



# Vulnerabilities, complicities and injustices: ‘Tim-adical’ actions for change in the neoliberal academy

Tim-adical Writing Collective

## abstract

Early career academics face their own particular set of issues when it comes to struggling with the neoliberal university. In this note, we consider how our responses to the neoliberalization of academia – whether in teaching, research or other activities – promote justice or not. Rather than theorize justice in the abstract, our goal is to tease apart the injustices, vulnerabilities and complicities of our workplaces. We draw upon our individual experiences, which span six institutions across six countries, to explore how mundane choices and everyday actions might enable us to resist the neoliberal pressures on our work and our labour. We do this by acknowledging that there is a real possibility that we come to embody neoliberalism in our choices, decisions and habits. That is, we are disciplined and become self-disciplining in turn, in order to survive. We explore this tension through a series of experiential vignettes that help to frame our everyday resistance as ‘tim-adical’ action, both radical and timid at the same time.

## Introduction

While we could start this piece by theorizing ‘the University’ as a neoliberal institution, it is rather a redundant task when others have got there well before us. Various scholars, writers, journalists and activists have described, discussed and conceptualized the corporatization (e.g. Castree and Sparke, 2000), commercialization (e.g. Slaughter and Rhoades, 1996), commodification (e.g. Mirowski, 2011) and corruption (Gill, 2009) of higher education. This is not limited to one country or another, instead stretching from the antipodes to Europe and beyond (e.g. Belina et al., 2013; Cupples and Pawson, 2012; Dowling,

2008; Lerner and LeHeron, 2005; NZGS-PG Network, 2014; Shore, 2010; Shore and McLauchlan, 2012).

As early career academics in both permanent and insecure positions in the tertiary sector, we think it is important to consider our own responses to this neoliberalization of the academy. For us, this raises a critical question: do our responses to neoliberalism (through our pedagogical approaches, our publications, our activism) that are intended to create progressive change in the academy actually promote justice? We ask this question acknowledging that we do not have a singular definition of justice against which to measure ourselves. The politics of distribution, representation, and recognition interweave in complex ways to create situations that we individually and collectively recognize as more or less just (Fraser, 2013).

Rather than theorize justice in the abstract, our goal is to tease apart the injustices, vulnerabilities and complicities of our workplaces. Although there have been numerous attempts to define justice in the face of neoliberalism (see for example Butler, 2004; Fraser, 2013; Sen, 2011; Young, 2011), we choose to work from the simple principle that injustice is perpetuated when the work, lives, and dignity of certain individuals and groups are valued less than others. We seek to identify the choices and actions we can take to support more just social relations on an everyday basis rather than asserting the need to storm the ramparts of the university. It is the daily, mundane, repetitive nature of our lives and their consequences that leads us to demand 'tim-adical' actions – timid, yet radical at the same time (The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012a; 2012b). We believe tim-adical action to be an important intervention at this time, as it acknowledges the economic precarity many of us find ourselves in under the current neoliberal regime, while also providing space for our need to make change. We seek ways to incorporate justice into our work environments while also trying to maintain whatever job stability we do have. We find that we must negotiate a tenuous balance through these tim-adical actions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'tim-adical' emerged after an earlier publication (The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012a) in which we problematized the precarity many of us felt as early career academics with the need to challenge and contest the uneven effects of the neoliberalization of the institutions in which we worked. We were later challenged for not being radical but being timid (Canally, 2012). In reply, we argued that yes perhaps our proposed actions were timid, but they were also radical in that they 'were motivated by a material recognition of the increasingly constrained spaces in which new academics work and the need for solidarity and action, however small' (The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012b: 4). We have therefore embraced the term tim-adical to reflect this ongoing struggle.

In this short piece we seek to open up some spaces for debate about the position of new and early career academics in the neoliberal academy. We present a range of vignettes highlighting mundane and everyday injustices and responses to these injustices. The vignettes are reflections on our own experiences that spanned roles from senior doctoral candidate to relatively secure early career academic in six different institutions across six countries (Canada, Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America), between 2013 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> While we recognize ‘the historical contingency, geographical specificity and political complexity’ of tertiary institutions (Larner and Le Heron, 2005: 845), we have intentionally avoided identifying the specific countries and institutions of the different vignettes because in some cases, anonymity is necessary to protect either authors and/or other parties referred to.

It is worth noting, though, that the tertiary education sector in the different countries has experienced similar neoliberalization processes, even if there is variability in the extent to which different processes and their effects have occurred. Considering the space available here, we can only indicate some of these processes and direct the reader to specific research in each of the countries. Neoliberalization in these tertiary sectors include calculative audit cultures, national research assessment exercises, erosion of collegial governance, growth of metric-based prestige systems, reduced funding and increased casualization of labour (for the UK, see Cruikshank, 2016; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013; for USA and Canada, see Mountz et al., 2015; for Aotearoa New Zealand, see Cupples and Pawson, 2012; for Germany, see Belina et al., 2013; and for the Netherlands, see Bal et al., 2014).

Our aim in the rest of this paper is to illustrate how the ‘neoliberal academy’ and its hierarchical predecessors are embodied in our choices, identities, performances and actions. Consequently, we argue that resistance to these pressures is also very much embodied and performative. Identifying where and how we might change the academy through our engagement in everyday moments is, therefore, an important task for understanding how we might change forms of vulnerable and unjust academic labour. When we think about what creating everyday spaces of justice means for us, we cannot help but think about the ways in which we are implicated in many of these systems of

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<sup>2</sup> Each member of the Collective was asked to write a brief story about an experience of injustice occurring within the institution where they worked or were studying. We then discussed the various experiences, situated them within the growing body of literature on the neoliberalization of tertiary institutions with a view to writing an intervention that troubles the nexus of complicity and vulnerability for early career academics.

oppression and violence in our everyday decisions to be silent, to speak out, or to offer support.

## Hierarchies and vulnerabilities

### *Vignette 1: Patriarchal impunity and emotional labour*

The maintenance of the status quo has significant and ongoing effects on vulnerable individuals within our institutions. Sexism and racism within academia are painfully familiar tropes and practices that we recognize from the past, yet they are still very active in our contemporary academic environments, and, as we suggest, bound up with the divisions of power within neoliberal institutions. The ways in which research outputs and funding is prioritized under neoliberalized metrics and accounting practices privileges historical gendered hierarchies and networks within institutions and even protects those who breach regulations and norms of conduct but perform well within the audit culture. The vignette below demonstrates how the neoliberalization of institutions can intersect with and perpetuate more traditional patriarchal hierarchies. It also highlights the complexity invoked as academic subjectivities are reworked to 'serve institutional productivity in a way that entrenches the hierarchical valuation of "women's time"' (Mountz et al., 2015: 1242).

There is a faculty member in our department who was found in violation of university policy regarding sexual harassment, but he continues working with no apparent restrictions on his teaching or access to undergraduates. Every time I see him walking through the halls of our department, my stomach turns and my face tightens as I try to swallow my anger. For those of us not directly involved, there is little we can do to pursue the case legally. Yet we still have to live with him and the impunity he enjoys in our work environment.

Many of us in the department have taken on the informal emotional labour of protecting ourselves and others from his manipulations. When we see someone in his office who fits his 'type', we make a point of connecting with that person, gently suggesting that they not rely on him. We provide other resources, offering our own support or connecting them to other faculty members. We try to buffer vulnerable students from prolonged engagement with him. This work is done primarily by female graduate students and faculty members. It is an informal system through which we make life a little better for others, but it puts more work on us and is a drain on both time and emotion.

While academic institutions have traditionally been male-dominated spaces (Bondi, 1993; Bondi and Peake, 1988; Mahtani, 2006; Pulido, 2002), where 'predatory' sexual behaviour was common, we suggest that audit culture provides a means by which such behaviour continues to be condoned. One wonders whether the senior faculty member in this story would have been protected had

he not 'measured up' within the audit culture. And indeed, had he not, would the sexual harassment charge have been precisely the vehicle through which to end the tenure of a 'non-performing' faculty member. Simultaneously, while those within the inner circle of patriarchal power are protected, those in more vulnerable positions take on the emotional labour of protection with those subject to discrimination and harassment. This labour is made invisible within neoliberal institutions focused on measurable outputs and assessment matrices. While we would not stop this sort of supportive emotional labour, we question whether or not we are living our politics by doing so. While we believe it is important for the individuals we are supporting, we wonder if we are simultaneously letting the system discipline us into silence and acceptance of the institution's status quo.

*Vignette 2: Intersecting vulnerabilities*

The perpetual scarcity of funding in the neoliberal academy creates competition for the limited resources available. This competition tends to reinforce the status quo as those in positions of power become gatekeepers. Precarity becomes the norm for early career academics, precarity that is exacerbated by other forms of discrimination.

A few years ago, our department had an accomplished post-doctoral fellow, a visible minority, doing postcolonial scholarship and practicing subaltern methodologies. Acknowledging that she was an asset to our intellectual community, the department offered her a fixed term, non-tenure track (NTT) line with the supposed goal of finding money for a tenure track position for her. But as soon as she went into the NTT, it was as if she lost all value. When a new tenure-track position was advertised in the department, the posting was not written to include her work. In the end, the position was offered to a white woman, a North American whose work closely aligned with others already in the department. In the process, our department lost the only postcolonial scholar specifically teaching non-eurocentric social theory.

What happened here? Was it that she challenged the theoretical assumptions of other faculty members? Or, as a visible minority, was she 'presumed incompetent' (Gutierrez y Mus et al., 2012)? Or, was it simply work overload that meant she could not publish? Of course, it was some combination of the above. Consequently, it is impossible to point the finger at any one person in any department for this type of outcome, but it is also impossible to accept that we had no control in this process. In this case, we question our complicity in perpetuating institutional structures and procedures by following 'the process'. Different departments have varying degrees of openness in the recruitment processes for new staff. Where they are open, we can ensure that we are actively engaged and vigilant to expose discriminatory practices for what they are. We can use our everyday connections with colleagues – our informal corridor chats – to

encourage different approaches to recruitment. That means being as engaged as possible in the hiring process and taking the time to meet with candidates. We are mindful that this puts yet more responsibility on us to do the labour of solidarity building and does not account for entrenched departmental politics, but it is at least a means of challenging the strict implementation of neoliberal matrices in assessing the value of a potential candidate.

## Complicities with neoliberalism

### *Vignette 3: Hierarchical complicities*

The trend of increasingly casualized teaching labour in the neoliberal academy is highly problematic – and it is probably down to those of us who have job security to step up to work toward solutions. There is a fine-grained hierarchy here, which generally includes: (a) graduate students who act as teaching assistants and sometimes run whole courses; (b) sessional or adjunct faculty who teach individual courses on a short-term, contractual basis; and (c) contract-limited faculty appointed on an annual or maybe longer-term basis, hired primarily to teach. If we then include permanent and secure faculty, there is a four-scale teaching hierarchy at most universities. Common to all institutions, however, is the dependence of permanent faculty on these precarious academic labourers – as is the university itself. Adjuncts take on extra teaching loads that result from sabbaticals and service or research buy-outs from teaching responsibilities for permanent faculty, as well as unexpected rises in student numbers, and so forth. They then take on the reverse livelihood burden (i.e. lost income) of losing teaching loads as permanent faculty return to teaching, student numbers decline, and so on. As much as it creates precarity, adjunctification can be identified as a neoliberal process of shifting responsibilities and management downwards onto permanent faculty – we become line managers, agents of discipline when it comes to the lives of adjuncts. There is a risk that our critical focus remains on our teaching and not its context; we find the time to challenge racism, sexism and inequality in our course content, but not always to change everyday working practices. In this we may be complicit as the following vignette illustrates:

Here it is important to think about my own, complicit role in the exploitation of adjuncts and teaching assistants. It has not escaped my notice that they are often better teachers than I am, often more committed, and often know more than me about the area I teach. I like to think that I have a better handle on the overall objectives and purposes of my courses – but I have no proof to support this claim. So, I end up managing people who might be better positioned to deliver my courses than me, but who, because of their insecure position, keep quiet or phrase their criticism of my actions in ways that don't hurt my feelings (not all do so though!). I find myself sitting at the top of one hierarchy and with an enormous

amount of influence over who works and who doesn't in my particular courses; for example, I am the one who selects the teaching assistants (TA) each year who work with me. Now, I don't know how this dependence on me impacts on these TAs lives and livelihoods, but I can guess [...] and in guessing, I realize how much power I exert in my daily life and through the decisions I make as a contributor to university governance.

How to counter this? Some of us try to share our workspaces with adjuncts who are not allocated space in the department. Others employ creative accounting by trying to pay more hours than are actually worked, adjusting pre-existing budgets upward wherever possible to account for the inevitable shortfall. We also try to provide other opportunities for publishing and research, mentoring where requested. And again the nature of these everyday subversions, while helpful and supportive to adjuncts, is individualized and may remain invisible. Strategically and openly discussing the nature of precarity inherent in the casualization of labour with senior (sympathetic) academics who may be in positions of relative power and who can shift hiring practices within departments is a further step in denaturalizing such hierarchies.

*Vignette 4: Self-disciplining complicity*

Another form of self-disciplining complicity refers to performance metrics, an increasingly prevalent management tool in the neoliberal academy (Castree, 2006; Mountz et al., 2015; Shore, 2008). Such metrics often require we develop future research plans, graduate supervision goals, and teaching development programmes. In countries like the UK there is also an increasing emphasis on identifying the 'impact' of our research – no matter how impractical that may be (Collini, 2011). Like any good new academic worker, we all spend time filling out forms while also being aware of how it disciplines us to be a good academic worker – one that is mindful of the requirement to publish the 'right' kind of articles in the 'right' kinds of journals. How this management-through-metrics is experienced is demonstrated by the next vignette:

My first formal professional development planning meeting was within three months of my arrival in my first academic post. I was nervous. It was the first meeting I'd had with the head of school since my appointment. I needn't have been – I was in and out of the meeting in less than 10 minutes. I had completed the required matrix, but I hadn't been told that the real purpose was to see how I was likely to perform in the national research assessment process that was coming up. If I had known, I would have included additional material and asked some further questions. I was duly assessed as an early career, and on the right track – better than the lowest category in which I might be at risk of being restructured out of a job (or had I been older, encouraged to retire early) and not close enough to the next category to be worth further thought. At the end of the meeting, I felt like I was dismissed, waved off, didn't really count. On the one hand, I felt relief – I had a license to not worry too much about my research outputs for the next 20

months. But on the other hand I was annoyed at the attitude, at being assessed and categorized within a set of crazy metrics rather than undertaking some constructive career planning in a supportive meeting with my senior colleagues. I felt annoyed that I wasn't given any support that might encourage me to work harder; that they thought I wasn't worth that investment (e.g. teaching relief). I felt that the process was unjust. Not only did I take it personally, I felt that early career academics were immediately disadvantaged by the assessment categories.

Even in the midst of our frustration about such measurements, we are aware of how we are responding as neoliberal subjects, frequently being measured and found wanting. We aspire to be 'good academics' but how we define that role differs from and yet is entangled with the institutional definitions inscribed in performance measures. We are shaped by these even as we contest them. As Cupples and Pawson (2012) write, drawing on Judith Butler's ideas of subjectivity as always fragmented, in process and comprised of multiple subject positions, we are subject to these (neoliberal) disciplinary technologies in having to 'give an account of ourselves' even as we seek to articulate our own path as 'academics'. The shaping effects and tensions of being always 'in-against-and-beyond' the neoliberal university (Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013), present us with the uneasiness of always being more or less neoliberal subjects, and complicit in that which we contest.

To achieve what we see as the possibilities of creating meaningful change to address injustices through academia (teaching, research, working with communities), we also have to comply with the institutional values, qualities and performance criteria we despise in academia – research outputs of a particular type, read only by those producing similar types of output, the increasingly metric focused assessments by citations, individual competition, and privileging research outputs at the expense of an appreciation of the value of learning and teaching. However, such metrics do not stop us finding alternative ways to produce and share our 'output' – like this article and its predecessors (The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012a, 2012b). Here we have deliberately sought to frame our writing as a collective process, which is itself one of our tim-adical actions in the university. By doing so, we challenge the focus on individual intellectual value and promote a collective voice in knowledge production.

## Undervalued labours

### *Vignette 5: Activism and advocacy*

In our current work contexts, activism and community engagement are still marginalized and undervalued in our lives as academics. While there is a range of institutional responses to such work – from active discouragement to an



expectation that it is done as yet another component of (but not replacement for) academic publishing, we find we are institutionally incentivized and disciplined to reproduce a narrow, academic community to which we can belong.

There are challenges with being, primarily, an academic and only secondarily a social justice advocate or activist. Often, important 'real world' work is sidelined in pursuit of my academic work. In some ways, apart from teaching, social justice seems to end up all but written out of the neoliberal universities equation.

This is, however, not always the case. For example, some scholar activists go out of their way to design classes that engage with community agreements. But this again comes at a cost:

In one case, a colleague teaches a class that is rooted in engaging with a community group and creating a final project that ends up being a public event. The problem is that this colleague's work is less appreciated by the university at a variety of scales, precisely because of this important engagement. They had more difficulty with the promotion process and have been less able to devote time to other aspects of academic life because of the time commitment in this type of work. As academics, we are by and large not rewarded for being unconventional inside our institutions.

Generally, our concern is with the role that advocacy work plays. On the one hand, we believe engagement outside the university should be normal. We need to encourage our respective institutions to provide us, as graduate students and early career faculty, with the space for community engagement that leads to the promotion of our work as social justice advocates, and to value this work as we value research. On the other hand, we have to recognize that an important part of our role in society *is* to contribute to academic debates and to drive those debates – as arcane as they may feel sometimes – in ways that challenge naturalized neoliberal assumptions and open up other possible ways of thinking.

The way we value each other and the work we do in the academy is conditioned by particular expectations that must be learned. As we are disciplined, we expect the same of others; it is difficult to change how and what we value as academics if we do not challenge this. Some places are doing this with the introduction of community-focused academic career paths – e.g. Syracuse's Department of Geography has a 'community geographer' and evaluation mechanisms (e.g. tenure criteria) to support these. Others, like the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia, have launched a Professional Development network with a mentoring system providing opportunities for graduate students to leave academia altogether. These programs have little weight in terms of academic merit, nor are faculty expected to engage, but they do provide alternatives to academic pathways.

*Vignette 6: Teaching*

The limitations placed on our abilities to engage with social advocacy work can be challenged in the classroom. Teaching takes us away from the publications we, as neoliberal subjects, depend on for our advancement through the university hierarchy. Yet, it is also where our influence is most felt. The spectrum of political debate that is able to take place in classroom spaces requires us to question what sorts of justice and politics and what sorts of student subjectivities we (want to) produce and reproduce within its confines. Doing our jobs well means engaging with students to discuss the problems with agency and global inequalities of class, race, gender and wealth so that we can all take actions without reproducing these inequalities. But, for example, what do we do in pedagogical moments when a new text or a play or a protest or a film incites in our students the urge for an alternative vision of the way the world works, as the following vignette demonstrates?

One of the films that I show while teaching about globalization and the intricacies of global connections is *Darwin's Nightmare*, a 2004 documentary film directed by the Austrian filmmaker, Hubert Sauper. It traces the links between the Nile perch, a predatory fish introduced to the waters of Lake Victoria in the 1950s, to the growth of the commercial export fishing industry in Mwanza, Tanzania, to the Ukrainian pilots who take fish and fruit from Africa to Europe, to the death of a Tanzanian sex worker at the hands of a violent pilot, to the EU officials who downplay the environmental and social impacts of the predator fish and encourage the growth of the export industry, to the street children who sniff glue made from the plastic fish packaging, and to the revelation that the pilots import arms and tanks from Europe for internal African wars. As one of the pilots laments, his voice choked with emotion and his head bowed low, 'the children of Africa receive guns for Christmas, the children of Europe receive grapes'. Frankly, the film is exhausting, upsetting, and fascinating, and the students feel these emotions acutely. Asking 'so...what did you think?' to prompt discussion after the film generates nothing but a weighty silence that fills the room. And after a minute or so, the first question is, 'So what can we do?' Followed by, 'We want to do something'.

Of course, new steps towards action are exciting, but complicated if we deal with those kinds of global connections. Thus, we must seek ways to couple our projects of raising students' awareness about injustice with examples and experiences of how to effect change so as not to leave our students or ourselves feeling paralyzed. We are not suggesting that all of our courses are embedded in local activism. Rather, we suggest a need to involve action within our course designs. Direct action within communities is great, but even incorporating case studies of action can show our students that it is possible to make a difference even if it is at a tiny scale in the context of broader issues.

## Conclusion

Our effort to avoid paralysis spurred us on to write this article. We are each individually struggling to survive within our institutions while not losing our sense of purpose, our desire for a better world. Our suggestions for action may seem timid, and they are, but they keep us moving forward. They keep us from paralysis; they allow us to practice alternative ways of being in the midst of neoliberal institutions.

We have offered a range of ordinary, everyday instances that highlight the implications of neoliberalizing universities. In turn, we have also offered ordinary, everyday and mundane responses to these effects, what we call tim-adical actions. In so doing, we want to stress that the fight for justice is always a daily task: It is often mundane – speaking up in meetings, talking to someone, making connections across and beyond the institution, rethinking our comments, etc. – and has to be done on almost a daily basis. It does not have to be grandiose or global. What it does have to be, however, is thoughtful, especially in the combination of the means and the ends we seek.

Promoting justice can produce odd allies and this is where some of our greatest impacts will be felt – beyond fellow travellers or believers. Some of our best allies are already with us. In addition to the allies amongst our colleagues, friends, and families, we have potential allies amongst the students who we teach. It is easy to forget that 40-50 percent of people in many countries now go to university, meaning that nearly half the population ends up within our reach. Engaging with students can be a powerful way to promote justice – this can involve engaging with them in alternative ways of thinking about politics, advocacy, and social justice more broadly. Sharing visions and hopes for change are things we must work at together, and then leave students to get on with in their lives, in making the changes they think are just.

What this illustrates, to us at least, is that we need to engage as much with justice *inside* the university as *outside* it. To do this requires that we change the university along with ourselves. If our aim is justice, our means are our research, our teaching and our service – we must combine these aims and means or we lose the critical, yet mundane meaning of justice we wish to support. The university is not lost to neoliberalism just yet. There is still room to reclaim it as a space of hope and change, as demonstrated by recent calls for radical provocations against the university that begin as a struggle from *within*.<sup>3</sup> To do so requires that we face

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<sup>3</sup> See for example “Call for Provocations: Stealing from the University: Within, Against, and Beyond the Criminal Institution” <http://undercommoning.org/cfp-stealing/>, accessed 29 April 2016

up to and challenge the vulnerabilities, hierarchies and complicities we are implicated in. We must also remember that we are not alone. The more neoliberal thought tries to separate, individualize and weaken us as self-seeking individuals, the more we have to remember our greatest strength is our ability to forge connections and work together.

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## the authors

The Tim-adical Writing Collective is an international group of scholars who met in Manchester, at the second annual Antipode Summer Institute for the Geographies of Justice (SIGJ2) in 2009 (see <https://antipodefoundation.org/institute-for-the-%20geographies-of-justice/>). The current authors were part of the 16 member SIGJ2 Writing Collective that formed as a result of that Summer Institute. The Tim-adical Writing Collective comprises six authors from the SIGJ2 collective who published under that name in 2012, but who have now refined their mission, which is to promote tim-adical change, (i.e. timid and radical action - see footnote 1 above) in the academy through their collective writing projects. The collective members are Kean Birch (York University, Canada), Sophie Bond (University of Otago, Aotearoa New Zealand), Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Dawn Hoogeveen (University of British Columbia, Canada), Nicole Laliberte (University of Toronto, Canada) & Marit Rosol (University of Calgary, Canada).