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## Towards an Ethics of Slowness in an Era of Academic Corporatism.

Yiu Fai Chow, Jeroen de Kloet et Helen Hok-Sze Leung

‘Now, of course, we live in Thatcher’s psyche if not her anus, in the world she made, of competition, consumerism, celebrity and guilt’s bastard son, charity: bingeing and debt.’

Hanif Kureishi (2008: 271)

### **THE HIDDEN INJURIES OF THE NEO-LIBERAL UNIVERSITY.**

In a recently published piece titled ‘Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University,’ Rosalind Gill reflects upon the experiences of academic work at UK universities. Inspired by her text, we wish to build further on her arguments and reflect upon academic work from different localities: Canada, the Netherlands and Hong Kong. Before doing so, we will start with briefly outlining the main arguments in Gill’s text, after which we will move to our own musings, to end with possible tactics of resistance.



The pleasure of reading her piece lies very much in the constant feeling of recognition, when she bit by bit unpacks the increased demands imposed upon academic work. She does so after outlining four bodies of literature related to changes in work conditions. The first body of work reflects upon transformations of work under late capitalism. Key terms to describe life under late capitalism—a life where boundaries between work and play increasingly dissolve and where mobility and flexibility are requested, both of which are facilitated by a constant retraining and re-skilling—are, among others, liquid modernity, network society, risk society, coming from authors like Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells and Ulrich Beck. The second, much

smaller body of work discusses structural transformation in higher education, including its increased corporatization, in which students become clients or consumers. A third body of work, often inspired by feminist scholarship, analyses the micro-politics at the work-floor, for example, supervision of PhD students and promotion patterns. A last body of literature Gill describes draws on Foucault's work on governmentality and neo-liberalism, and discusses the individualization of work and an audit culture that produces the always self-monitoring and overtly responsible academic.

Gill's aim in this piece is to think these four approaches together in order 'to explore the relations between transformations in capitalism, new forms of governmentality and psychosocial experiences of working in the university' (2010: 231). She does so not by focusing on theory but rather on the practices and experiences of fellow academics as well as herself. Whereas this makes her argument somewhat jumpy and unstructured at times, it also generates numerous moments of recognition for workers at universities like us. Academic jobs have become precarious, in particular for younger faculty members, who often shoulder the heaviest workload on the basis of unreliable short-term contracts. Gill refers to this situation as an emergent 'aristocracy of labour,' which is sustained by an ideology that frames scholarship as a noble thing, a 'calling' that allows little space to muse over financial compensation and job security. The inequalities produced here between the tenured and the fluid work force is, Gill argues, profoundly gendered. Drawing on our experiences, we want to supplement a geopolitical dimension. Better-paid Hong Kong academics, for instance, often employ cheap research assistants in mainland China to collect all the data, based on which the Hong Kong academics write and publish their articles, solely under their own names. This outsourcing of academic labour is becoming increasingly prevalent as academics struggle to comply with the output demands of universities that are caught up in the race of global ranking. When the University of Hong Kong ended up on the 18<sup>th</sup> position of such a ranking list in 2008, its Dean explained that such a ranking is not an honour but instead should inspire the staff to work even harder so as to *deserve* that position. To us, this is an example of how the ranking culture is used as a disciplinary device.



In the global rush to become excellent, a tendency that saturates today's promotion of universities, nearly all universities claim to work with excellent teachers and accept only excellent students, who are constantly innovative and creative in their pursuit to become even more excellent than they already are. As we can read on the [website of the University of Hong Kong](#):

*We admit the BEST STUDENTS*

*We nurture LEADERS with an international outlook*

*We deliver QUALITY TEACHING*

*We excel in RESEARCH*

This discourse of excellence is often embedded in a wider discourse about our assumed ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘information society.’ At the same time, it comes, at least in the Netherlands, with a slow but steady process of budget cuts from the government. Whereas two decades ago Dutch students were generally allowed six years of study, this has now gone down to four years, during which, due to concomitant cuts in student grants, they are forced to take side jobs to support themselves. These budget cuts affect both students and faculty, constantly requiring them to deliver more in less time, a paradoxical demand believed to be possible by means of all kinds of training and re-skilling to make us work more ‘efficiently’ and become acrobats of time management. Recently, the Dutch science foundations announced the ambition that, by 2020, the Netherlands would be ranked in the global academic top five. Not only given the size of the Netherlands, but also in the context of continuous budget cuts, this is quite a bizarre and perverse ambition.



The intensification of work comes with an audit culture that aims to measure how excellent universities ‘really’ are. For example the research assessment exercise (RAE) in the UK, which creates quite an ‘overheated competitive atmosphere in which acts of kindness, generosity and solidarity often seem to continue only in spite of, rather than because of, the governance of universities’ (Gill 2010: 235). As Gill observes aptly, the academic is the ideal neo-liberal subject whose working practices are characterized by self-regulation, calculation, conscience and responsibility—all under the guise of ‘freedom,’ ‘flexibility’ and ‘autonomy.’ In a sense, academic work increasingly

resembles creative work, sharing with the emerging creative class what Richard Lloyd (2005) refers to as a neo-bohemian ideology to justify the prevailing practices of uncertainty, exploitation and perpetual financial insecurity. The use of technologies like e-mail and mobile phone has further blurred the line between work and private life, and created an ‘always on’ culture without walls, where we are constantly checking our emails. If we feel we do this too much, we individualize the issue by pathologizing ourselves as being ‘addicted,’ instead of questioning the structural conditions that make us check our emails so frequently. This ‘always on’ culture is being intensified with other applications, such as Blackboard, which stretches teaching up to a potentially 24-7 activity, and which increases techniques of student-monitoring and feedback.

Gill then moves on to explain how these working practices often translate in what she terms a ‘kind of toxic shame’ (2010: 240). The culture of anonymous peer review produces a constant cycle of shaming each other, in which failure is always individualized. For example, an article submitted by one of the authors was rejected with the anonymous review that ‘this is much worse than what a BA student would ever submit to me.’ This propels

a ‘deeply gendered, racialized and classed’ culture of shame that makes us feel useless. The solution left to us is to work even harder, so as to have a better chance of avoiding shame. The online journal [Participations](#) may serve as a counter example: it has a deliberate policy of giving positive feedback whenever possible, of avoiding shaming by having an [open, rather than anonymous, review process](#). This helps, in our view, to at least humanize the review process.

More fundamentally, we also wonder if it is not possible to turn shame into something more positive, something more productive. Rather than negotiating shame by working even harder, we can also use shame as a moment to pause, to take a step back to reflect upon why we feel shamed, what this tells us about us and our relation towards the other. Here we draw on the book on shame by Elspeth Probyn (2005), who argues that we need ‘to embrace the sometimes painful ways shame makes us reflect on who we are—individually and collectively’ (2005: 8). Precisely because shame is such a strong emotion, one that often takes us by surprise, it may be used as an opportunity to reflect carefully upon the conditions that have produced this feeling of shame. In other words, shame, being an ‘affect of proximity’ (34) can be read as a signal that prompts us to unpack the micropolitics of everyday life, that may make us reflect upon the ways we relate to ourselves as well as to the other. Shame reveals what matters, what interests you; as Probyn writes, ‘interest is the key to understanding shame, and shame reminds us with urgency what we are interested in. Shame reminds us about the promises we keep to ourselves’ (2005: x). Shame can thus, like power (and, after all, this is also what shame does: it brings to light relations of power), be a productive force, a technology of the self. After all, ‘when we feel shame it is because our interest has been interfered with but not cancelled out. The body wants to continue being interested, but something happens to “incompletely reduce” that interest’ (15).

At the end of her piece, Gill retreats to a rather problematic hierarchy of suffering when she questions the relevance of her piece and its potential narcissism in the context of a world of growing inequalities and injustices. She refers to her protesting against Israel while writing this piece—as if implicitly suggesting that this would morally balance things out. A rather awkward ending in our view, as it pushes the argument out of its context, to issues that paralyze rather than empower the reader. Gill’s postscript reveals another pernicious dynamic in the ‘progressive’ or ‘leftist’ sector of the academy where we find ourselves located. The creeping guilt that our own ‘injuries’ surely cannot compare to that of less privileged ‘others’ is as paralyzing a force as any other. Gill attributes her own momentary hesitation to publish the article as a result of this potentially ‘silencing dynamic.’ We also find ourselves hesitating to finish this piece, wondering if we are not complying too much with the system by adding yet another publication on our cv? Furthermore, an early response to our efforts in writing this piece argued that what we are exploring amounts to no more than individual ‘coping strategies’ that actually contribute to, rather than resist, the very neo-liberal tendencies we are supposed to be critiquing. The responder expresses a spectrum of emotions from disappointment, being flabbergasted, to contempt for privileged academics that cannot even begin to contemplate collective action. In the face of such opinions, we may well appear to our esteemed colleagues as pawns—or (worse!) collaborators—in the neoliberal

regime. But we wonder: what kind of collective action is possible when the people acting collectively are shamed, exhausted, insecure, and guilt-ridden human beings?

Rather than reproducing Gill's somewhat moralistic line of thought, we think it is important to, first, address one implicit bias in her piece—its UK-centrism—and to discuss one further complication, namely the increased dominance of a hard-science paradigm that proves inadequate and problematic, in particular for the humanities. Finally, we will move towards the tactics we hope may help to deal with the current situation. We consider these tactics as technologies of the academic self, a terminology that betrays our Foucauldian take on these matters, a take that also explains why we refrain from framing the issue as a conflict between management and staff. We hope these technologies may facilitate the development of alternatives or produce potential points of resistance or lines of flight out of the contemporary neoliberal mode of academic work. We will outline four technologies: a politics of whining, an ethics of slowness, more stress on collaborative work, as well as the promotion of new publication strategies.

Gill's piece is clearly grounded in her experiences of working in the UK. She refers to how race, gender and class are implicated in growing disjunctures between working conditions at today's universities. However, she does not reflect further upon wider geopolitical divisions and inequalities. From that perspective, our first and most obvious observation concerns language. English has become the lingua franca of the neo-liberal University. Nearly all ranked and high-impact-factor journals are English-language journals. This issue has, of course, been extensively discussed elsewhere, but remains an urgent point of attention, as it does marginalize and complicate the working conditions of all non-native speakers. These speakers do have to comply with the same system, yet always from a disadvantaged position; and, as non-native speakers, it strikes us time and again during conferences as well as in reviews that we receive on our texts how utterly ignorant and unaware native speakers are, and remain, of this issue. Just think of the speed with which so many native English speakers speak during conference talks, and their impatience to listen to a contributor whose English is shakier.

This issue is in turn connected to the pertaining hegemony of the West in the global production of knowledge. Whereas Western academics can easily make universal claims, and write books with titles such as *Gender Trouble*, those operating outside the West generally bear the geopolitical burden of localizing their knowledge production—a Chinese author would have to add the prefix 'Chinese' to 'gender trouble,' for example (see Chow 2006 for a sophisticated elaboration of this critique). Whereas Western scholars can easily gain academic capital by displaying their knowledge of, for example, Walter Benjamin or Michel Foucault, for academics outside the West, it is hardly possible to share with their Western counterparts their knowledge of scholars like, for example, Yu Ying-shih, Mou Zongsan or Feng Youlan—to play a Sinocentric instead of Eurocentric card. The persisting Euro- and Anglocentrism of global academia, and the related bias in the production of knowledge, remains an unresolved issue. Even worse, it seems to us that this bias is strengthened—despite decades of fierce critique from postcolonial

studies and related fields—under the conditions of neo-liberalism. This bias often relegates scholars working outside the West or those working on research related to places outside the West towards specialized fields such as area studies, allowing them not much of a voice outside that specialized domain. The observed schism between decades of postcolonial critique and increased geopolitical cleavages feeds the urgency not to theorize more, but to think of practices that may help counter this schism. One example of a successful counter-tactic comes from the inter-Asia cultural-studies project from Chua Beng Huat and Chen Kuan-hsing. This network of scholars based in Asia organizes conferences and PhD summer schools and has established a successful and ranked journal (the *Journal of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*) that allows submissions in other languages than English and that clearly privileges ‘Asian’ scholarship.

The journal hence operates on a tactic of complying with the global neo-liberal standard of anonymous peer review, ranking, and English as its mode of language, but simultaneously tries to change the parameters by taking Asia as the basis of production and circulation of knowledge, connecting intellectual individuals and communities in Asia that might have hitherto conducted dialogue more readily or even exclusively with their Western counterparts (hence the term ‘inter-Asia’). In that sense, Asia is employed as a method to problematize Asia itself on the one hand, *and* to problematize the universality, the legitimacy and hegemony of the West on the other. Chen formulates ‘Asia as method’ in the following way:

*When the dialogue partner is changed, multiple frameworks of reference will gradually enter our vision, seeping into our subjectivity. Only then will our anxiety towards the problem of the West be diluted, and critical and productive work will truly emerge, in multiplicity. (2007: 360; original in Chinese, our translation our)*

Embedded in these politics, the IACS project aims to facilitate regional and local scholarship, and basically, by shifting the dialogue partner, and no longer privileging ‘Western’ academia. It thus inverts the balance, and replaces the naïve ignorance of the West about its own hegemony by a deliberate practice of ignoring the West to undermine that hegemony.

Furthermore, with the increased demand to secure funding for one’s own research, and the rigorous competition that is a result of this demand, funding schemes are becoming more and more important. Yet, these funding schemes often operate on a logic that comes from the hard sciences and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. Big grants are preferred over smaller grants, while large research groups are privileged over individual scholars. Yet, most scholarship in the humanities is based on labour-intensive individual research, and requires quiet time of focus rather than the facilitation of big research teams working in labs with expensive equipments or software. As a consequence, scholarship in social sciences is gravitating more and more towards a hard-science model (for example, linking genetic research with communication-effect research) as this model suits the funding schemes better. In one of the authors’ experience of being a humanities-and-arts researcher in Canada, she faces tremendous pressure to shoehorn her research program into a similar paradigm, *not* for creative or intellectual reasons but purely for increasing her chance of getting grants. Research time



stipends for ‘time off’ from teaching/administrative responsibilities are now virtually a relic and we are expected to increase research productivity *in addition to* our rapidly intensifying teaching and administrative duties. An area of priority in most major grants is graduate student training, which downloads funding responsibility of graduate programs to faculty members. It also ensures that faculty members with bigger grants will be able to fund more students, thus influencing the intellectual directions of programs. This has often resulted in the absurd situation of a researcher whose needs may be best met with a \$10 000/year grant with partial time off instead retooling her research project to request \$100 000 per year to employ a team of graduate students who require time-consuming supervision to conduct work that is in fact best done by the researcher herself.

Michel Foucault once responded to the critique that his work merely reveals a gloomy picture of a world of surveillance and discipline as follows: ‘My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do’ (1983: 256).



This brings us finally to the last and probably most difficult part of this essay: how to deal with the current situation? what is that ‘something’ that we have to do? First and foremost, we don’t want to simply whine. Or do we? While writing this piece, both Helen and Jeroen got increasingly anxious, working in an environment in which people often complain about their work, their students, and the lack of time to read or to enjoy doing research. What is the point of complaining here again? Isn’t there a better way to deal with the pressures? To which Yiu Fai responded, ‘What is the problem with whining? Isn’t it more that we are not whining enough—in the sense that we should do it more extravagantly, more outrageously, and ultimately more creatively?’ Here, we want to draw on Yiu Fai’s experience with the Hong Kong Complaints Choir project as one of the possibilities to do whining creatively. Launched in Birmingham in 2005 by Finnish artists Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen and Tellervo Kalleinen, the [Complaints Choir project spread to Hong Kong in 2009](#), where members of the public were asked to supply their complaints (which would be turned into a song), joined in an ad hoc choir and performed their complaint song in public. Participating in the project, Yiu Fai did not only experience the possibility of ‘transforming the huge energy people put into complaining into something else. Perhaps not directly into heat—but into something powerful anyway’; he was struck by the solidarity, the liveliness and the pleasure of the process. Whining can be fun. We wonder if academics could do the same—after all, the Hong Kong complaints song opens with the lines ‘Why do we never stop having to work? Why are our bosses always jerks?’ We wonder if academics could also turn their private, individual whining into a collective, creative and public performance. In other words, we want to whine shamelessly, and there, perhaps, are the politics of whining, politics that give expression to injustice felt; that does not, however, aspire to any ‘solution’; that opens up the space for us to whine while we are being told constantly that we should not. All of these we can do collectively, creatively and publicly.



Second, we may consider bringing an ethics of slowness to our profession. In *In Praise of Slowness*, Canadian journalist Carl Honoré documents the rise of the Slow Movement. From the 'Slow Food' ethos that supports the conservation of local food traditions and the planning of 'Slow Cities' with sustainable and livable urban space to complementary and alternative medical practices that consider 'slow' treatments, there are concerted attempts to slow down the drive of acceleration towards corporatized efficiency in every sector of life. Is it possible to bring the Slow Movement to academia? What practices would it inspire? How can we use these practices to help us not only cope with the system but more importantly *change* it? Many of the activists and practitioners associated with the Slow Movement are also concerned with ecological issues like preservation and sustainability. What Gill's article shows very clearly is that our current professional environment is patently *not* sustainable and that the transformation of academic labour towards ever greater level of efficiency is depleting what was once considered the primary resources of academic work: creative freedom, adventurous innovation, collegiality between colleagues. No individual strategy can overhaul the structural causes, as outlined by Gill, that have transformed the modern University into its workforce of 'precarious lives.' At the same time, as we find small ways to turn precarious conditions into more sustainable ones, we are also making an impact, however uncertain or itself precarious, on the future.

Gill suggests that 'as good neoliberal subjects,' our response to our livable work conditions is simply to work harder, as though there is a magical threshold across which we would finally be able to 'hack it' and become the good academic citizen we are supposed to be. Yet, the intensification and extension of work have made that goal a moving target, a fiction that perpetuates our anxiety and intensifies our shame. A slowing tactic would nudge us towards working *less* hard, or what we like to think of as working *softer*. By working soft we mean working in ways that run counter to institutional expectations. Gill's very article is an example. It is work that is produced as part of our academic labour, yet its very existence questions the nature of that labour. In a similar vein, we see *refusing* work with thoughtfulness, such as explaining clearly to an editor why a manuscript should not be reviewed by me, or devising alternative teaching practices that reduces the volume of grading, or imposing limits on email hours as active ways of working less. Launching complaints with editors over unnecessarily rude or insulting reviews, unapologetically highlighting the complete lack of time and mental space to catch up with the vast amount of literature in each of the ten or more fields we are responsible for, refusing to perpetuate the myth of our 'passion' for our work in instances where none actually exists are tactics that may all go a long way towards losing that 'toxic shame' Gill writes about. Finally, in place of the work we have actively refused, we should pursue work that sustains, nurtures and pleases us, such as collaborations with colleagues on adventurous projects, researching on unfashionable (thus 'unfundable') topics, even writing blogs instead of accepting book reviews... even if all of these are considered 'lesser' endeavours on our cvs. Ultimately, if we can begin to not equate the steps on our salary scale to our net human worth, we are bringing slowness to our profession.

Third, we should consider placing more stress on collaborative work, a tactic

that would also require more methodological promiscuity. Too often, disciplines guard their boundaries by privileging certain methods. In cultural analysis, it is the object that speaks back; in cultural studies, it is the ideological context that is often taken as the dominant explanatory factor; in communication studies, it is the psychological effects of media messages. A call for more cross-fertilization between disciplines and methods is nothing new; yet, in the context of the problems outlined in this essay, it may help to forge creative and productive alliances. We do need to create strategic alliances to counter the current paradigm, to turn different disciplines into bedfellows in order to look for an alternative model of academic work. This tactic can come together with taking an approach to academia that involves more humour, more parody and more fun, a Bakhtinian inversion of the symbolic neo-liberal order in which we laugh both at ourselves as well as at the academic environment we operate in.

Fourth, we should explore the promotion of new publication strategies. The already mentioned inter-Asia cultural studies project provides one example of the possibility to counter Western hegemony in the sciences, just as the example of *Participations* presents an alternative to the shaming practices of the dominant anonymous peer review process. The *EspacesTemps.net* project offers in its multilingual policy an alternative to the hegemony of English. The further promotion of open-access journals, and to make sure that they do count as well, presents another way of retreating from the current publication regime. Or, just for discussion's value, we can take the neo-liberal logic to the extreme, and start working, for instance, as a record company, in which the University takes care of all the publishing of the work of its staff, offering better reward mechanisms to the authors, while circumventing the publication regime as a whole.

We are aware that these technologies will not fix the system—but it is hard to believe in a clear fix. What is left to us are the everyday practices in which we deal with our work, our colleagues, and our students, practices that are changeable, malleable, at times with great effort, at other moments more light-heartedly. There are no fixed solutions in a system that thrives on flexibility, a system that operates with different parameters in different localities and at different moments—and our politics are highly contingent upon our sensibilities towards these differences and our creativity to respond accordingly. With Gill's article, the issue of academic neo-liberalism has been put on the agenda. It is our hope that the technologies we can employ to whine, to slow down, to form collaborative alliances, to publish differently—in other words, to tease, poke fun at, counter, undermine or evade the corporate University—, and with them our range of alternative modes of scholarship, will amplify slowly but steadily.

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