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It's systemic: leaving academia and the politics of withdrawal

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Citation

Hesselberth, P. (2022). It's systemic: leaving academia and the politics of withdrawal. In C. Flanagan & G. Wright (Eds.), *Leaving the grove: a quit lit reader*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3277306>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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It's Systemic:

Leaving Academia and the Politics of Withdrawal

Pepita Hesselberth

Originally published in expanded form as Chapter 10, "On Leaving Academia and the Need to Take Refuge," in *Politics of Withdrawal: Media, Arts, Theory*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), pp. 147-60.

Why People Leave

WIn the early 2010s a surge of articles began appearing in Anglophone (online) magazines and newspapers such as *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, even *The Guardian*, *Vox*, *Slate Magazine*, and *Nature*, as well as on numerous personal blogs, on the topic of "leaving academia." In unison, or so it seemed, (soon-to-be) former academics — from PhDs and postdocs to adjuncts and tenure-tracked professors — began to report on why they felt compelled to leave a profession to which, in general, they nonetheless felt committed. Indeed, by the mid-2010s, the raucous subgenre had become so commonplace in the US that Rebecca Schuman, an academic turned freelance writer, dubbed it "quit lit,"¹ a term that — although still trending — is as problematic as it is catchy. The precipitous collapse of the academic job market, and the changing landscape of higher education in response to neoliberal reforms, have continued to sustain this outpouring of reflections about leaving academia. And I am one of the genre's riveted

1. Rebecca Schuman, "I Quit Academia,' An Important, Growing Subgenre of American Essays," *Slate*, October 24, 2013, <https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/quitting-academic-jobs-professor-zachary-ernst-and-other-leaving-tenure-and-tenure-track-jobs-why.html> [pp. 137-40 in the present volume].

readers.

The reasons reported for leaving are manifold and often vary, but certain themes suffuse these essays. First, there are the working conditions: the precarity, the humiliating succession of temporary contracts, the low pay, the lack of career-development support, the insane working hours, the continual demand for relocation, the overall dearth of future prospects in the field. Second, there is the changing landscape of higher education itself: its ever increasing bureaucracy, its audit-culture, the erosion of resources devoted to scholarship, its management by metrics, its orientation towards research grants, and the general privileging of economic over academic values, along with the consumerism and grade inflation that now seem to lie at the heart of the academic enterprise. Third, there are the incentives within the university system itself that are seen to challenge the declared principles of equality, autonomy, and self-determination for its participants, as well as the norms of appropriate assessment and behavior. Here I would count the failures to properly address (sexual) harassment and to guarantee academic freedom in the face of financialized targets and the assertion of corporate interests. Fourth, and finally, the issues of mental health and general well-being are repeatedly brought up: the liminal experience,² the absence of a healthful work-life balance, and the constant stress and anxiety relating to everything I've outlined above; the pressure to publish, the competitive atmosphere, the often acutely felt imposter syndrome, the fear of failure, and (especially, though not solely, upon leaving) the loss of identity and of peers, both individual colleagues as well as the sense of belonging to a group.

To be sure, there are also individuals for whom leaving is not so much about diverging from a once-chosen path or opting-out but rather about opting-in to something new, something (more) exciting, something to look forward to: a new job, a change of environment, a different lifestyle. Even as many feel pushed away from academia, others feel pulled towards some other, presumably better livelihood. As Anne Trubek remarks, contemplating giving up her tenured position in order to expand her career as a freelance writer: "It is a job, being a tenured professor. Just a job."³ So indeed: "Why not leave?" At times one can, as Trubek observes, detect a sense of self-importance in academics, and "a certain exceptionalism and a tinge of arro-

2. See Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru, "Betwixt and between Identities: Liminal Experience in Contemporary Careers," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 36 (2016): 47-64.

3. Anne Trubek, "Giving Up Tenure? Who Does That?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 8, 2013, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Giving-Up-Tenure-Who-Does/138345>

gance" in some of the essays of those who have left. Some of these frustrated academics depart in silence (in fact, most of the leaving still occurs quietly), others leave with a bang. And then there are those who leave one privileged position for another and still feel compelled to make a huge statement about it at the expense of those who are left behind: students, colleagues, peers.⁴ Not everyone has that kind of privilege. That, at least in part, is precisely the point. Overwhelmingly, though, for those who leave and end up writing about it, their departures are neither instigated nor followed by openings and opportunities. Rather, they are a form of retreat or withdrawal.

Combining incisive criticism with a strong reliance on personal narratives, today's essays on leaving academia, Grant Shreve observes, contrary to those of the 1970s, often "marshal intense feelings — of rage and grief and everything in between."⁵ Indeed, they often are a testimony to the "author's desire to publicly validate their private feelings at being shut out of a profession they have spent a significant portion of adulthood pursuing." The centrality of such needs explains why, as Shreve and others have pointed out, the term "quit lit" is so misleading. "I do not know one person with a PhD who is a quitter," writes Ellen Kirkpatrick in a recent post in *Times Higher Education*. She therefore proposes to call the genre "exit lit": "People are leaving academia not because they are quitters but because the system is broken."⁶ Indeed, the real problem, the ongoing outpouring of articles seems to suggest, is systemic. And it is precisely because the affective has become intertwined with the institutional, I contend, that the essays take on the shape of testimonials.

Speaking Out

"This is my story," writes Sarah Ahmed, announcing her public resignation from Goldsmith College, UCL, in protest against "sexual harassment as institutional culture."

4. E.g., Michael Edwards, "I Quit! Why I Am Leaving UK Academia," *Times Higher Education*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/cn/blog/uk-academia-has-gone-hell-handcart-and-i-quit>; Oliver Lee [Bateman], "I Have One of the Best Jobs in Academia. Here's Why I'm Walking Away," *Vox*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/8/9261531/professor-quitting-job> [pp. 77-86 in the present volume].

5. Grant Shreve, "Quit Lit' Then and Now," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/04/04/comparison-quit-lit-1970s-and-today-opinion> [pp. 163-67 in the present volume].

6. Ellen Kirkpatrick, "The Academy I Dreamed of for 20 Years No Longer Exists, and I Am Waking Up," *Times Higher Education*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/academy-i-dreamed-20-years-no-longer-exists-and-i-am-waking>

It is personal.

*The personal is institutional.*⁷

Tapping into what Heidi Hartmann has referred to as the “great thrust of radical feminist writing”⁸ — i.e., the thinking coalescing around the 1960s’ consciousness-raising slogan “the personal is political” as well as its rephrasing as “the institutional is political” by Gillies and Lucey in the mid-2000s to call attention to the “everyday processes of negotiating institutional power relations” that generally remain invisible⁹ — Ahmed’s resignation draws on a long tradition of feminist activist writing in which the personal is leveraged as a catalyst for social change.¹⁰ “To resign,” Ahmed writes, “is a tipping point, a gesture that becomes necessary because of what the previous actions did not accomplish.... *Resigning was speaking out.* It was saying: this is serious enough that I have had enough.” For Ahmed, then, “resignation is a feminist issue.” And in this she is not alone. For Liz Morrish, the emergent audit-culture was what triggered the “feminist snap — the moment at which your faith in academia finally yields to terminal antipathy.”¹¹ Like Ahmed and some of the other prominent voices within the leaving-academia debate, Morrish continues her activist work outside of academia, writing (and

7. Sarah Ahmed, “Resignation Is a Feminist Issue,” *Feministkilljoys* (blog), August 27, 2016, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/08/27/resignation-is-a-feminist-issue/> [emphasis in original].

8. Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 191.

9. Val Gillies and Helen Lucey, eds., *Power, Knowledge and the Academy: The Institutional Is Political* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2. On “the personal is political,” see Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political: The Women’s Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction,” in *Carol Hanisch: Women of the World, Unite!* (2009 [1969]), <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

10. See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 575-99; Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, eds., *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” *Signs* 28 (2002): 1-19; Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

11. Liz Morrish, “Why the Audit Culture Made Me Quit,” *Times Higher Education*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-audit-culture-made-me-quit> [pp. 87-96 in the present volume].

earning her living writing) on, among other topics, the state of higher education today.¹² Indeed, one cannot help but note that, unlike in the scholarly discourse on exiting — where, Sarah Sharma has rightly pointed out, contemplations regarding exiting or exodus as a form of “engaged withdrawal (or founding leave-taking)” are dominated by men¹³ — most of these essays about *actually leaving academia* (with the odd exception — yes, there are a few) have been written by women.

In what is perhaps one of the most often read, quoted, and indeed echoed contributions within the leaving-academia debate, eloquently entitled “The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind,” Erin Bartram strikes a somewhat different chord.¹⁴ Adhering to the same tradition of feminist activist writing discussed above, the essay opens with Bartram’s final job rejection. Contemplating the “abundance of quit-lit out there,” she observes that “[t]he genre is almost universally written by those leaving, not those left behind, a reflection of the way we insulate ourselves from grappling with what it means for dozens, hundreds, thousands of our colleagues to leave the field.”

Situating herself as someone who, despite her imminent departure, is still an insider in the world of higher education, Bartram invokes here the grief of the leaving and the left behind — a rhetorical choice that clearly plucked the heartstrings of many readers, judging by the massive outpouring of responses, of the leaving and the left behind alike, after the essay’s publication.¹⁵ Bartram’s essay is conspicuous in its acknowledgment of the “disavowed work of mourning” that comes with exiting. With Bartram, then, the “leaving academia” debate quickly went from “it’s ok to quit” (no, you are not a failure) to “it’s ok to grieve” (and if you are not grieving, perhaps you should be). Yet the essay also warrants some caution, powerful though it may be. Critics have pointed out that its undergirding grief, nostalgia, or melancholy

12. See, for example, Morrish, “Pressure Vessels: The Epidemic of Poor Mental Health among Higher Education Staff,” *Academic Irregularities* (blog), May 23, 2019, <https://academicirregularities.wordpress.com/2019/05/23/pressure-vessels-the-epidemic-of-poor-mental-health-among-higher-education-staff/>

13. Sarah Sharma, “Exit and the Extensions of Man,” *Transmediale: Art and Digital Culture*, April, 2017, <https://transmediale.de/content/exit-and-the-extensions-of-man>; the quoted phrase is from Paolo Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” trans. Ed Emery, in *Generation Online*, n.d., <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude2.html>

14. Erin Bartram, “The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind,” *Erin Bartram* (personal blog), February 11, 2018, <https://erinbartram.com/uncategorized/the-sublimated-grief-of-the-left-behind> [pp. 97-101 in the present volume].

15. See Sarah Brown, “She Wrote a Farewell Letter to Colleagues. Then 80,000 People Read It,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/She-Wrote-a-Farewell-Letter-to/242564>

reveals Bartram's inability to detach herself from the object of loss in the present, i.e., the myth of the academic good life (once a potential, now lost). "No wonder [the essay] was so appealing to so many," writes Katie Pryal, author of *The Freelance Academic*: "even while forced out, Bartram still looks upon the field with love."¹⁶ "This," Wendy Brown suggests in "Resisting Left Melancholy," "is what renders melancholia a persistent condition, a state, indeed, a structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss."¹⁷ As such, Bartram's calling upon the grief of the left behind, Shreve points out, possesses as great a potential to reinforce as to dismantle the (academic) status quo.¹⁸

Yet it would be a mistake to accuse Bartram, as Pryal does, of failing to provide a genuine critique of academic labor. Quite the contrary. In Bartram, I argue, labor precarity, perhaps for the first time, takes on the form we fear the most: the exhaustion and annihilation of our productive labor powers, and the (feared) reality of no future, no identity, and — above all — no wage. Resignation here still features not as a last instrument of empowerment but rather as the ultimate sign, and materialization, of disempowerment: her surrender. "Buy me a cup of tea," reads the essay's final, uncomfortable words.

Hidden Injuries

If the "leaving academia" debate strikes deep chords of recognition, I suspect it does so because it speaks to affective embodied experiences that impinge on the leaving and the left behind alike: all those feelings of exhaustion, precarity, stress, anxiety, overload, anger, shame, competitiveness, grief, guilt, and so on — experiences which the sociologist and feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill calls the "hidden injuries of neoliberal academia."¹⁹ What Gill's ruminations suggest is that the "leaving academia" debate reflects more than an upwelling of the wretched or courageous few, i.e., the departing — rather,

16. Katie Rose Guest Pryal, "Quit Lit Is About Labor Conditions," *Women in Higher Education*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.wihe.com/article-details/74/quit-lit-is-about-labor-conditions/> [pp. 169-73 in the present volume].

17. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26 (1999): 2.

18. Shreve, "Quit Lit' Then and Now." Indeed, as Shreve points out, the essay has already been repurposed along these lines. See, for example, Leonard Cassuto, "The Grief of the Ex-Academic," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Grief-of-the-Ex-Academic/242612> [pp. 149-53 in the present volume].

19. Rosalind Gill, "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neoliberal Academia," in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. Roisin Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 228-44.

it points to a permanent state or condition. While, for those working in academia, such experiences are "at once ordinary and everyday," Gill observes, "at the same time [they] remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy," where they lack "proper channels' of communication." Indeed, Gill writes, "[f]or all the interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the *experiences of academics* have somehow largely escaped critical attention." Instead,

[t]hey are spoken in a different, less privileged register; they are the stuff of the chat in the corridor, coffee-break conversations and intimate exchanges between friends, but not, it would seem, the keynote speech or the journal publication, or even the departmental meeting.

The "leaving academia" debate is so compelling precisely because it unveils some of these "hidden injuries" and "gives voice" to affective embodied experiences that hitherto were hearable only as "a 'moan', as an expression of complaint or unhappiness, rather than being formulated as an analysis or a (political) demand for change."²⁰

What Gill's reflections on the "hidden injuries" of working in academia further make clear is that the very predicament that makes people leave academia and then write about it is practically indistinguishable from what enables them to work and *survive* working in Higher Education during times of radical uncertainty in the first place — in a nutshell, our passionate attachment to the work on the one hand, and, on the other and often simultaneously, our attuned withdrawal from it through various forms of resignation (fatigued, triumphant, defeated, infuriated, subdued, and so on). Such, writes Lauren Berlant, is the "cruel optimism" of the (academic) good-life fantasy: it is what enables us to endure all the uncertainty and (self-) exhaustion, and what binds us ever more tightly into the neoliberal regime.²¹ Significantly, the myth of the academic good life is not monolithic but

20. Gill, "Breaking the Silence," 229-31. Since the time of her writing, things have slowly started to shift, not least due to Gill's own critical interventions. See, for example, "Academics, Cultural Workers and Critical Labour Studies," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7 (2014): 12-30; and (with Ngaire Donaghue) "Resilience, Apps and Reluctant Individualism: Technologies of Self in the Neoliberal Academy," *Women's Studies International Forum* 54 (2016): 91. Other notable examples include, to name but a few, Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seiber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), and Marjan De Coster and Patrizia Zononi, "Governing Through Accountability: Gendered Moral Selves and the (Im)possibilities of Resistance in the Neoliberal University," *Gender, Work and Organization* 26 (2019): 411-29.

21. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

manifold: it entails a patchwork of different, at times competing flights of the imagination, varying from dreams of fame and respect (or just the security provided by tenure), to the aspiration to engage in intellectual exchange or escape from the straightjacket of 9-to-5 waged labor. The sanity of most academics, indeed, seems to rely on their faith that their “moment” is (still) to come.

Well acquainted as I am with the various forms of enervation and uncertainty that come with working in academia, and no stranger to the need to take refuge, what has always struck me most powerfully about the “leaving academia” debate is its call to action. This rallying cry at once invigorates me (indeed, to the extreme) even as it ultimately tends more to exhaust me than to give me strength. For if invigoration leads to the realization that the only logical conclusion to mounting concerns over precarity (in academia) is to resign, or else become complacent toward a system that is broken, then, it seems to me, we are trapped in a political double-bind. I have often wondered, therefore, what a less precarious take on the need to take refuge, or withdrawal, in academia might entail, other than, say, “speaking out” by quitting — which for many of us (academics) still boils down to depriving oneself of one’s source of (joy and) livelihood. Moreover, I wonder if a “politics of withdrawal” is (still) even possible *within* an academic context (and if so, to what extent),²² if *writing* about withdrawal, politically, is so clearly at odds with *acting out* the gesture of withdrawing itself, here understood as opting-out of the neoliberal university’s “pressure vessel,”²³ where the only way to “elude control” and evade some the aforementioned pressures and uncertainties may be, to speak with Deleuze, the creation of little “gaps of silence” and “vacuoles of non-communication.”²⁴

To the point: my intention here is not to downplay or trivialize the importance of “speaking out” or “breaking the silence” but rather to call attention to the differences *and* congruity among various gestures of withdrawal, as well as between, on the one hand, our attachment to academic work and, on the other, our need to withdraw from it, so as to underscore the political weight of the latter.

22. On what the “politics of withdrawal” might entail, see Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois, “Introduction: Towards a Politics of Withdrawal?” in *Politics of Withdrawal: Media, Arts, Theory*, ed. Hesselberth and de Bloois, 1-12 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

23. Morrish, “Pressure Vessels.”

24. Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming: A Conversation between Toni Negri and Gilles Deleuze,” trans. Martin Joughin, *The Funambulist Magazine*, February 22, 2011 [1990], <https://thefunambulist.net/law/philosophy-control-and-becoming-a-conversation-between-toni-negri-and-gilles-deleuze>

Cruel Optimism and the Politics of Withdrawal

As Berlant writes in *Cruel Optimism*, “all attachments are optimistic,” if we understand optimism to be a structure of relationality or bonding that is invested “in one’s own or the world’s continuity.”²⁵ Optimistic relations are “not inherently cruel,” Berlant insists, but rather “become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially”²⁶ — as with, in our case, the promises of upward mobility, of autonomy and personal growth, of societal relevance, and so on. For Berlant, more important than the *experience* of such optimistic attachment (whatever its content) is its *affective* structure: the continuity of the form is what “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.”²⁷ The condition of cruel optimism, then, differs from melancholia in that it is not “backward looking” but is rather invested in the historical present, is bound to the here and now.²⁸

Both the “leaving academia” debate’s call to action and Gill’s demand that we “break the silence,” I argue, are driven by optimistic attachments. But — and this is important — so are complaints and moans about the “hidden injuries” of working in neoliberal academia. These gestures converge in that they can all be seen as forms and modes of surviving the affective labor of cruel optimism in our present moment, which — Berlant insists — is a time of ongoing crisis (a crisis of the ordinary). Although the cruelty of these attachments usually remains unstated, Berlant observes, it is experienced when we are faced with “a sudden incapacity to manage startling situations” — as occurs when driven out of the university or during any situation producing the aforementioned “hidden injuries” or “reasons for leaving” cited above. What we fear, then, is that “the loss of the scene of optimism” (here: the academic good-life fantasy) “itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything,” at which point the fantasy starts disciplining us to keep on investing, as Gill asserts, “with ever growing costs, not least to ourselves.”²⁹

As an affective structure, Berlant points out, cruel optimism “involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy.”³⁰ Significantly, the scene of fantasy to which the “leaving academia” debate’s call to action and

25. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23, 13.

26. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

27. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

28. Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” 22.

29. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

30. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

Gill's plea to "break the silence" time and again returns, I contend, is twofold: it entails both the academic good-life fantasy and the fantasy of a particular model of political action, one that is rooted in dialectics. It is the latter that holds my attention here. For, as Darin Barney points out in a somewhat different context, it is in upholding dialectics as a model of political action that the "leaving academia" debate's call to action and Gill's plea to "break the silence" risk to "reproduce a set of normative expectations about politics — i.e., that it consists of willed, intentional public actions" that *must* be outspoken to be recognized as such. This necessity, in my view, raises the question, precisely, of what transpires in silence and in what is silenced: in "the rolling everyday" of academia, the chats in the corridor, the intimate exchanges; the moan, the complaint, the unhappiness; the quiet departure and silent surrender; the retreat to recompose — that is, in all those (little) gestures of withdrawal understood as "resignation, directed nowhere" that arguably precede resignation as "event" — for some, *ad infinitum*.³¹

The Impasse

If I make a point of being explicit here I do so because of the sense of envy and at times (unspoken) guilt one can detect in the "leaving academia" debate, where the online comment sections, Ian Saxine observes, tend to be remarkably thoughtful and un-horrifying (even if gloomy).³² Indeed, Anne Trubek remarks, the news of people leaving their tenured jobs is commonly "received with congratulations and, often, envy," both in real life and in the online echo chambers.³³ Guilt, another one of Gill's "hidden injuries," also figures — not just the kind that is often said to "guilt-trip" especially young academics into staying (i.e., the kind of guilt Lobo calls "academic guilt": the sense of failure to get work done and/or appreciate the opportunities one is given),³⁴ but more specifically the kind of guilt that Sally Racket, using

31. Darin Barney, "Withdrawal Symptoms: Refusal, Sabotage, Suspension," in *Politics of Withdrawal: Media, Arts, Theory*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 122.

32. Ian Saxine, "They're Not Quitting! Reclaiming a Genre," *The Professor Is In* (blog), March 20, 2018, <https://theprofessorisin.com/2018/03/20/theyre-not-quitting-reclaiming-a-genre-a-postac-guest-post/> [pp. 155-57 in the present volume].

33. Trubek, "Giving Up Tenure?"

34. Guiseppina Iacono Lobo, "Academic Guilt," in *How to Build a Life in the Humanities: Meditations on the Academic Work-Life Balance*, ed. Greg Colón Semanza and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 83-90. On being guilt-tripped into staying, see, for example, Elizabeth Keenan, "Leaving Academia? It's Time to Have 'The Talk,'" *Chronicle Vitae*, April 9, 2014, <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/434-leaving-academia-it-s-time-to-have-the-talk/>; Mike Dwyer, "The Hidden Guilt of Leaving Academia,"

another war metaphor, calls "survivor's guilt": the sort of guilt that comes from *not leaving* and obtaining that tenured job that others didn't get, as well as from the fear (and reality) of being or becoming complacent toward a system from which one nonetheless feels progressively alienated and within which one is in fact struggling to survive.³⁵

From the point of view of cruel optimism, no matter what the gesture of withdrawal — to leave, to write, to speak out, to resign, to remain in silence, to complain or to moan, to feel disheartened or depressed, to retreat or seek refuge: it always signals fissures in the world that once was, a world organized and disrupted by the neoliberal capitalist regime, as prior phantasmatic structures continue to exhaust and restructure our sensorium, with no genuine alternative to speak of. Cruel optimism's activity, its work so to speak, Berlant indeed reminds us, is one of (self- or world-) maintenance, not of making; its temporal structure that of the impasse, the cul-de-sac. "In a cul-de-sac," she writes, "one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the same space."³⁶ Berlant is worth quoting at some length here:

Whatever else it is, and however one enters it, the historical present — as an impasse ... — is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape.... It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. People are destroyed in it, or discouraged but maintaining, or happily managing things, or playful and enthralled.³⁷

Framing academia's hidden injuries and the overall leaving-academia debate in terms of Berlant's reflections on cruel optimism is illuminating, then, because to do so helps shed light on why we remain attached to something that is not working, as well as on our need to protect such optimism in the

Ordinary Times (blog), May 14, 2015, <https://ordinary-times.com/2015/05/14/the-hidden-guilt-of-leaving-academia/>; Gayatri Phadke, "Guilty as Charged: On Leaving Academia," *Medium*, June 20, 2017, <https://medium.com/@gayatriphadke/guilty-as-charged-on-leaving-academia-d85c3294f652>; Alison Green, "My Boss Keeps Guilt-Tripping Me for Leaving My Job!" *The Cut*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/article/my-boss-is-mad-that-im-quitting.html>; r/LadiesofScience, "Guilty for Wanting to Leave Academia," Reddit, October 29, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/LadiesofScience/comments/1pgc01/guilty_for_wanting_to_leave_academia/

35. Sally Racket, "Survivor's Guilt," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 15, 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Survivors-Guilt/126710>

36. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.

37. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 200.

face of being defeated.

What the “leaving academia” debate and Gill’s “hidden injuries” also make clear, however, is that the myth of the academic good life, itself, entails a fantasy of retreat: it *is*, in many ways, a gesture of withdrawal. Take, for example, Ahmed’s “resignation”: well before it becomes “a giving of notice,” it involves first and foremost a vision (an idea and an ideal) of “the university” as a counter-normative, utopic, feminist, indeed a queer space — a place of safety into which one can withdraw to investigate, contemplate, resist, and challenge the normative identity politics and overall logics of neoliberal capitalism and its dominant modes of governance. Only when this fantasy of the university as a place of withdrawal starts to break down does Ahmed decide to retreat, once again, by giving notice, so as to continue her work outside of academia.

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the leaving-academia debate for the most part seems to unfold on personal blogs, an intermediate form *par excellence*, situated between an “intimate” and a public discourse. The *academic* blog is preeminently an “intimate” public space. As such, it is as much a response to the problem (i.e., the evaporation of the boundary between public and private, work and leisure) as it is one of its symptoms. Consisting of “discrete, often informal diary-style text entries”³⁸ written “for fun,” the genre *at once* figures as a stage for the continuous self-promotion of the academic, which is necessitated by the conditions of labor precarity, and yet at the same time makes it possible for (former) academics to criticize the intimate intertwining of the personal and the institutional. The latter “preaching to the choir,” Berlant insists in a somewhat different context, should not be undervalued, for as “as a world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness, it is absolutely necessary to do.”³⁹ But, and this is important, the same holds true for the complaint and the moan, and all the other gestures of ordinary withdrawal instilled by the hidden injuries Gill speaks of. Together, these gestures signal a collective disidentification with the state of higher education today, a search for a new “scene for being together in the political” beyond normative politics, in a community bound (as it formerly had been) through critique. To complain (or moan, or just to be unhappy), in this context, is a way of “bargaining with what is there,” a performative plea that “implicitly holds no hope for change in the conditions ... apart from whatever response the complaint itself might elicit.”⁴⁰ In times of radical uncertainty, which is how Berlant describes our

present times, the personal is a collective rather than an individual experience. “The personal is the general,” she writes in *The Female Complaint*: “publics presume intimacy.”⁴¹

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41. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, vii.

38. Wikipedia, s.v. “Blog,” last modified April 9, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

39. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 238.

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