a hang: an alchemical amalgamate of high level of musicianship, a relaxed atmosphere, and a sympathetic intergenerational crowd. The jam session is the heart of the after-hours jazz scene, a when/where often associated with what Shane Vogel calls “closing time, [...] the legislated hour by which nightclubs and bars must stop serving and close their doors, [...] a historical mode of temporality that reorganizes the normative temporal

order upon which logics of familial reproduction and capitalist productivity are constituted and maintained” (2009, 112). *JAm It!*’s very modes of production – from below; decentered; fragmented; irregular; dramatic; affectionate; queer, if you will – cast it as a journal that operates in similar modes of fugitivity. Jam sessions also foster what Samuel R. Delaney calls *contact* – modes of casually promoted opportunity, social interaction, and conversations that challenge structured *networking* encounters, such as conferences, workshops, and cocktail parties, often promoted under the rubric of productivity – moments where *things happen*, when the social fabric of a scene is maintained and interwoven. We believe it is in this setting of fugitivity, stripped of the roles set upon us by the structure, that younger and older generations of scholars can interact freely effectively. Within this space, we encourage love, exchange, fellowship, and a reconfiguration of being and belonging that can only be achieved via a tear down, however temporary, of the system we inhabit. Jamming sessions exist in and for their audience and the ambiance is part not only of their execution, but also of their inception. They teach us that the absence of a formal structure calls for a kind of experimentation that engenders spontaneous and informal modes of being. At the same time, jamming does not eschew rigor, but rather calls for a heightened attention to one another, to the care and growth of our individual and collective capacity.

JAm It! did not come to life without some of the emotional, intellectual, and methodological turmoil that characterizes the productive, active, and unending process of creating being-in-common. Not only does a common not pre-exist the agonistic struggle to activate it, but, as per Stuart Hall’s retrospective on his experience at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, such struggles are often “central to reorganiz[ing academic] fields in concrete ways” (1996, 269). For our moments of both collective enthusiasm and internal friction, my uttermost gratitude to the editorial board, to Lorenzo Costaguta and Virginia Pignagnoli (my fellow co-chairs of the AISNA Graduate Forum), and the AISNA Board. Especially instrumental to this endeavor have been Elisabetta Vezzosi, Andrea Carosso, Fiorenzo Iuliano, Gianna Fusco, and Serenella Iovino

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