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The Great Resignation: The simple joys of not belonging

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Abstract

As the 2020s march on into a post-COVID age, an increasing trend for academics to exit their current academic positions or to leave academia altogether can be observed internationally and locally. Consequently, a sizeable body of experts accessible to higher education but geographically beyond its ivory towers and psychologically outside its neoliberal grip has come to exist. These para-academics and public intellectuals continue to contribute to communities of teaching, learning, and researching but do so often without affiliation. This study explores the relational link between the archaic notion of affiliation and what it means to 'belong' to a university as staff. The study problematises belonging as an assimilative designator of an organisation's culture and suggests that belonging, as employed in teaching and learning discourse, as a trust-based mode of building community, is a different beast than that conceived by neoliberal universities. Using vignettes as narrative enquiry, the paper retells and curates six accounts of academics making transitions out of academic positions and finding fresh educational contexts for belonging. These emancipatory narratives move through spaces of trauma into authentic places of reclaimed identity, most notably as independent public intellectuals within a broader context of global citizenship. The narratives show us what life after being academically affiliated can look like when individuals exercise critical resilience to establish academic identities beyond the neoliberal university.

Introduction

Varying degrees of not belonging to academe, universities, institutions, or faculties appear in accounts of tertiary educators' departures within the research sub-genre known as "the toxic university" (Smyth, 2017) or "dark academia" (Fleming, 2021) and in Barcan's (2013) work on why academics leave. My study explores the neoliberal underpinnings of 'belonging' and troubling it to suggest the category of 'not belonging' ('Un-belonging' is used in studies with learners). Not belonging also challenges the notion of 'affiliation' to describe an educator's identity in academic orbits, such as those of conferences or professional organisations, as outdated and hegemonic. I propose that Giroux's (2014) notions of "public intellectual" and the concept of "para-academic" (Withers & Wardrop, 2014) are appropriate signifiers in this space. These titles align with "relational being" (Graham & Moir, 2022) as a more agentive description of authentic academics in a "supercomplex" world (Barnett, 2012) or, applying the updated COVID-era version, a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world of overlapping wicked problems (Stein, 2021).

We may still 'belong' as global citizens with integrity despite geo-physically operating beyond the contracted walls of the hallowed university. If you 'belong' to an organisation, you are seen as 'affiliated' to it; yet a sinister sense of 'belonging', that of contracted ownership, a Faustian bargain, lingers within the connotations of 'belonging'–the moment when Mephistopholes 'belongs' to Faust. In this sense, 'belonging' implies an individual accords with the assimilative designators of an organisation's culture: its mission and core values, its employee behaviours, and world view. Invisible in 'affiliation' is any sense of an organisation's ethic of care, as may be the case with casualised workforces and precariats. This study suggests ethics (or 'duty') of care is increasingly replaced by "academic incivility" with its "bully culture" (Twale & DeLuna, 2008). How many academics happily sign work contracts in the knowledge that they sign themselves into a Faustian bargain with a neoliberal twist?

Narrative and autoethnographic studies of the lived experience of academic identity in anxious times, spearheaded by Sparkes (2007) and Poulos (2017), offer empirical yet visceral accounts of damaged subjectivities of individuals whose senses of belonging have gone (Andrew, 2020; Fleming, 2021). More often, they are shown as having been snatched away by the machinations of technocratic corporatism characterised by surveillance culture (Ball, 2003, 2012; Shore, 2010). Particularly significant is the "overloading of responsibilities" (Shore, 2010, p. 20) as workload intensification is disguised as dutiful service or lifelong learning. Indeed, Taylor (2013) pointed out that the use of business-oriented euphemisms such as "flexible delivery", "lifelong learning", and generic "excellence" obscure a harsher reality. Exercises of university brand-building and rebranding replicate this discourse, which Barnett (2012) regarded as forms of imaginative, ideological, and ethical constraint.

Drawing on the method of presenting multivocal narratives of lived experience, themselves based on elicited writing, this study suggests that not belonging for academics in the sense of being independent/unaffiliated offers a constructive and rewarding possibility for higher education workers who, for such reasons as redundancy, resignation or the expiration of any honorary status, are no longer affiliated to a single master or are free from an institution that affiliates them. The enquiry addresses the question: *In what ways does not belonging to a tertiary institution enable and support independent academics?*

The Great Resignation

As I was collecting data in the form of narratives of exiting tertiary education, as part of a broader project on changing academic identity in Australia and New Zealand, I discovered a rich and authentic data source in the US-based Facebook page "The professor is out", where departing/departed academics share their stories: those thinking of leaving solicit advice, doctoral learners, who realising that academia has no future, seek corroboration for their hunches, and academics in new roles express their regret that they stayed in academia as long as they did. Owan et al. (2024) wrote of the need to balance out the instrumental neoliberalist concept of "metrics" by fostering a "culture of rigorous and unbiased evaluation in the academic community" (p. 9). Interestingly, however, they methodologically base their study on evidence from a Facebook page, "Reviewer 2 must be stopped". This is a place where authors share mostly shocking experiences of the review process, demonising the ever-mean Reviewer 2. What I do present are six donated narratives of reformed academics, and their reflective stories echo core themes of the literature of "The Great Resignation" (Flaherty, 2022): being worked to death, bullying managers, losing positions in restructures, and realising there is more to life than *this*.

Barcan (2013) and Flaherty (2000) have identified a trend among scholars and educators, especially those later in their careers or post-PhD, who are part of the literature on "The Great Resignation," which refers to the significant departure of professors in the 2020s. They feel a sense of 'not belonging' within academia yet take on the role of public intellectuals, adopting an activist stance that challenges traditional academic identities based on institutional affiliations. This position underscores that aspects such as collegiality and the pedagogical process itself are integral to social justice (Goodall, 2010). It is also an adaptive position in that it embraces multiplicity and resists the capitalistic ideologies that infuse the hierarchal designation of status within organisations. The notion of academic 'affiliation' is a dinosaur of a feudal age that has passed; it meant adoption as (or possibly suckled as) a son in its medieval Latin cognate, figuratively extending to adoption by a society, a relationship, a belonging. The name 'academia' itself suggests a scholarly Platonic Grecian idyll, like 'Arcadia', from a golden but remembered age of nostalgic fiction (Tight, 2010). Any analogy between a university and a family or a community belongs, too, to a bygone age.

The critical and radical types of global citizenship education (GCE) discourse (Stein, 2021) remind me of the utopian days of collegiality (Tight, 2010), which Hil et al. (2022) hope can be reclaimed as part of a global rejection of

neoliberalism. It reminds me, too, of the Greek origins of 'cosmopolitanism' as *not being affiliated* with any given city-state or polis (Koukouraki, 2020). The idea of being a citizen of the world breaks down the exclusionary boundaries, perhaps best epitomised by the Trumpian wall, in favour of a cosmopolitan view of global citizenship more akin to another transformational utopian idea, the melting pot, the Confucian great unity (大同 / dàtóng), where we may all be family (Koukouraki, 2020).

Aotearoa/New Zealand, moving to a co-governance structure in its higher education organisations in the mid-2020s, is the only country to use the term *whanāu* ('family') with any degree of success, but even then, it can feel like imposed belonging. This is arguable because it ontologically clashes with the concept of *whakapapa* or heritage that academics in Aotearoa/ New Zealand figure into rote-learned *pepeha*, or individual, personal origin stories. *Pepeha* figure at the opening of meetings as part of the process of *mihi* (greeting) and can be figured as a *tangata whenua* (people of the land) or *manuhiri* (guest, visitor). Our varying stories of whakapapa show that we cannot truly be a blood *whanāu* but in a post-*Tiriti* (Treaty of Waitangi) sense, we can be a group with a common sense of endeavour, a community of practice. We all have a sense of belonging to our *tūrangawaewae* (our place to stand). While Aotearoa/ New Zealand seemed in 2023 to be moving towards a family-focussed sense of co-governance with its promise of unity as opposed to division, the populist hate rhetoric of the COVID era intersected with mark2-neoliberalism in an elected coalition government late in 2023 and 2024. For academics still passionate about learning and research but having no affiliated place to stand, the identities of the para-academic and public intellectuals offer much potential, and, even more, hope.

Literature review

I have chosen to cover key sub-topics in this review. The first of these delves into the literature of belonging in anxious times (Press et al., 2022) under the heading 'Troubling belonging'. In the next section, I extend this sense of troubling to communities of practice as somewhat utopian sites where people ideally behave well. Finally, I consider what it is that academics leaving their formal positions are, in fact, leaving. They may, in fact, be leaving a vision of the university that had long since ceased to exist.

Troubling belonging

Not all scholars support 'belonging' and its assimilative ideology as an ideal for students and, indeed, academics (Press et al., 2022, in a special issue entitled 'Pedagogies of belonging in an anxious world'). Few studies consider 'belonging' from a worker's perspective, the majority examining learner belonging as in the abovementioned special issue; or they afford the fostering of belonging, especially via designed collaborativism and evidence of instructor presence in online communities of practice, in both pre-COVID and COVID era settings (e.g. Andrew, 2024; Stafford, 2022). In a rare exception, Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) demonstrated that 'belonging' was a value of import to students and staff alike and related to motivation and attainment. However, for staff, belonging was seen as "the degree of alignment between the role within the organisation and the personal needs of the employee" (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020, p. 23). With a definition of 'belonging*ness*' as "the congruence between the expectations of the role within the organization and the personal needs of the employee", Brion's (2015, p. 5) study of teacher morale is rare in its linking teacher morale, an asset of well-being, to belongingness, rationality, and identification.

Universities are not places of inclusion and belonging for all learners, particularly priority, non-traditional, mature-age, first-in-family, and low socio-economic background learners (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2022). Indeed, Kahu and Nelson (2018) stress that "viewing belonging as the outcome of both institutional and student factors recognises that belonging can manifest differently for each student depending on their background, their personality and other aspects of their experience." (pp. 65-66). Berryman and Eley (2019) call upon a more responsive and relational pedagogy to counter the "racial microaggressions and lateral violence" (p. 19) experienced by priority students, often indigenous, undermining their possibility of belonging. We trouble 'belonging', too, by questioning the neoliberalist hegemonic discourse of the individual, with individual academics scrambling competitively for metric points (Owan et al., 2024). The focus on individual performativity normalises for academics "isolationist, self-interested individualism at the expense of more collectivist, community-oriented ways of being in the world" (Press et al., 2022, p. 4).

The dominant pro-belonging view is represented by Healey and Stroman (2021), whose detailed work demonstrates that "building learning environments that support belonging, and therefore learning and well-being, for every student entails both challenging exclusion and promoting inclusion" (p. 9). They are spot-on, but this needs to occur within a relational, collaborative approach involving "care for and valuing of students as complex, situated, knowledgeable beings in their own right" (Graham & Moir, 2022, p. 12). This is because, according to Yuval-Davies's explanation,

> belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way. Even in its most stable "primordial" forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations (2006, p. 199).

While fostering a sense of belonging is positive, particularly for a world reeling from a COVID-19 online meltdown, it feels different when management, "a particular hegemonic form of power relations", does it. Graham and Moir (2022) see institutional fostering of belonging among diverse learners as leading to "a culture of conformity and assimilation which perpetuates the injustices of those unable, or unwilling, to 'belong' due to their personal backgrounds, beliefs, or material circumstances" (p. 2). They argue that the notion of 'belonging', as a function of aspiration and allegiance,

is a *sous*-marketing exercise in "institutional retention and economic advantage" (p. 22), suggesting an enforced, non-critical conformity to an institution's ideals, behaviours, and missions.

Similarly, when academics begin employment at any university, there are orientations involving inculcation in organisational policies, missions, and multiple in-person gatherings to meet other novices in the 'cohort'. There are endless mandated tick-box online training about facets of the organisation's culture including health and safety, cultural safety, bullying and harassment, rainbow rights, and whistleblowing. Coming to belong is a process of assimilative acculturation, but for both the learners and staff, as Graham and Moir (2022) discuss "the ways in which it can be enacted, and the motivations for doing so, stem from prevailing neoliberal agendas which seek to instrumentalise education and, in doing so, favour the experiences and values of dominant groups" (p. 12). *You will* belong, or else. You will belong – to the organisation that pays you.

Troubling belonging to communities of practice

When people form a community to which they can belong, they "come together because they are able to identify with something–a need, a common shared goal and identity" (Hung & Der-Thanq, 2001, p. 3). In this vision of 'community', be it a group, a faculty, an institution/ university, or the dream of academia, shared needs, goals, and identity are the key factors fostering belonging. These factors align with Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory. Here, the imperatives of mutual engagement (the regular interactions of community members), joint enterprise (members' common endeavours, goals, visions), and shared repertoire (ways of thinking, speaking, expressing, and remembering common to the community) unite eclectic individuals into a whole, where novices are supported by the experienced. Gaining any sense of community begins with feelings of membership, an affective, engaged, invested sense of wanting to belong (Wenger, 1998).

What happens, though, when the need is no longer mutual, the goal no longer common, and the shared identity too remote or ideologically alien to enable the maintenance of individual ethical authenticity? More specifically, what happens to university academics (and their learners) when the university endeavours which they have invested in no longer accord with that of the technocratic agendas of the new order? In this order, Ginsberg (2011) reactivates a zombie apocalypse with armies of functionaries, name-checked as "vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants – who, more and more, direct the operations of every school" (p. 433). This parade depicts identities trapped in "a pre-determined paradigm of capitalist domination" (Neary & Wynn, 2016, p. 410). The technocracy-heavy structure of the modern university is at odds with the primary endeavours of teaching, learning, research, and social good.

What happens to us when we no longer share the same sense of community? We might go underground with like-minded colleagues to maintain what's left of our integrity and write a book or a journal special edition, exemplified by *Social Alternatives (2022) — It's time: the reform of Australian public universities as a strategy of collective solidarity* (Hil et al., 2022). We might turn to post-structural social critical theory which teaches us in an age of *vive la différence* to think about the identity of education workers as being beyond academic identity, offering increased possibilities for malleability and multiplicity in the spaces of the public intellectual (Neary & Wynn, 2016). To paraphrase Neary and Hagyard (2010), it is necessary to imagine and realise new forms of social institution for higher education founded on a fresh understanding of social capital as an abundance of knowledge, rather than the idea of education as a commodity (Neary & Wynn, 2016). This economy of social wealth offers fresh possibilities for academics as producers who don't 'belong' and are not even emeritus or honorary. They may use their abundant knowledge for a public, not primarily institutional, good. Another strategy to regain agency and identity is to adjust our sense of belonging. Community of practice saw the sense of community as a psychological concept, comprising one's sense of place, its people, their collegialities, their shared compassion, and their sense of belonging. When the sense of community erodes, so too does the sense of belonging.

Not belonging to what?

Any number of scholarly names can agree with the assertion that lack of agency, powerlessness and anxiety increasingly denigrate academic identities up to and into the 2020s. This is an age when ninety percent of UK academics are cited as being 'very unsatisfied' with management (Fleming, 2021). The list may open with Slaughter and Leslie's (1999) germinal critique of globalised, marketised academic capitalism and Tight's early anthology of narratives (2000). The former foretells an environment of contradictions where faculty and professional staff expend their human capital stocks in increasingly competitive situations. The latter is the first of studies detailing how socio-political change impacts academics' lived experiences, a theme presented in an age of increased anxiety by Loads et al. (2016), Poulos (2017), and Evans and Nixon (2015), who speak of the long shadow that European neoliberalism casts on colonies such as Australia.

Ball (2003, 2012, 2015) and Shore (2008, 2010) are leaders in presenting perceptive, emotive 'Zeitgeist' accounts of anxious life in the neoliberal university and they are compelling, authentic, and elegiac. Academe is a place where your soul becomes the property of the affiliated university (Ball, 2003) and where traditional community relationships of trust and professionalism have irreconcilably eroded (Shore, 2010). In a long catalogue of reasons why academics put in the hours, overwork is ultimately a badge of courage (Acton & Glasgow, 2015) in the performance of duty. Yet Ball (2003) declared: "Performance has no room for caring" (p. 224). Academics are subject to horrid Orwellian technologies of evaluation and audit, rendering academe itself as damned as Faust sucked dry by Mephistopheles (Ball,

2012). Gill (2009), Hil et al. (2022), and Tregear et al. (2022) curated narratives covering exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt, feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence, and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy. Scholars of imposter syndrome will also recognise these feelings (Dews & Law, 1995). Berg et al. (2016) named the drivers of economic efficiency and intensifying competition as core sources of anxiety in Northern European academia, and life generally; these anxieties today manifest in the cost-cutting culture of degrowth. These values of outsiders from the marketplace have no place in academe. Withers and Wardrop (2014) observed, "scoundrels have infiltrated the academy—bureaucrats, managers and marketing 'experts'—some of whom know very little, or even care about, education" (p. 6).

Giroux (2017) sounded a call to war: academe versus neoliberalism, but there is hope in his notion of 'the public intellectual" (Giroux, 2014): the independent thinker interrogating the text from the margins, or the independent thinker with critical resilience (Bottrell & Keating, 2019). Loads et al. (2016) share many stories from those struggling with performativity and intensification to those reconfiguring productive terrains. These (and other) studies are powerful, essential snapshots, and their visceral language is evocative and innovative, figuring the identity of academic discourse itself as evolving. Strategies for resisting neoliberalist ideology are relayed (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019), but these are still largely from within academia and focus on maintaining self-integrity and learner-centredness despite authors being mostly still part of the machine and still complicit. They may be Barker's (2017) zombies and nervous wrecks, hanging on obliviously and/or anxiously, or they may, like Barker, figure ways to negotiate the new terrain.

Methodology

The vignette, also known as a scenario or situation, is a short story with characters who may be hypothetical or fictionalised and is used to prompt and elicit participants' perspectives on difficult topics. In social science research, vignettes are used as a mode of data elicitation (Kandemir & Budd, 2018); but my use of 'vignette' describes how the narratives are collected and presented. Vignettes are an allegorical method of gaining narrative data from participants or an ethnographic mode of retelling stories (Bottrell & Keating, 2019). In this use of vignettes, the ethical imperative is to protect identities. As a narrative method of sometimes visceral representation, vignettes are autoethnographic, and may as such, draw on respondents' partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, and corridor whispers (Sparkes, 2007). Poulos (2017) calls autoethnography a methodology of "resilience, resistance, and remembrance" (p. 1). He reminds qualitative researchers under fire in the academy and beyond that "we meet resistance with resistance, reproach with resilience, and disregard with remembrance" (p. 1). Such a relational narrative approach views an act of coming to know as a human and cultural construction (Polkinghorne, 1997). The narrative vignettes presented here are stretches of memory that testify to critical resilience and speak to the theme of not belonging.

These narratives are stories from a wider, ethics approved project on the lived experience of members of academic communities past and present during turbulent times (Ethics: Victoria University, Melbourne, HRE16-204). I want to be clear that no cited evidence comes from 'The professor is out', 'Reviewer 2 must be stopped' or any additional source. A series of narratives problematising 'voluntary' redundancy has already appeared (Andrew, 2020). Taking a similar narrative approach, this paper problematises 'belonging' as it pertains to academics and their affiliation or psychological alignment with universities to which they may or may not have belonged, peripherally or centrally. All the narratives used in this particular study are from people in their 50s or very early 60s, from three men and three women. The narratives all come from the Australia-New Zealand region, with Narrative 1 extending into an Asian nation and Narrative 3 referencing time in the United Kingdom.

Participants were purposively sampled from the networks of the author and his co-researcher, and the resonance of the subject led to a snowball effect. Participants were asked to write a short reflective piece on one or more of a sequence of bullet-pointed themes related to loss of academic identity, one of which was belonging to the modernised university. These narratives have been curated to remove shadows of recognition and returned to the writers for confirmation. Each of them presents a vignette of transition, an academic identity in progress, and they all find a way to portray authentic critical resilience in the face of managerialist narratives of nihilistic resilience. This narrative process involves in each case a grappling with belonging, or not.

Narrative 1 (New Zealand and Asia): Change (mis) management—where can we belong?

Leaving my work after 24 years was scary and liberating at the same time. I had to deal with two contradictory emotions; one was a miserable, dark sinking feeling, and another an elevating feeling that I will be free from this misery. To find myself without work was devastating. I lost my income, my 'social status', which was 'guaranteed' by being 'institutionalised'. And I loved my job. I loved co-creating new knowledge with my students, my research, working with like-minded people, the energy of the place, and the opportunity to connect with local communities. There was so much that I loved about my work, which became a part of my identity. How could I be 'me' without it? However, the place had changed so much and I realised it was no longer the place that now existed only in my imagination.

At the same time, I was caught by this strong feeling of liberation that was coming from the realisation that I did not need to return to the place that made me sick over the last two or three years. The endless and mostly meaningless restructuring resulted in bringing the institution to its knees with the help of a new group of managers who'd appeared from nowhere. They couldn't manage and they couldn't lead due to an absence of future vision and a general lack of organisational history, combined with a lack of understanding of the academic environment and the

needs of the sector. Preoccupied with their own survival and keeping their jobs as restructuring continued, the new managers mastered *discipline and punishment*. Control over the dissemination of knowledge was only one of their skills. One day my colleague said to me bending over the coffee machine in the kitchen: 'We don't really know what is happening in our department, do we? Unless we were in the elite circle'. These words stayed with me because a week later, he passed away from heart failure. The selected circle comprised the fast-growing group of middle managers that included contractors; some had only recently graduated. It was not even the classic divide-and-conquer rule but a survival tactic of an inexperienced management who knew that they needed to surround themselves with sycophants who would feel their obligation to them and always support them. Darwinism at its worst.

I started to observe bullying around me. It was surreal. I knew that bullying existed, but I was lucky or naïve, perhaps, to have endured it without experiencing or observing it myself. Colleagues, respected academics, and experienced teachers tried to speak their minds, to raise their voices, critically but not with criticism. Everybody saw the need for change and 'wanted to be part of the solution,' using management jargon. Colleagues asked caring questions about the new direction of our programmes, our industry, our department, and our institution. The new managers felt threatened by the questions; they had no answers. Instead of initiating constructive dialogues, they initiated disciplinary measures. The new 'middle managers' simply shut down questions and reported misbehaviour. By being obediently silent, you have a chance to survive.

There was nothing left for many of us. People started to leave. Many left without securing a new job. My colleagues were leaving because they realised that staying much longer would affect their physical and mental health. Others were afraid to leave or could not leave because of their financial circumstances and many other reasons. Then one day, I faced the feeling that I didn't want to go to my office. I felt palpitations. I had this debate going in my head – *I'd loved my job, but I couldn't stay any longer. However, I had no plan B. My family is here. Should I try to hang in, perhaps? How long for?* This cacophony of voices in my head left me divided. An a-ha moment: continuing in this environment not only affects me physically, but also mentally. Time to go!

There is a saying: *when one door closes, another opens*. Things started to happen quickly with redundancies on offer. I signed a contract with another university a month before my final day. It was a part-time, temporary contract but a breath of fresh air, and psychologically, it was important to prove that I could do it. On arriving, I felt belonging—a good sign! I seriously thought of moving away from academia at the time but another job in the international university found me or I found it. I think I am in control of my life again and this is an empowering feeling. The last few years in my previous workplace became a distant memory, which I hate revisiting. I wish I could obliterate it completely; but as long as I can park it on memory lane, I am content.

Narrative 2 (Australia): Finding spaces for the public good outside the academy

For some strange reason, I retain the view within the murky morass of neoliberal capitalism, that an academic is a person of high probity who works at a university and is committed to the pursuit of knowledge through an integrated approach to research, teaching, and professional and community service. For new knowledge to be forged in either tentative or more substantial forms, the work of academics must be carried out with autonomy and integrity, not at the whim of others. Of course, academics do not work in a vacuum but construct their activities around the principles, protocols, and codes of conduct that should have been established by the profession over long periods of time. Further, it is important that tertiary institutions have competent management and administrators to ensure that all aspects of university life can continue with efficiency and appropriateness, provided that management and administration do not interfere with the conduct of academic assignments. Unfortunately, the dominance and distortions of market forces over recent years, has determined that this separation of powers is often a distant memory. Educational quality, indeed, the honour and nobility of higher education, is at stake.

It may be possible to seek a breathing space, perhaps even to strengthen academic work, by establishing an independent existence, outside of the university environment. That is free at last, free at last to concentrate on working with a small group of research students, to write for a range of publications, to engage in various projects when available, and to undertake other educational and research activities for personal interest and satisfaction. Some formal contact with a host university will most likely be required. However, most of the incessant meetings and administrative tasks that face academics every day, would be eliminated. In other words, one might become a true, autonomous, professional academic. For the public good.

In many respects, these are moral decisions, of determining where the most good can be achieved, for the majority of participants. Establishing an independent office reduces contact with larger numbers of students and lessens the opportunity for all those informal discussions with staff on ideas and projects that excite. Wandering down the corridor for a chat is often when the ideas ferment. Financial considerations may mean the continuing necessity to write grant applications similar to the pressures of formal academic employment. Neoliberal dominance has made professional academic life in its truest guise very difficult to achieve and therefore can generate enormous frustration for those who want an honest academic relationship with knowledge, students, and colleagues. If it can be arranged, an independent, academic existence has many attractions.

Narrative 3 (Australia): Why flying under the radar is a useful strategy

The three universities I have worked at are all in the same city. They range from a research-intensive, high-status university, a middling one and another that is of lower status. I completed a PhD at the first and worked there for eight

years in total. The bullying became intolerable and with the support of the union, I won a formal case, but nevertheless had to leave. When I was offered a tenured position at the middling university, I was very pleased and threw myself into teaching and research. A new head of school was appointed but turned out to be a sociopath. I was groomed and toyed with over a dark period of two years. I met every impossible target, and the administration load was so heavy that I rarely stopped working. I could not allow myself to buckle. It was an identity thing. Again, the union assisted when I formalised my accusation of bullying, which escalated to an accusation of victimisation. That means the person claiming bullying receives even more abuse for speaking up. The person from the Human Relations Department backed the manager and appointed a tame external consultant to examine the case. I lost. This level of bullying leads to a breaking point.

After leaving that tenured position, I was offered a five-year research-only role in a new research institute. I couldn't believe my good fortune. My earlier experiences influenced my decision to consciously fly under the radar, instead of joining in with the new university community. Research-focused positions are quite rare and highly competitive, and I felt animosity from colleagues in the faculty, who had high teaching and administrative loads. Given my outgoing nature, it was a considerable restraint not to join in. I resolved to work on this until it became my professional persona. Over time, I became more and more solitary as the focus became writing grant applications and publications and supervising PhD students – rather than working collegially with others. Over the eight-year period I spent at that university, I became friendly with half a dozen people, but few of them have been to my home. Reflecting on this significant change in professional identity has revealed just how strange it has been to continue to exist professionally, as an absent presence. Sanctioned bullying is widespread in universities, and it messes with people's lives.

Narrative 4 (The United Kingdom and Australia): Breaking with competition and toxic relations

'A sheltered workshop for gas bags' is what a previous head of department called universities. I must have missed the sheltered workshop part because my experience of university departments was the opposite of that. Margaret Thatcher's suspicion that not everyone was pulling their weight, and her slavish belief in metrics, led, in 1986, to the introduction of the first Research Assessment Exercise in the UK. My entry into academia occurred some five or six years later so it is likely that the gas bags were already being weighed and found wanting by the time I entered the fray. The history and subsequent development of how research and other academic output was and is measured can be found in the literature above, and elsewhere. But there is no question that the common purpose in academia is to bring in money through publication and research grants. Discovery, innovation, and academic excellence are also the purpose, but it's about money. Thatcher has had a long reach.

My various jobs—let's call it a career—have taken me to senior positions in both academia and government service. An academic department is, I am convinced, a unique work environment. My experience in the five universities in three different countries in which I worked was characterised by an ongoing sense of not fitting in, of not understanding the undercurrents, of constantly feeling not part of the club: *not belonging*. Joining a department is like joining a family wedding or a wake halfway through. All the family members are in role, and there is a sense that something ominous is about to happen: a fight breaking out, perhaps, or old hurts being dragged up and played out. It's confusing for a new staff member who does not yet understand the undercurrents. Nor do they understand the jealousies and rivalries between all the relatives; how they started and why people are so exercised about what appear to be small matters to an outsider. Department meetings are characterised by meaningful looks across the room, notes passed to one's neighbour, raised eyebrows, sniggers, and even guffaws.

I speculate whether the personal attributes of a good academic may be also those that also make you an awful person to work with. To bring in money you must be better than the next person, and you need to be innovative; in other words, you must compete. It's a marvel how nasty people can be on the way up the ladder. A Faculty Dean described it as 'clever people thinking up clever ways of being horrible to each other'. It is a job that requires a tremendous amount of ego and opportunities to indulge in truly intellectual thought and open discussion I found to be strangely rare. Ego has no place in government service. And not to be too naive about it, government service, is public service and is based on a common purpose. However, no cloud comes without a diamond-dazzling lining, so towards what was to be the end of my academic career, I switched jobs and entered a fascinating public service role. Having a PhD seems to hold a lot of sway in contexts other than the academy! I'm glad I'm 'out' now. I will always operate as a supporter of those in higher education but from an emeritus position. Will I work in a university again, though? One never knows.

Narrative 5 (Australia and New Zealand): Going it alone: The para-academic

There are few things more liberating than working in an 'emeritus' or 'honorary' capacity. You have earned your badge and stripes, can work on passion projects and also support, as in my case, graduate students. You can be the 'old world' learner-focused and research-driven academic, and your energies are your own. You may no longer belong to a university, where 'belong' means 'have a reciprocal capital-based relationship with', but you can belong, finally, to yourself. The space of the independent is a rewarding one for those who made their mark, and those who have simply had enough.

The generations known as 'Gen X' and 'Gen Y' were those most hit by managerialist and neoliberalist reforms, and ultimately these were the majority of those whose positions were lost due to the endless restructures and redundancy rounds of the past decades (Andrew, 2020). COVID-19 afforded opportunities to thin the academic ranks further. Around me, colleagues were left without tenured affiliations

and consoled with honorary ones, which amount to online library access. They were asking whether they wanted another such position; many realised enough had been enough long ago, and thus went on to occupy independent academic spaces or to work in contexts of reinvention where they discovered at least fleetingly what workplaces had been like before the fall of the university.

At the centre of a group, I heard many stories. Some of the titles might be Death by Administrivia (and other 'Death by...' titles), *The Annual Crisis, Micromanagement Survivors Anonymous, The Sycophancy of the Neoliberal and Bullied to Death*. I carry these stories with me, but elect, for myself, to aim to make a difference. While I work at a distance with postgraduate learners, the pandemic made us all realise how distance, and Zoom and its proxies, were enablers of the less affiliated and more agentive life. The space of contract work afforded possibilities, both pedagogic and ecological. We realised the campus was, in fact, unnecessary, and had long since ceased to offer community to either graduate learners or their mentors.

We created a community afresh online, initially because we had to, but ultimately realised this saved time, stress, and horsepower. The pandemic catalysed two trends already underway: the fresh possibilities of online one-on-one, peer, and group supervision and the necessity of the unaffiliated academic. Fostering teams or communities of belonging for postgraduate learners testifies to the human need to align with professional or social groups as a motivation and support mechanism; but working independently from an institution suggests that for academics of my generation, there is more agency and authenticity in going it alone.

Narrative 6: (New Zealand) A new start with the same identity

Just prior to the turn of the century, I had felt I found a place of belonging when I achieved a position at the university that I'd long wanted to be part of. I performed well within the increasing audit culture, but increasingly with less heart and more stress. Then there came a 'camel's back' moment. I have to say that there are many serious push factors from my work as a senior lecturer at a prominent university; after 20 years there, the gloss has well and truly worn off, and it has become a bit of a toxic work environment for me at least.

I will keep the backstory short: I spearheaded a protracted and bitter battle a couple of years ago to get casual teachers in our school made permanent, which I eventually won, with the excellent help of the union, but it took a toll on me. I later discovered the Vice Chancellor of my organisation was allied with the Atlas Think Tank, which cross-pollinated a particularly vile form of neoliberalism at that time and continues to threaten democracy itself today. At least I am departing, having made life better for 12 of my colleagues, so there is a grim satisfaction in that.

Although the push factors resulted from pain and disappointment, these were outweighed by new hope. Pull factors towards the new, and largely online educational organisation–not a university–are a fresh start, a permanent, full-time position with a much better salary, seemingly lovely people, and the feeling of being valued rather than disposable, replaceable. So, I am moving from my core disciplinarity now towards related specialisms which have always been one strand of my career. I am also stepping out of the university sector. The air is fresher and cleaner, and I can breathe again.

Discussion

The narratives testify to four things. First, the instrumentality and surveillance characterising the modern university prove major push factors to passionate educators; second, there is intellectual life after a university 'career', as Narrators 4 and 6 still call that sequence of random events. Third, a more ethical and authentic sense of academic identity is possible, too and it is here where the possible categories of public intellectual and para-academic apply, as Narratives 2, 3, 4, and 5 tell of ongoing multiple academic and emeritus roles beyond the hallowed walls. Narrative 2 aligns particularly with the ideal of the public intellectual. These are the extramural, extracurricular educationalists Withers and Wardrop (2014) described. Narratives 1 and 6 tell of moving out of toxic workplaces into places of new hope where the academic identity can be restored. Fourthly, the narratives unveil what Gill (2009) called hidden injuries and unmask the neoliberal university's failures in upholding collectives' and individuals' duties of care, especially in Narrative 1's story of management silencing those who speak out and trapping knowledge of change within an inner circle and Narrative Five's battle for integrity to improve conditions for others. Yet the stories also speak to individuals' critical resilience (Bottrell & Keating, 2019) as in the narratives' reversals of fortune, even if it brings what Narrative 6 calls a "grim satisfaction".

Whilst just one of the narratives mentions public intellectuals or para-academics (Narrative 5), there is a sense of "relational being" (Graham & Moir, 2022) in each narrative. That is, each individual nominates a new educational identity. Narrative One is a transition to a less stressful, academic position, while Narrative Two operates an independent academic existence beyond official ivory towers as a mentor, supervisor, researcher and activist. Narrator 1 is torn from their passion but worked down by the panopticon of managerialist discipline and punishment; Narrator 2 is convinced an authentic academic existence is impossible under neoliberalism. However, a rewarding and ethical intellectual life is possible, though corridor conversations are missed. The third narrator's key theme is the psychological impact of ingrained bullying, and how a neoliberalist human relations regime can turn a victim into a miscreant, themes seen, too, in Narratives 1 and 6. The survivor of bullying, even sheltered in a research institute, bears the scars. Trusting others and making collegial friends will always be a challenge.

Narrator 4 is not resistant to the capitalist, competitive thrust of the university, but wonders why they are environments that attract effective narcissists and sociopaths. They wonder about a connection between academic social climbing and

awfulness as a personality trait. They speak of not belonging to five universities across three countries due to institutional politics and ladder-climbing egos. Organisational histories that remain unresolved impact newcomers. On leaving, the joy of reading and writing for pleasure returns. Narrator 5 revels in finally being their own person, creating an academic identity that is fulfilling behind the restrictive parapets. They also cast themselves as a representative of a generation hit hardest by neoliberalism's tight fist and name the push-factors covered in the literature review. In a sense, they carry others' similar stories within them. The pandemic forged possibilities of online belonging to professional and postgraduate groups, giving voice to the value of the outsider. Narrator Six speaks of a transition from a stable role, through an organisational crisis, to a fresh role outside the university sector, but one which uses core expertise. She hints at the push factor of a Vice Chancellor whose work as an operative for the Atlas Network severely altered the direction of her university and many of its academics; her short vignette now seems like a window onto a terrifying emerging story (Hamilton, 2024).

A troubling theme of the feeling of being bullied runs through five of the six narratives. Narrative 4 called it "clever people thinking up clever ways of being horrible to each other". Narrator 2 calls it "sanctioned"; the neoliberal university condones such behaviour by perpetuating justice imbalances and privileging hegemonic voices. Even with union activism, there is a sense that neoliberalism will be victorious. A metaphor of 'battle" (Narrative 6) rings throughout. Also thematic is the idea that the university is a petri dish for sycophantic neoliberals, anxious for a place on the ladder at any cost. Narrative 6 hints at a powerful lobby group influencing the expression of this neoliberalism in higher education, and their infiltration by vested power and interests. A theme of academic hard work or success not bringing joy prevails. A refreshing theme of finding breathing space is present, too (Narrators 1, 3 and 6), as is the idea of work as a public intellectual being ethical, with professional probity a function of the profession itself, not the organisation (Narrators 3 and 5). Significantly, most narrators note the connection between inferred status and affiliation. For Narrators 1, 5 and 6, the sense of still being able was confirmed with a new offer. The archaic notion of 'affiliation' is still required in technocratic systems, circulated in conference communities and normalised by publishers who often require an affiliation as part of the submission process as if there is no possibility of identifying as an independent researcher for purely bureaucratic reasons. Non-affiliated independents exist. The symbolic violence of being made redundant, discarded or moved-on wounds us psychologically (Andrew, 2020). It "takes a toll" (Narrative 5). Not being affiliated is an identity option that affords agency.

Conclusions

As the 2020s run on, an emancipatory counter-narrative (Goodall, 2010) where the academic is agential continues to evolve, spurred by such critiques as that of Neary and Wynn (2016). Perhaps also Utopian, this sub-genre is activist, malleable and adaptive, and my study has pivoted on appreciating such things as critical resilience, para-academic work, and the joys of working beyond affiliation; of *not* belonging to a badged institution. Not belonging is here an agentive state that refigures power, opportunity, and identity in authentic ways beyond toxic universities and their zombiedom (Smyth, 2017). It resists the logically ludicrous notion that one single monolithic organisation defines individuals and opens the possibility of operating independently under multiple banners or realigning skills to other professional endeavours. It is concomitant with notions of liquid modernity with its information overload and super speedy change (Stein, 2021) where ex-academics, para-academics, public intellectuals, and those in emeritus capacities contribute broadly to global citizenship education and even cosmopolitanism in the sense of non-affiliation. Should their traumas persist, they may seek "to develop and disseminate a revised set of shared educational ideals, values, and modes of meaning making and social change' pivoting on "democracy, inclusion, and shared humanity" (Stein, 2021, pp. 483, 486).

Thriving outside the academy as ethical, creative non-conformists is increasingly an option, even if it is a plan B (Barcan, 2017). This "paraversity" of "para-academics" offers the ability to do good academic work outside institutions as creators, experts, contractors, or consultants, operating unseen in plain sight (Rolfe, 2014; Withers & Wardrop, 2014). Withers and Wardrop (2014) write that such extracurricular educationalists "carve out opportunities to inhabit spaces that appear off limits under the terms of the contemporary academy… so thoroughly 'occupied' by marketization" (p. 7). The universities are 'occupied' as by an enemy wartime force and even by "operatives" for corporate think tanks (Hamilton, 2024). Yet, it is possible to occupy a new place for articulating and reclaiming the value and integrity of practical and collective work of knowledge and resistance. Clearly, the demand for 'affiliation' needs to disappear from many a technocratic apparatus such as conference enrolment forms; without independent thought beyond group/think/tanks, the academic is rudderless. And without being allowed integrity, the designation 'academic' becomes a falsehood, a non-entity.

Thriving is not only about an ongoing intellectual life, but also about well-being. Acton and Glasgow (2015) argue that only contexts that "provide possibilities for action, agency and autonomy" can be seen as supportive and remedial of pressures (p. 107). Their study is particularly damning of the death by administrative workloads, "the metric" (Story 4) and "audit culture" (Story 6) that comes with intensification in neoliberal universities. Narrator Two could survive only by flying under the radar in a geographically-other research institute beyond the panopticon. The lived experience of the six narrators shows that no amount of passion, talent, and success can counterbalance administrivia. All stories testify to the academic incivility and bully culture that Twale and DeLuna (2008) identified. There is a lack of morale, that in Brion's (2015) conception, comes when belonging doesn't exist. However, thriving offers the possibility of not-belonging as an option.

Thriving seems, too, to be about different forms of belonging, but an authentic sense of non-hegemonic belonging, not that of organisational propaganda and

agitprop orientations. Scholarly belonging differs from organisational belonging: it involves mentoring others, building capacity and capability through the exercise of one's experience; it involves a common purpose, as in our narrators' stories of finding new places, potentially in spaces of "democracy, inclusion, and shared humanity" (Stein, 2021, p. 486). It is simultaneously a selfless and a human need, evolves organically, and cannot be enforced top-down by technocracy. Most of all, the thriving that happens in these stories happens independent of affiliation to the modern university and enables an authentic academic identity with integrity.

Further research

Lewin (2023) reported on the post academia careers of five academics during 'the great resignation'. A phenomenon of mass exodus by choice or redundancy is caused more by push factors than pull factors: there are more stories of escape from toxicity than finding a new workplace for fresh belonging. A sense that teaching and learning are not what they should be due to a loss of educator agency pervades. A 2019 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* offered the evocative title: "'This was a hell not unlike anything Dante conjured': Readers share their stories of fraught academic careers". Clearly, there is more to tell beyond my, Lewin's (2023) or Barcan's (2013, 2017) scope about the phenomenon of 'the great resignation', specifically issues of educator agency, organisational policy and even curriculum content that need exploring with a view to resulting in positive change. The unlikelihood of positive change, at least in the present, is arguably because of the cockroach nature of the neoliberal reported here and elsewhere (Ball, 2015; Fleming, 2021; Andrew, 2020, 2023, 2024). Hence, possibilities for innovation are limited without change due to the all-pervading ideological palsy of neoliberalism (Hil, et al., 2022). Further, the ethics of care that I owe to narrators requires me to stay with impressions, perceptions and experiences and prohibits me from reporting details that may damage institutions or reflect poorly on surviving educators teaching their changed/sabotaged curricula.

I have already written of how neoliberalist process has itself no room for care in assessment processes even in the post-COVID world (Andrew, 2024) and of how educators remaining after 'the great resignation' may be *homo economicus* clones, tow-the-line zombies or conscious-riven nervous wrecks (Andrew, 2023). It is also important to ask the question, 'Whatever happened to the exit interview?' and the concomitant enquiries, 'Did exit interviews ever do anyone any good?' and 'Did organisational change ever result from exit interview data?' The truth is that, for universities, except in the case of some who stay in emeritus or honorary capacities, once you're gone, you're gone. The reality is that exit interviews, once an aspect of process and duty of care, seldom if ever occur anymore.

One last question that needs to be asked, and which will take considerable courage, considers the possible impact of the loss of ideological outsiders from democratic processes of teaching and learning. The loss of these educators represents a massive loss for present and future generations. This question lies in the domain of Giroux's 2019 horrifying work on higher education in a populist universe: *Terror of the unforeseen*.

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