There is a tremendous amount of speculative labor (or performance of labor) aimed, optimistically, at possible payment later involved in building an academic career in the neoliberal “entrepreneurial” university; and much of it takes place in spaces that are simultaneously/indistinguishably “work” and “leisure.” This paper will draw on my experiences as director of graduate studies in my department, responsible for helping our graduate students envision and construct careers, and as chair of the committee in our department that crafted the “Self-Study” for our required septennial Academic Program Review, which is undertaken in good faith in the hope that it might persuade the higher levels of administrators to invest additional resources in the unit.

I will situate the personal and institutional investments/attachments we enact through these activities in the context of the entrepreneurialism of the university as subject of/to larger forces of financialized capitalism; Curtis Marez has called the university as it operates in this mode “the university of debt.” I refer to this as a “cruel” entrepreneurial university, with reference to Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of “cruel optimism” as an attachment to something, “a cluster of promises” that is “actually an obstacle to your flourishing.” That is, the optimism we enact in our speculative performances of labor towards academic careers and program building may actually be self-undermining, serving an institution or
economic system in which we are exploited as workers or dispossessed by being subjected as debtors.

After sketching this scene, I will consider possible responses and forms of resistance. Building on the work of Randy Martin and Chris Newfield among others, I will consider what can be accomplished through alternative modes of accounting to reshape value in the academy; I propose, optimistically, that such counter accounts might articulate transformatively different stories of who owes what to whom. I will also explore the visions of resistant collectivities that have been offered by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in the essays now collected in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* as well as in José Muñoz’s late work on the “brown commons,” which seem to suggest that it is possible and necessary to detach from the cruel object and make some elsewhere rather than engage and struggle with it.