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**DISMISSING ACADEMIC SURPLUS:
HOW DISCURSIVE SUPPORT FOR THE NEOLIBERAL SELF SILENCES
NEW FACULTY**

“...what bodies, desires, and longings must be annihilated to produce the (desirable) liberal-subject and destroy the (undesirable) non-subject – the ‘human surplus’”

—Grande (2013)

As the essays in this collection reveal, academics entering the field today are firmly ensconced in the neoliberal economy. Positions are scarce and precarious, remuneration tends to be barely sufficient (or insufficient), resources are inadequate and shrinking, and workloads are increasing. The effects of these features are comprehensive; they influence the quality and quantity of intellectual engagement and production as well as the physical, psychological, social, and emotional well-being of the new generation of academics. These conditions are discouraging, and bode ill for the future. To counter a sense of hopelessness, many new faculty members seek support and reassurance from their senior colleagues. Although voices of encouragement and righteous anger certainly exist – sometimes even coupled with advocacy on behalf of junior faculty – the overall discourse, both inside and outside the academy, is saturated with neoliberal principles that discourage dissent and signal a stance of silent acceptance. The prevalence of these discursive characterizations of what it means to work in the field contributes powerfully to the construction of new faculty members as “surplus,” disposable entities, rather than valuable members of an important profession – much less the continuation of a public intellectual class dedicated to social justice.

Vassallo defines neoliberalism and the construction of the neoliberal self:

Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy underpinned by the logic that a free market best supports economic prosperity and well-being. Researchers argue that in order for the free market to function properly subjectivities must be constituted in ways that legitimize neoliberal relations (Apple, 2006) (Fitzsimons, 2011). That is, the subject must be (re)defined in terms of human capital and self-management, and must be guided by an imperative to pursue a kind of self improvement that is aligned with an economic rationality. This kind of self has been referred to as an “entrepreneurial self” (Rose, 1998) and a “managerial self” (Fitzimons, 2011). Here, it will be referred to as the “neoliberal self.” (p. 241)

As Vassallo further notes, this conception of a “neoliberal self” contributes to a “false sense of autonomy, construes self in economic terms, privileges Enlightenment rationality, fosters an imperative of

consumption, and isolates personhood from social and historical contexts” (241) The parallels between what Vassallo terms the “neoliberal self” and the role expectations for new faculty members are evident.¹ Life in the academy has historically been connected with a great deal of autonomy as well as academic freedom, yet faculty time and labor are increasingly absorbed in tasks related to marketing, strategic planning, and meeting the needs of students as “consumers” rather than learners. Furthermore, the notions of learning outcomes and data-based accountability reveal the intensification of a positivist standpoint.

Moreover, this neoliberal characterization of academic labor reinforces the perception of new workers as “human surplus,” living capital of dubious value in a saturated market. Grande (2013) invokes Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira (2008) to explore the human implications of this notion by asking, “what bodies, desires, and longings must be annihilated to produce the (desirable) liberal-subject (Vassallo, 2013) and destroy the (undesirable) non-subject – the ‘human surplus.’” In the neoliberal economy, human intellectual and physical labor is commodified, subject to competitive market forces, organized around profit; these factors drive down wages and exploit workers. In an academic framework, exploitation includes processes and products of labor, as well. Because the milieu of academia involves ideas and discursive engagement, its productivity is difficult to quantify in relation to financial resources. How is it possible to calculate the value of an intellectual or artistic product? What “worth” can be assigned to a book? A journal article? A piece of art or music? A conference presentation? A course developed and taught?

In a neoliberal environment, an economist or accountant might seek to determine value in relation to monetary resources by considering the number of hours spent in the production of a particular good and multiplying the hours by an hourly wage that would encompass expertise, experience, and other relevant criteria. These admittedly crude and arbitrary calculations, however, must be contextualized; that is, college presidents might assign tremendous value to their faculty and deem them worthy of six-figure salaries, but if college resources cannot support this determination, the salaries will not manifest. In this case, the broad neoliberal context in which funds supporting the common good are increasingly reduced and constrained supports low, and in many cases unsustainable, salaries. In US public higher education, the portion of budgets supported by state budgetary allocations has dropped significantly. Although “public colleges and universities educate over three-quarters of the nation’s undergraduates,... states are spending \$2,353 or 28 percent less per student on higher education, nationwide, in the current 2013 fiscal year than they did in 2008, when the recession hit” (Oloff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). What Oloff, Palacios, Johnson and Leachman call “steep and almost universal” cuts to higher education will certainly have a negative effects on current students and future generations

This reduction in resources for public goods such as education, health care, and infrastructure, is a key aspect of neoliberalism. Giroux, in *The Abandoned Generation* (2004), explains the effects of neoliberal policies on new generations and processes of democracy. According to Giroux, neoliberalism

attempts to subordinate all human needs to the dictates of the market and the bottom line, while simultaneously demonizing ‘not only government but the very idea of public service and public goods.’ (p. 3)

Neoliberal policies frame and saturate the experiences of workers throughout the global economy. This essay, however, focuses on the academic community and the discursive messages, both formal and informal, that constrain conversations aimed at positive change. Instead of amplifying the voices of workers in the academic labor market to interrupt the neoliberal narrative, prevailing messages serve to perpetuate the precarious positions of academics. I must preface this account by noting that the campus where I work is committed to equity and social justice. Our union leadership has struggled to improve the conditions of adjunct faculty and many people in my own department have advocated for greater

¹ This does not imply that more senior faculty are not also subjected to neoliberal forces that affect their professional lives; however, given the spiraling vigor with which neoliberalism is affecting the economy, its effects are more intense for those entering the workforce.)

compensation for new faculty. Despite these significant counter examples, the discourse about compensation and workload reflects the neoliberal orientation that dominates contemporary U.S. society. As Gill states,

academia represents an excellent example of the neoliberalisation of the workplace and that academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalisation of new forms of auditing and calculating.

Neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics whose predispositions to 'work hard' and 'do well' meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self motivating, responsabilised subjects. (2009, p. 248)

In this context, I began to listen carefully to the discourse that swirls in and around faculty, particularly new faculty, as we struggle to feel valued and valuable even though we often cannot afford to live in the communities where we work. In the public university system where I am employed, we have worked without a contract for nearly three years. Salaries have been frozen. Expenses increase while income and alternative sources of funding (such as internal grant opportunities, discretionary salary increases, and travel funds) remain stagnant or decrease. The proposed contract, developed through lengthy and diligent efforts by our negotiating team, included zero percent salary increases during the three years of negotiations, followed by increases of two percent in each of the next two years. As expected, faculty responses have not been universally positive. Among the ameliorating factors, we were told, was that the presented zero percent salary increase was not entirely accurate. In fact, the contract included base salary increases totaling \$1,250 over three years, raises that were categorized as “Chancellor’s Power of SUNY Performance Incentives.” The reason for this euphemism, according to numerous sources, was so that New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo would be able to present the salary increases as smaller than they truly are. While the news about the higher raises was welcome, it was also disturbing. First, I resent being complicit in an attempt to deceive the public on behalf of the Governor. And second, I have to wonder whether we, as a union, are unwitting participants in an ongoing effort to drive down wages. That is, when the next public union negotiates, they will see a string of zeros that does not truly represent the contract that our faculty is working under.

Of course, salaries represent only part of the picture. Colleagues across campus express concern about pressure to market our programs in an era of nationally declining jobs. At the same time as we worry about our own careers, we also agonize about the ethics of graduating students for whom the likelihood of finding stable employment is dwindling.

All of this serves as a narrative backdrop for the messages I have been hearing since being hired. These messages swirl in the air I breathe and the texts I read. They have been spoken and written by mentors, colleagues, acquaintances, friends, family, and those who represent me in various ways. In writing them here, my intention is not to assign blame or heal pain. It is simply to express what I have heard in order to extend the dialogue. I also hope to sensitize the ears of other listeners and amplify the voices of those who are currently feeling silenced, reduced to whispering frustrations and sharing tears behind closed office doors.

Silencing Statements

In my experience, responses to objections and concerns about workplace conditions in academic settings fall within five categories.

1. *It's always been like this.* I first heard this reply as part of a discussion about the relatively recent increase in property values and associated taxes in the college community where I work. When I expressed dismay about my inability to afford to live near campus, tenured faculty members often shared their historical perspective, which, in effect, dismissed my complaint in two ways. First, it contextualizes the problem as a perpetual issue beyond amelioration. And second, it implies that if

I had done some research, I would have been aware of the conditions and might have avoided them. In both cases, the issue is unresolved and, perhaps, irresolvable.

2. *You are lucky to even have a job.* This discursive gem is powerful because it is true, especially when many graduates are constrained by student loan debt which limits their ability to make ends meet on new faculty or adjunct wages. It doesn't take a terminal degree to figure out that full-time salaried, benefitted positions are scarce and getting scarcer. Economic forecasts are distressing. Securing a position requires tremendous time, effort, support, and luck. The fear that undergirds this response is further heightened by guilt, since most of us know many others who are struggling more than we are. Thus, this response is associated with corollaries such as: *Others have it much worse; Adjunct/part-time employees experience extreme exploitation; and Hundreds of candidates would be happy to have your position.* All these are true, but accepting them amounts to substituting gratitude and subservience for solidarity and constructive action. This fact is emphasized by the most maddening version of this reply, which amounts to *Don't bother asking for more; administrators understand the market.*
3. The notion of focusing on the positive recurs in the next reaction to expressed workplace concerns: *Low salaries are the price you pay for academic freedom and the right to do your work.* A variation on the theme of being lucky to have a job, this response pits academic freedom against material independence. It is frustrating to imagine that new scholars must choose between intellectual repression or economic oppression. If your administration leaves you alone and allows you opportunities to pursue your research interests without raising barriers, you are exhorted to be content with whatever remuneration and material support are offered.
4. In keeping with the promotion and development of neoliberal identities for a neoliberal society, the next category of responses suggests that faculty should strive to *Be flexible and creative.* Not making enough to pay your rent *and* buy food? Pick up an extra course! Teach part-time (or full-time) at another institution! (Poor evaluations at a different place won't affect your tenure prospects.) Earn extra income by doing work as a consultant, a coach, a tutor, or a barista! Survival, not to mention prosperity, in today's economy requires an entrepreneurial approach: match your skills to the market or, better yet, *create* a market! Exclamation points notwithstanding, this perspective is profoundly depressing. Like my colleagues, I *want* to dedicate 100% of my efforts toward my students, my research, and being an active participant in the learning community at my institution. Being counseled to cultivate my entrepreneurial self, as I was by a senior administrator at a previous institution, is demoralizing and disappointing. And following this advice has negative consequences for my scholarly identity, my colleagues who will have to compensate for my diluted energies, and my students – all of which will ultimately be detrimental for my institution.
5. *If you want more, go elsewhere.* Although this piece focuses on the experiences of faculty and graduates who are underpaid, especially in relation to student loan debt, it is no secret that compensation and working conditions vary tremendously. The 2011-2012 College and University Professional Association (CUPA) survey reports average full-time salaries from \$39,641 (for an instructor in the area of English/literature in a public institution to \$135,309 for a professor of law/legal studies in a private institution (2012). Contingent, adjunct, or part-time employees generally earn below subsistence wages and enjoy neither job security nor benefits. On its face, then, it may seem sensible for accomplished scholars to seek employment at higher-paying institutions. Salary information is easily available, so...why not? The apparent logic of this argument emphasizes the extent to which neoliberal discourse saturates our society. Instead promoting the concept of solidarity and equity, this response reinforces competition and the cult of celebrity. Worse yet, this perspective neglects the effects of such an approach on public institutions, on the public good. My colleague, Eve Tuck, expressed her reaction to the suggestion that *if you want more, go elsewhere* as follows: "Oh, so we should abandon the public project."

The public project – the contribution of scholars to fields of knowledge to benefit humanity – is what matters most of all. Graduate school, ideally, begins as an act of love: passion for a particular content connects with a desire to contribute to new ways of knowing. It should end with discovery, excitement, and hope. Neoliberalism is not in harmony with love, discovery, or the public good. As a critical pedagogue, I believe in the power of people to challenge existing power structures. I believe in the value of inquiry and in the promise of solidarity. If we can identify characteristics of discourse that contribute to the continuing repression of new scholars, perhaps we can shift the dialogue in ways that can contribute to effecting radical change.

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