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Editors

Resisting Neoliberalism in Higher Education Volume II

Prising Open the Cracks

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Creating a Positive Casual Academic Identity Through Change and Loss

Joanne Yoo

Introduction

As higher education becomes commodified, there has been a rise in the number of academic staff to accommodate growing student numbers. In fact, Australian universities have raised 29 billion dollars of revenue in 2015, and almost a half of this has been spent on wages.[1] Despite these increases, the working conditions of staff are problematic, as fixed term and casual contracts have become the preferred model of employment in Australian higher education.[2] It is estimated that casual academics teach around half of all undergraduate teaching in Australian Universities.[3] More recent figures, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) estimates that approximately 41 percent of academic employees are casually employed and a further 22 percent are on fixed term contracts.[4] Casualisation has become an accepted and normalised form of

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employment, but long-term job insecurity has negatively impacted casual academics' well-being.[5]

In this chapter, I describe my experiences as one of the many anonymous casual academic workers in the Australian higher education context. Since this chapter reflects an intimate account of my experiences with casual work, it is written in a personal and reflexive style, aiming to, as Warren suggests, "maintain a connection between my personal and academic self".[6] I attempt to bridge the personal and academic by sharing personal insights on the concepts of identity and loss discussed. Through this process, I seek to question the norms of academic writing,[7] as well as to depict the, "… back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience" within the writing process.[8]

Why Write About the Casual Academic Identity?

Identity is a common subject of inquiry and addresses important queries concerning human thought and behaviour.[9] Inquiry around professional identity is driven by questions such as, "Why people do what they do? How do members or a group understanding of who they are? How does this influence their personal and professional lives?" Our identity frames our experiences and affects our dealings with others. The ways in which we define ourselves further impact how we engage in and construct reality with others.[10] In *Composing Academic Identities: Stories That Matter,* Badley argues that humans undergo a life-long quest to find out who they are to avoid the discomfort of insecurity and the unknown. He asserts that self-knowledge helps us to position ourselves within the world and proposes that individuals need to undergo this positioning process and "compose and search for a core identity to prove their existence and to verify that they are not imaginary beings".[11] This is not to say that identity is fixed. Indeed, identity is constructed narratively as it undergoes the continual reflexive process of being defined and redefined within changing contexts[12]; it is temporal and evolves through ongoing lived experiences.[13]

Academic identity is the source of much debate because of its complexity. Identity theory suggests that self- concept naturally comprises of multiple identities, which arise from daily encounters and responses to environmental demands.[14] These identities surface through diverse encounters with people who hold different perspectives and ways of being.[15] Identity formation has been likened to an "argument" as individuals justify and provide meaning to the differences within their thoughts and actions[16] and can become a significant point of interest when these differences collide. For example, Badley suggests our multiple identities are shaped by diverse contexts and tensions can arise when they compete with or are incompatible with each other.[17] For example, academic identity has evolved to reflect the changing nature of academic work.[18] Traditionally, academics have undertaken three major categories of work, including: teaching responsibilities, discipline-specific research and service work.[19] The balance between these three roles, however, has been lost due to the increasing economic rationalism and marketisation of higher education.[20] Academic identity continues to shift as priorities change to meet the demands of the massification of university education, decrease in government funding and a growing audit and quality control culture.

The casual academic identity is particularly problematic, as many casual workers desire security and permanence despite their temporary contracts. As a casual academic, I yearned for stability and certainty within a series of year-long contracts and I attempted to create a measure of consistency by maintaining a wide range of research and teaching roles. I rarely declined work as I did not know when it would next be offered. I also tried to improve my chances of tenure by writing publications on the research projects of tenured staff, rather than following my own interests. Years of such work had made me feel fragmented and without purpose. Like many others, I wanted to explore the concept of identity to better understand where I was headed. This notion is similarly expressed by Levin and Shaker's study of full-time non-tenured (FTNT) faculty, who they perceive as having, "incoherent or conflictive identities".[21]

Casuals on the Periphery

The majority of Australian academics are now employed on a casual or contract basis. The growth of casualisation within the Australian higher education workforce has been highlighted in a study by Larkins,[22] which documented an 81 percent growth of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) casually employed academics between 1996 and 2011, including up to 80 percent of first year teaching load. A more recent report published by NTEU also indicated that there was a 21.5 percent growth in the casual employees in 2016, and that most of these included teaching only positions.[23] Ultimately, this long-term instability and uncertainty has a cost. For instance, over half of the 1203 casual researchers who had been surveyed in the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) national study expressed that "uncertain job prospects" was the most challenging part of their work.[24] Levin and Shaker relate additional difficulties associated with this uncertainty, pointing out that "Full-time non-tenured (FTNT) faculty teach, research, administer and serve their institutions just as of those with tenure, but they lack permanent employment protection, an acknowledged role in institutional governance, and an established or well-understood position in the academy".[25] Unfortunately, there is no clear pathway from fixed term to permanent employment due to the lack of continuing or tenured academic positions.[26]

The increasing number of non-permanent staff has led to a unique work force structure described as the "core–periphery" model, which embodies a small core of permanent staff and the majority on fixed term contracts in the periphery.[27] This workforce hierarchy creates an "organisational insiders versus outsiders" effect, where the outsiders on the periphery protect the employment conditions of the core labour force by supplying the market's demand for work.[28] Workers are consequently shaped according the position they occupy. Casual academics, for instance, need greater ingenuity to "fall back on their own resources to construct their own employment biographies, negotiating the hazards and opportunities in inventive ways" due to the lack of a career path.[29] Without a discernible "career path", they cannot be promoted and progress to higher academic levels. Their employment opportunities are

further limited as they undertake the majority of teaching-related work, which is devalued by the institution. Levin and Shaker affirm this lack of agency for casual or non-permanent staff who are unable to "control their destiny… [as] their principal work, teaching, is undervalued by the academy".[30] My experiences were similar. I had believed that I was on a career path as I did the work of tenured staff, but there was no career progression.

My Search for a Coherent Casual Academic Identity

My casual academic identity felt incoherent and problematic due to its inherent inconsistencies. Levin and Shaker describe academics in non-continuing positions as having a "hybrid" or "blended" identity, as they are experts in the classroom but amongst the tenured staff, they become, "subalterns, as their placement on the academic hierarchy diminishes their influence and power".[31] After reading about the casualisation in higher education, I questioned why I had persisted for so long. My desire was strong despite my lack of success. Levin and Shaker[32] express a similar surprise at how non-permanent staff continue working in such insecure employment conditions. Like the contingent staff in Levin and Shaker's study, my own desires to become an academic were deeply rooted in childhood aspirations. The academic dream was planted as I watched the struggles of my immigrant parents, who laboured in low skilled work despite having once been highly paid professionals. The academic identity represented the legitimacy of a highly educated and qualified profession and I pursued it whole-heartedly to bring meaning to my parents' suffering. Such associations between work and personal meaning have been described by Papa and Lancaster, who propose that professional identities are ascribed "societal meanings" or "shared connotations" that characterise the group.[33] An academic's identity is associated with positive meanings of intellect and prestige that characterise higher learning institutions. By attaining the positive associations of working in higher education, I believed that I could validate the sacrifices my parents had made.

Despite my aspirations to acquire greater legitimacy and validation, acquiring a tenured academic position was challenging. My casual academic colleagues and I would disclose our mutual exhaustion and helplessness over unrealised hopes of permanency. I would see one skilled worker after another leave for a more secure position outside of academia, and would despairingly ask, "How can I wait any longer? What if I am still in this position ten years from now?" Levin and Shaker talk about this dissonance expressed by non-permanent staff as they enjoy the work but are not satisfied with the work conditions; "Although teaching matches their tastes, the non-tenure-track role does not match their aspirations".[34] Finally, I was offered a continuing position outside of academia, but still hesitated, unable to let go of a life-long dream.

The Changing, Undefined and Peripheral Identity as Story That Matters

The unsettling reality of a contingent and peripheral "academic" identity was a topic that had personal value as it reflected my concerns for the future. Badley urges us to write about such "stories that matter" as inquiry should encompass issues that hold personal meaning.[35] With an identity that was difficult to fathom, accept or manage, I knew I had come to an issue that mattered. My approach to my impermanent status was unsustainable; it left me over committing to work "just in case". I was on the fast track to burnout. Since I could not change my casual status, I decided to adopt an alternative perspective on my circumstance. Up until now I had regarded my peripheral identity as a weakness because the work was so diverse and miscellaneous. I picked up odd jobs as they were offered, which limited my confidence, creativity and sense of agency. My time was constantly governed by others. In my academic publications, I also lacked the confidence to explore areas of interest as I was too busy seeking a "legitimate" academic identity. As tenure became my goal, I had lost sight of seeking personally meaningful and enjoyable work. Levin and Shaker[36] equally affirm how concerns for the lack of legitimacy, status or equity can detract from non-permanent academic's sense of agency.

Changing my perspective ultimately made me more curious about building a positive casual academic identity.

As I searched for core qualities that defined my casual work, I kept returning to the theme of "loss". I had collected a lot of random and miscellaneous work experiences whilst working on short term contracts. Looking deeper and questioning what I had gained or internalised, I saw the benefits of continuing losses. My work-life involved a series of roles and responsibilities with a designated end-point; this meant I needed to adapt and evolve according to new work. Change and adaptability were my defining qualities. To explore how academics construct loss and change, I began reading papers by retired academics who developed new and meaningful identities despite entrenched beliefs that the end of work life is without functionality and purpose.[37] These retirees describe how the loss of work triggers a loss of identity that poses difficult and sometimes overwhelming challenges. Richardson depicts retirement as "fall[ing] off a stage" to indicate both the loss of identity and status of being an academic.[38] She documents the abrupt "fall from grace" as the retired academic is no longer the focus of everyone's attention. Richardson speaks of avoiding the term "retired", in the same way cancer sufferers avoid naming their disease for the fear of what is implied, as she observes, "It is hard to let go of the identity, status, and perks that being a professor confer. You pass as smart, even if you aren't; you can claim to know more than you do, and others accept the sham … But when you retire you become dispensable".[39] Badley[40] similarly depicts retirement as the decline and decomposition of a highly regarded identity, where the loss of the academic identity equated to the loss of being "somebody" who matters.

Identity loss is considered to be a catalyst for re-envisioning and constructing new and authentic identities based on deeper and more meaningful interests.[41] Identity disruption is depicted as an opportunity for retirees to choose how they wanted to orient themselves rather than "falling into" their identities.[42] Badley, for example, uses his retirement to explore and redefine himself outside the higher education landscape. He defines identity disruption as a source of inspiration and new learnings, as being retired means being free of the previous associations to compose, to speak and to write without worrying about "research criteria" or one's "impact factor".[43] emerald and Carpenter[44] similarly touch on the

openness, possibility and vulnerability inherent to retirement. They provide an analogy of retired academics embarking on "a journey without maps" as they become disconnected from their previous identities and experience confusion at the sudden freedom. By emerging from their struggle with the loss of identity, retirees can redefine themselves with greater authenticity, as Richardson notes, "Each story I begin to tell is interrupted. Right now, the interruption is from deep within: body history, emotional history. Do I have the time, energy, emotional space to be in that previous traumatic event now?".[45] Richardson is driven to write from these places of mystery and demonstrates how identity disruption offers new possibilities to write about stories that matter.

Flexibility and change are intrinsic to the academic identity. The literature on retired academics reveals how individuals with a fixed notion of professional identity often experience a greater sense of loss when their roles come to an end.[46] Retirees who had heavily invested in their work lives were seen to experience significant loss or disruption of identity after retirement. Identity theory relays how disruption ensues after the loss of a core role.[47] In terms of job loss, the impact on well-being is particularly significant if individuals attributed a high level of value to their work.[48] By the same token, individuals who are accustomed to loss and change may not experience such severe disorientation or crisis. In fact, loss was shown to strengthen rather than disrupt or derail identity. This same principle could apply to casual academics, who possess a multi-faceted identity based on a series of short term projects and teaching periods. The casual academic identity evolves with the rhythm of contingent work; casuals have no "core" identity to protect or to preserve as multiple roles are undertaken to ensure continuing employment.

Such fluidity and flexibility is vital as uncertainty is considered to be an escapable trait of being human. Badley proposes that a fluid identity is a part of our human condition, as individuals do not have a core or central identity and that our search for an "authentic or core or essential or fixed or real identity is a story that does not matter … [as] the notion of a real, authentic self is, in this view, just a delusion, a fantasy. The quest for an authentic, true self is, at best, fraught and, at worst, a wild-goose chase".[49] Identities are also considered to be fictional as they are constantly being composed and decomposed, which means that what is finally constructed

or under construction is a fragmented and changing whole.[50] Badley consequently refers to our lives as a bricolage as our life encounters form "incomplete and partial texts…. that are pieced together".[51] Rather than being a grand narrative, our lives are constructed by multiple story lines and plots that undergo re-description and re-composition; our identities are therefore narratives in progress.[52] Such process of restorying can be highly positive as individuals become more empowered to recompose selves according to their desires.[53] Living entails deciding which stories are useful and compose our identities according to personal meanings. Emerald and Carpenter express similar sentiments, as they write, "I need to adjust and adapt to maintain who and what I am and who and what I have become; now resigned and retired, I have the freedom to disengage, reengage and realign who I am".[54] Through this flexible and empowered lens, Bochner explains how he can reinterpret and reframe even the most challenging stories, such as his relationship with his deceased father, to "reclaim [his] past".[55] The casual academic identity illustrates how identity is the on-going construction of the smaller identities that make up the whole, rather than a real, core or authentic self. These reconstructions of self help us to exercise greater agency over our lives.

Generative Spaces Within the Cracks: Composing and Recomposing Our Academic Identities

Considering that life involves constructing plot lines rather than a grand narrative, it is important to reflect on the multiple changing stories that we live by. In his attempt to construct authentic and meaningful stories, Badley refers to Heidegger's advice to cherish and be inspired by "our most important words", as we identify ourselves through them.[56] Charmaz's research on chronically ill men provides a vivid example as she illustrates how these men seek to live normal lives by preserving aspects of self that they have valued, which she describes as "maintaining essential qualities, attributes, and identities of this past self that fundamentally shape the self-concept".[57] Papa and Lancaster refers to these efforts as an

independent "self-construal" which encompasses a self- concept that is buffered against a loss as it "embod[ies] relatively stable ways of interacting with the world" that are not so affected by the disruption or loss of a role.[58] Badley also suggests that these personal meanings and essential qualities are words to live by; they are a way of expressing who we are and a means of exercising our academic freedom. Richardson affirms this point by suggesting that "people who write [stories] are always writing about their lives".[59] The words that I wanted to explore reflected the positive agency inherent within change and loss within my casual academic identity, rather than the negative associations of illegitimacy, uncertainty and instability.

If openness is essential for growth, asking questions is more significant than having the answers.[60] As I reflected on my search for generative spaces between the cracks of uncertainty, I began searching for new meaning amongst "ruins". It was only then I was able to see the richness in what was previously overlooked. One way I attempted to pursue meaning with my fragmented identity was to explore non-traditional research approaches. I experimented with new writing styles and research topics. Rather than writing about "legitimate" topics, I began to expand my reading and writing to less familiar but meaningful areas such as the body, illness and the casual academic identity. I wrote from these personal and vulnerable places to explore its hidden potential. Haynes explains how merging the personal with the professional enabled her to, develop a new identity as an academic. Research became cathartic as it involved a "project of self".[61] Conducting research into personally meaningful matters lies at the heart of meaningful inquiry. Haynes asserts that it is fundamentally impossible to "separate reason and emotion"[62]; whilst, Bochner argues that academics should become more transparent about their alienation from research. He writes, "It's about time we wrestled more openly and collectively with these problems. Instead of hiding the pain many of us feel about the ways we are unfulfilled by the life of the mind".[63]

Researchers who choose to write about "epiphanies" are pattern seekers who examine their experiences in relation to those of others.[64] The patterns that emerged from my explorations revealed that identity was fluid, complex and paradoxical rather than being secure, certain and fixed.

After finally leaving the debate of permanent and non-permanent work aside, I could see the generative spaces in the cracks of my peripheral academic identity. A fluid academic identity encouraged me to become more fluid in my research practice. I became more proactive in searching for less familiar research topics and ways to express them. Badley similarly concludes that academic identity encompasses this ongoing process of composing and recomposing rather than reaching certainty through a final, complete or authentic self, we can only attempt to establish a "temporary (that is, unfixed) reflective equilibrium".[65] As composers of academic identity, he argues that we should continually move forward to construct our lives depending on what matters to us and explains how he plans to write about "what matters" by constructing a post-retirement identity by pursuing new ways of writing, moving from, "traditional or conventional modes to approaches [to writing] that are more experimental or flexible or even looser".[66] I therefore immerse myself in such experimental writing to explore the complexity of my casual academic identity. Behar acknowledges that this is not without its risks as she discloses how her vulnerable writing attracts equally vulnerable readers. She describes such readers as not wanting to be "alienat[ed] from themselves or from those whom they seek to understand and eventually write about" and further warns readers to only follow her if they "don't mind going to places without a map".[67]

The Conclusion

Neoliberalism has negatively impacted the higher education space, particularly in the area of academic staffing. As education becomes an asset to be bought and sold, universities have accordingly adopted competitive and flexible employment structures that rely heavily on non-continuing academic contracts. Uncertainty, change, instability and loss characterise such employment conditions as there is no promise of tenure even after consecutive years of "non-continuing" work. Ongoing insecurity has had a negative impact on staff well-being, but there are also lesser-known advantages of occupying the peripheries of academia. Within marginal spaces there is more room to manoeuvre, less guidelines to follow and

greater opportunities to break from traditional academic conventions. In this paper I have attempted to capitalise on these advantages by writing about the hidden possibilities in the "cracks" of their "undefined, peripheral and contingent" identities and to reveal my *apprehension* about what the future holds.

> Where does that leave me? Apprehensive. But wow, what a great word, apprehensive: to apprehend, but not be certain; to be apprehended, to arrest, to be arrested, to be caught dumbfounded in the flow of someone else, something else, a breeze, a warm glow of sunlight – affect: to understand, practically, not intellectually.[68]

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