On becoming 'bad subjects': Teaching to transgress in neoliberal education

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In October 2013, I began the first of two years as a Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS, University of London. Buoyed by the prospect of temporarily leaving research to focus on teaching, I had spent part of the preceding summer reading works on critical and feminist pedagogy. I was particularly inspired by work on education as a "practice of freedom" as developed by Paulo Freire (1996 [1970], 1998) and bell hooks (1994), whose experience as scholars and educators promised new ways of constructing knowledge and community. Holding fast to the conviction that I might "teach to transgress" (hooks 1994) within feminist classrooms, I was surprised to quickly encounter the logics of neoliberalism within and without these critical spaces. Previously, I had imagined feminist politics to act as a kind of safeguard against the intrusion of capitalist ideology into the classroom. Protecting learners and instructors alike from atomisation, competition and the logics of individual gain, feminism would build solidarity and mitigate against inequality, generating safe spaces of inclusion and exploration.

Yet almost immediately I encountered neoliberalism through the combination of circumstantial and structural factors, which together shaped my feminist classrooms. At the same time as I accepted a fixed-term fractional position, I was also elected to the School's branch of the University and Colleges Union (UCU) as the first ever fractional staff representative. Throughout the year and a half of my tenure, this position would consistently keep at the fore of my consciousness the concerns, struggles and varying plights of my colleagues employed in precarious conditions similar to my own. During the course of the 2013-14 academic year, UCU campaigned heavily and mobilised extensively in response to the offer of a one per cent pay rise (Shaw 2013; Press Association 2014; UCU 2015), which fell far short of meeting the 13 per cent loss in pay experienced since 2008 by many working in the

Higher Education sector.[1] This call to collective action produced strikes, rallies and teach-ins that electrified the atmosphere at our School, stimulating discussion and creativity among participants as well as support within the student body.[2]

However, while the actions of academic staff were largely understood and encouraged by SOAS students, a number of off-hand comments made during office hours and in hallways alerted me to a sense of dissatisfaction felt by some. "How long will you keep rescheduling classes? I am *paying* for this, you know?" one particularly aggrieved young woman asked somewhat rhetorically upon the announcement of further strike action. With the steep rises in tuition fees enstated by many universities in autumn 2012 (Sedgi and Shepherd 2012), for some students education had become a transaction, a form of knowledge "banking" apart from the system outlined and contested by Freire (1996 [1970]), which will be discussed below. This new transactional approach to education has been effectively entrenched through the recent announcement of a Teaching Excellence Framework (Ratcliffe 2015) and the oversight of universities by the Competition and Markets Authority (Morgan 2015) – though both ostensibly aim to strengthen teaching in Higher Education, these government-led initiatives position students as consumers whose assessment of the classroom experience will impact university funding and leave academics vulnerable to legal action.

As these lived experiences of precarity and shifting student expectations indicate, market logics and uncomfortable choices increasingly frame the classrooms of many

[1] After a series of strikes and negotiations, UCU members voted to accept a final offer of a two per cent pay rise from August 2014, in addition to the one per cent offered from August 2013; see UCU 2015.

[2] Throughout the 2013-14 campaign, the SOAS Student Union officially supported the actions of UCU members; see Kush 2013.

early career academics who seek to establish themselves as scholars and educators in the UK. Drawing on three years of experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and two years as a Senior Teaching Fellow, this chapter reflects upon the challenges facing feminist early career scholars who "teach to transgress" (hooks 1994) in the context of neoliberalism. While the precarity of fractional and part-time contracts affects emerging academics across disciplines, the prospect of years spent patching together employment in Higher Education yields particular tensions for feminist scholars. Faced with the seeming hypocrisy of (politically) teaching to transgress while (personally) obeying the limits of an exploitative system, this account sheds light on how feminist educators bargain or negotiate with power, balancing professional development with personal and political costs.

The chapter first details conditions of rising precarity as produced through the increasing commodification and casualisation of education in the UK, focusing on the experiences of early career academics often positioned on the 'front line' of the classroom. I then consider the tensions specific to feminist classrooms and pedagogical practices, reflecting on five years of providing Gender Studies tuition at SOAS, University of London. Here, I discuss what it means to teach students of Gender Studies to identify power, understand structure, locate agency and practice resistance, while remaining subject to – and reproducing – the logics of neoliberalism. However, rather than positing a zero-sum game in which early career academics either accede to the demands of the neoliberal market or part ways from Higher Education, the third section of the chapter suggests that those of us who bargain with power might understand ourselves to be "bad subjects" (Althusser 1971) – incompletely interpellated into the system and poised to disrupt. The challenge facing

feminist bad subjects is how to become agents of the very transgression we teach, actively contesting neoliberal logics as we carve out new spaces within academia.

Neoliberal precarity

As recent academic articles and media accounts make visible (Gill 2009; Kendzior 2012; Calkin 2013; Jump 2013; Grove 2014), Higher Education has increasingly become a site of isolation and disenchantment for scholars who survive the rigours of doctoral study and find themselves entering a flooded job market. This saturation has produced – and thus far maintains – exploitative conditions that threaten to entrap early career scholars in insecure low-paid and highly demanding positions, many on the 'front lines' of the classroom.

Within Higher Education, the conditions and prospects confronting doctoral students and immediately post-doctoral scholars reflect the growing commodification and casualisation of academia. Promising low-paid and highly demanding positions as Graduate Teaching Assistants and (recently graduated) Teaching Fellows, many UK universities advertise fractional part-time positions as a means of supplying the labour needed to meet the demands of student enrolment at a relatively low budgetary cost (Gill 2009: 233). Squeezed by the pressure of meeting Research Excellence Framework (REF) standards (Radice 2013: 413; Barkawi 2013; Jump 2013)[3] and the realities of sector-wide cuts enstated in conditions of economic austerity (Barkawi 2013), universities increasingly view recent graduates as a particular kind of resource – highly knowledgeable, eager to establish a career, and fresh to an extremely competitive job market (Calkin 2013, Grove 2014). Together, these circumstances

[3] As Tariq Barkawi (2013) highlights, performance in the REF is directly linked to university and departmental funding.

leave early career scholars vulnerable to exploitation, vying against each other in order to gain the experience as educators and researchers that enables employment in seemingly elusive permanent full-time positions.

While competition is not new to academia – indeed, many scholars understand and experience this practice as driving the precision of our work and the development of our profession (see for example Jafar 2012) – the conditions faced by early career academics certainly are. For many newly post-doctoral scholars, the period of low-paid part-time work on (sometimes) renewable contracts extends for far longer than anticipated when choosing to make academia a career. As austerity measures and assessment frameworks combine with an established culture of competition, recent graduates are told to expect between two and five years of employment in precarious conditions, stringing together fellowships as a means of material survival and building CVs while publishing, proposing and applying in hopes of attaining more permanent and lucrative positions. Importantly – and for some, shockingly – these scholars emerge into a job market that not only presents limited opportunities for adequately paid full-time work, but also creates hierarchies among those vying for precarious part-time employment.

Upon meeting with a mentor one year after earning my doctorate, I explained how my then-present application strategy targeted entry-level lectureships across a limited number of disciplines, from Gender Studies to politics, anthropology and sociology. With a PhD in Gender Studies, an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies and a BA in Women's Studies, I understood interdisciplinarity to be a strength that would widen rather than restrict my opportunities; however, thus far my applications had yielded nothing. Clearly and kindly, I was told that the lack of response was less tied up with disciplinary rigour and more connected to the relative stage at which fellow applicants

were submitting their scholarship, experience and plans for consideration – while I had one year as a Teaching Fellow and two peer-reviewed published articles behind me, due to necessity others were likely to have been building their profiles over a minimum of three years, with more publications and hours spent in the classroom.[4] Thus advised, I re-calibrated my strategy to target temporary fractional positions, applying for Teaching Fellowships and Research Assistantships rather than the full-time permanent lectureships for which I now understood my fellow applicants to be more qualified, by virtue of time forcibly spent in precarious conditions.

While postdoctoral research fellowships provide a limited number of recent graduates with two to three years of respite from the precarity of Higher Education,[5] for many the years immediately post-PhD unfold in a manner similar to my own experience – patching together part-time temporary work that provides important experience and (theoretically) time to develop publication records and future research plans, entailing long working hours for meagre pay. Forebodingly, Rosalind Gill (2009: 232) writes: "Precariousness is one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life – particularly, but not exclusively, for younger or 'early career' staff (a designation that can now extend for one's entire 'career', given the few opportunities for development or secure employment)." Significantly, this situation should not be viewed as inherent to academia as a competitive field or career path, but as intrinsically linked to the processes and logics set into motion by neoliberalism.

[4] Interlocutor anonymised; personal communication 20 February 2014.

[5] Within the context of UK academia, postdoctoral research fellowships have grown increasingly competitive. For example, in 2013-14 Clare College (Cambridge) received 230 applications for one Junior Research Fellowship; during the same year, 325 applicants bid for three Junior Research Fellowships at Peterhouse (Cambridge). See Grove 2014 for further rates of application.

In the context of Higher Education, the precarity experienced by early career academics reflects the emergence of neoliberal thinking as a dominant political – and educational – philosophy. Ongoing in the UK since the mid-1970s (Radice 2013: 407-408, 411), the rise of neoliberalism has resulted in the treatment of knowledge "as a marketable commodity" regarded as best approached through practices of financial management (Radice 2013: 412). As Hugo Radice (2013: 412) highlights, this shift toward marketisation and commodification within Higher Education reflects and compounds movement away from an understanding of knowledge as a collective social endeavour. Linked to the cultural changes that construct the "free individual" as model citizen, UK universities increasingly constitute sites in which academics view themselves as atomised "workers," monitored and rewarded by the larger system (Radice 2013: 415).

Critically, these transformations – the production of a "knowledge economy" (Radice 2013: 408) and the rise of the autonomous individuals therein – are key to the proliferation of casualisation within academia, now characterised by a preponderance of temporary part-time contracts, many of them teaching-only (Gill 2009: 233; Kendzior 2012; Calkin 2013). As recent studies of Higher Education reveal, processes of marketisation and commodification fashion self-governing subjects who internalise and accept the logics of neoliberalism within their profession, managing and disciplining themselves while effectively regularising the field (Gill 2009: 231; Radice 2013: 415-416). Here, "[...] new and emerging forms of discipline . . . operate as technologies of selfhood that bring into being the endlessly self-monitoring, planning, prioritising 'responsibilised' subject required by the University" (Gill 2009: 231).

Then not only do early career academics encounter neoliberal logics, systems and practices as they enter academia through university classrooms (Gill 2009; Kendzior 2012; Calkin 2013), but also they become participants in the process of "subjectification" (Althusser 1971; Foucault 1988). As an ideology neoliberalism fashions "good subjects," interpellated into the system "[...] *as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection,* i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'" (Althusser 1971: 56).[6] Within Higher Education the production of good subjects breaks and precludes solidarities, compounding the shift from education as a collective endeavor to knowledge as an (individualised) economy. Fundamentally changing the environment into which recent graduates seek entry, neoliberalism intensifies competition to the extent of undermining the attachments and relations that make collective action possible (Gill 2009: 235; Radice 2013: 416). Thus what constitutes ultimate 'success' within Higher Education increasingly emerges as a full-time permanent contract awarded to a 'good subject' who dutifully reproduces the logics of neoliberalism, both within and without her classroom.

For many feminist early career academics, this seeming complicity constitutes a significant obstacle to long-term achievement, as much of our work interrogates the sites and logics through which power is produced and maintained. However, neoliberalism more immediately presents emerging feminist scholars with troubling tensions within our classrooms, the very sites through which we gain a footing in academia and come to understand ourselves as educators whose political, personal

[6] Emphasis in original.

and professional praxis are intertwined. The following section explores these tensions through a consideration of my own classrooms, revealing how neoliberalism poses particular challenges to feminist critical pedagogy.

Tensions in/of the classroom[7]

As proponents of critical pedagogy highlight (Freire 1996 [1970], 1998; hooks 1994; Darder 2002; Evans 2005), neoliberalism indeed constitutes a significant force shaping practices and philosophies of education, whether in primary schools or universities. Considering how today's "knowledge economy" (Radice 2013) takes shape through material practices, early in the development of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire (1996 [1970]: 53) outlined the production of a "banking system" through which "education . . . becomes an act of depositing." Here, as Freire (1996 [1970]) writes:

> [...] the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.

Neoliberal processes of subjectification, then, pertain not solely to those many early career scholars who enter academia as teachers, but also to the students present in our classrooms. This capacity to transmit ideology is perhaps the most insidious aspect of the neoliberal knowledge economy – in fashioning subjects, teachers and students alike, who accept the world as it is, neoliberalism constitutes an "immobilizing ideology" (Freire 1998: 26-27, 126) that thwarts resistance and transformative action.

[7] The analysis presented in this section draws from an earlier paper written for the 2013 meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA). My thanks go to Nadje Al-Ali, Mark Douglas and Shaira Vadasaria for their critical feedback on the material presented at that time.

However, action, resistance and transformation are precisely what practitioners of critical pedagogy seek to foster within the spaces of their classrooms. Indeed, while Freire (1996 [1970], 1998) details the mechanisms and logics through which neoliberal education gains purchase, the main thrust of his work aims at subverting this very system. In practicing and teaching resistance, practitioners of critical pedagogy contest the "taming" capacity of ideology, (re-)positioning education as a "form of intervention in the world" (Freire 1998: 113, 90-91). As advanced by feminist scholar, educator and activist bell hooks (1994: 2, 7), feminist critical pedagogy takes up this charge as a radical practice of engagement. For hooks (1994: 2, 14), devotion to learning constitutes a "counter-hegemonic act" that challenges not only the neoliberal banking system of education, but also inequalities based on race, gender, sexuality, nationality and class. Through impelling teachers and students to acknowledge difference and interrogate its relationship to power, the feminist classroom becomes a space of shared knowledge production, creating and sustaining a political community (hooks 1994: 8).

Contesting the fragmentation and atomisation of neoliberalism while at the same time drawing attention to difference and power, critical pedagogy takes shape within feminist classrooms as an ethics, politics and practice that promotes a particular mode of intervention in the world. Rather than striving to reinforce domination, here education might become "a practice of freedom" (hooks 1994: 4), fostering resistance and transgression without eliding the ways in which power distinguishes and differentiates. Yet critical approaches to education do not solely challenge power, whether on broad or more nuanced scales – as Freire (1998: 91) writes, "[...] this type of intervention . . . implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking. The dialectical nature of the educational process does not allow it to be

only one or the other of these things." Then as early career feminist scholars 'teach to transgress' within their classrooms, to a degree we inevitably reproduce the very relations and conditions that we seek to contest.

This dynamic has indeed characterised my experiences as a feminist educator, first as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and more recently as a Senior Teaching Fellow. Initially, I became aware of the tension inherent in my pedagogical practice not in relation to neoliberalism, but through a discussion of power and violence. Through sometimes difficult interactions, during my time as a GTA I realised that while we might aid our students in fashioning analytical and political tools with which to identify and challenge power, at the same time we unexpectedly reproduce forms of violence within our very classrooms.

For many students on the MA Gender Studies core course, tensions arose with the introduction of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1994) article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Centred on the political and methodological question of voice, in tutorial sessions we discussed whether Spivak's query might concern not the ability of the subaltern to speak, but rather whether we listen – *(what) can we hear?* Despite the difficulties of the article's language, many of our students deftly connected the politics of discourse, reception and representation to material realities, seeing personal experiences reflected or complicated by Spivak's critique. For some, privilege loomed large; by virtue of race, class, education and geopolitical location they have access to and currency within prevailing hierarchies of knowledge and power. For others, marginalisation, invisibility and silencing rang true; through different circumstances, they understand themselves and their communities as unable – though not unwilling – to participate in the conversation.

Across these varying terms of recognition, engagement with 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (Spivak 1994) raised the spectre of epistemic violence and consequently shifted the focus of our students' critiques and interventions. Having spent the previous weeks working through foundational (Western) approaches to gender including naturalisation and biological determinism, psychoanalysis, materialist critiques, postmodernism and post-structuralism, postcolonial scholarship now directed attention to the effects of the relationship between power and knowledge. In grappling with the questions of who is *subject to* and *subject of* knowledge, students use the language of epistemic violence to locate and challenge power not only within academe, but also within our course. Designed to provoke questions around agency, structure, voice and privilege – including within feminist movements and bodies of knowledge – the core theory course traces the circulation and function of power at micro, meso and macro levels across diverse contexts. Yet as our students highlight, at the same time as we unmask power and aim to foster resistance, we risk reproducing epistemic violence. Devoting a series of focussed sessions to African, Asian and Middle Eastern contexts *after* a term of Western theory and replacing exams with short weekly papers still evaluated on the basis of standardised marking criteria, we transgress particular limits while reproducing others. Thus while student critiques testify to the relative success of our critical pedagogical practices – underlining how our classrooms become open sites of engagement, exchange and action – they also reveal the extent to which we continue to fall short of our political, personal and professional ideals.

These tensions and dynamics continue to inform my experiences as an educator, though as a Senior Teaching Fellow the embeddedness of my pedagogical practices has become apparent in ways that resonate more clearly with the challenges of

neoliberalism. Now responsible for convening the MA Gender Studies core course, my re-organised syllabus and addition of less formal writing assignments go some way in mitigating the epistemic violence unintentionally experienced by students on the course. However, at the same time I have become more deeply implicated in the relations of power underwriting neoliberalism as a dominant ideology, largely through my precarious position as a part-time fractional member of staff. While I urge students to take up the critiques of transnational feminist scholars who identify and challenge neoliberal logics and global capitalism (Grewal and Kaplan 2000; Mohanty 2003; Mama 2011), my very presence within the classroom reinforces the inequitable relations and conditions in question. Like many feminist early career scholars, I might contest the 'banking system' of neoliberal education (Freire 1996 [1970]) through fostering engagement and action, but at the same time I somehow reproduce the deeper ideology through my assent to the current terms of academia, as outlined above. The challenge, then, is how to understand our seemingly hypocritical actions as we teach to transgress in neoliberal education.

'Bad subjects,' radical potential

Rather than positing stakes in which feminist early career academics either assent to the demands of neoliberalism or leave Higher Education with our ideals intact, after five years of learning and practicing critical pedagogy I suggest that we might understand our actions as not as a 'choice' between complicity or resistance, but as a worthwhile struggle to carve out a new space within academia. In drawing attention to power, structure, agency and resistance in our classrooms, yet remaining entangled within their tensions, we effectively undertake a mode of bargaining that positions us both inside and outside the system – in this, we are poised to disrupt.

As scholars of critical pedagogy make visible, resistance to neoliberal education is not an endpoint, but rather an ongoing unfinished process (Freire 1970, 1998; hooks 1994; Darder 2002; Hey 2015; Leany and Webb 2015; Pryor 2015). Whether fostering critical thinking as a practice of difference and hope (Danvers 2015), reasserting sociality as a mode of everyday political interruption (Leaney and Webb 2015), or generating new publics through our visions of feminist futures (Hey 2015), the location of early career academics on the 'frontlines' of the classroom enables us to intervene precisely where neoliberalism takes root as an ideology. Yet recalling Freire's (1998: 90-91) important caution, these acts of intervention will reproduce the dominant ideology at the same time as interrogating it – our entanglement is a necessary element of the struggle. However, rather than regretfully acknowledging our implication in the production and maintenance of power and teaching in spite of this tension, we might practice transgression through fully occupying and embodying the seeming grey zone in which we operate. In doing so we may take up positions as wilful "bad subjects" (Athusser 1971; Ahmed 2010), incompletely interpellated into the system and willing to cause its obstruction. While ideology fashions "good subjects" who work "all by themselves" to reproduce the wider structure and its logics, as described above in relation to neoliberal education, it simultaneously produces "bad subjects," or those who apparently fail to work as such (Althusser 1971: 55). Then the process of subjectification should be understood as a site of contestation as much as regulation, as instances arise in which individuals are indeed hailed by ideology, but only incompletely so. Like resistance, subjectification is an uncertain and unfinished process, constituting and conditioning the subject but not determining her (Foucault 1988: 50-51; Youdell 2006: 517; Freire 1998: 26). As Judith Butler (1995 cited in Davies: 2006, 426) asserts, "[T]o claim that the subject is

constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency."

By understanding ourselves as conditioned but not determined by neoliberalism, as agential despite constraints, feminist early career academics might use our positions as 'bad subjects' to craft more targeted and enduring interventions in the classroom and beyond. In keeping with the dialectic inherent to education, our actions will transgress particular limits while necessarily obeying others, entangling us with power and complicating our understandings of resistance. As Freire (1998: 91) reminds:

> It is a fundamental error to state that education is simply an instrument for the reproduction of the dominant ideology, as it is an error to consider it no more than an instrument for unmasking that ideology, as if such a task were something that could be accomplished simplistically, fundamentally, without obstacles and difficult struggles.

In committing to the act of struggle and deliberately embodying our location inside yet outside ideology, we might realise the radical potential of our pedagogical practices. For many of us, the classroom remains a space of possibility (hooks 1994: 27, 207) – however here our teaching might enable transgressions not despite, but rather *through* embeddedness in power. Following the imperatives of critical pedagogy and feminist politics (Mohanty 1989; Freire 1998; hooks 1994), as educators we must be willing to take risks, to expose our vulnerabilities as a means of being fully present within our learning communities (hooks 1994: 213). This means allowing our students to witness our struggles as part of our pedagogical practice, and bringing these tensions into the discussions that unfold within our classrooms (Freire 1998: 95).

Through actions in and out of the classroom, students may take part in the conversation about precarity, acting as full partners in the practice of education. We might begin within the space of a lesson, identifying the multiple forces that shape our learning communities, from everyday questions of access and voice, to the broader relationship between students and instructors, to the structure and aims of the university as an institution. Once named and unpacked in the classroom, these forces might be contested on wider political scales as an act of community – here struggles and interests emerge as interconnected, breaking down the perceptions of difference and hierarchies of power that obstruct collective action. As such, we cannot allow neoliberalism to enter our spaces of education solely as a constitutive or conditioning power – instead we must act willfully as bad subjects, "[...] not only being willing not to go with the flow, but also *being willing to cause its obstruction*" (Ahmed 2010).

Then the task confronting feminist early career scholars is in part how to understand struggle and bargaining as crucial aspects of resistance, as integral to the always-unfinished process and practice of transgression. Our embeddedness in the structures and logics of neoliberalism need not be a sign of complicity, but might constitute the very means through which we are able to practice engaged pedagogy as a radical form of intervention in the world. In this, the ability to wilfully embody our positions as 'bad subjects' becomes an expression of political activism, rather than defeat or depression. By taking up positions inside yet outside ideology, presenting this position coherently to our students, and encouraging engagement in a collective struggle we do not accept the conditions of precarity in which many early career academics presently feel entrapped – rather, these pedagogical practices might enable us to become agents of the very transgression we teach.

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