

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



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1. Writing from the wreckage: Austerity and the public university

Robin DeRosa

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.

(Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”)

As do many of us who identify as lifelong English majors, I start most of my writing projects by reading. Of course, there is focused research — quite a lot of which went into my preparation for this chapter. But there is also the reading that English majors do around the edges of any writing project: to procrastinate, to find inspiration in others who have managed to somehow put together a coherent story, to feel the hefty weight of a thick book instead of the glaring vacantness of a blank screen. I knew this chapter would centre on the ravaging effects of austerity on higher education and I felt instantly overwhelmed by the fatigue that the topic generates in my brain, by the anxiety it generates in my stomach, by the existential tickle that it generates in my soul that there is no choice but to find a glimmer of hope in the wreckage. So, I reached not for my keyboard, but for a book to distract or, if I were lucky, catalyse me. Eddie S. Glaude Jr’s biography of James Baldwin, *Begin Again*, was on my desk waiting for this moment. I opened it and read the epigraph from James Baldwin (quoted by his brother, David):

I pray I have done my work... when I’ve gone from here, and all the turmoil, through the wreckage, and rubble, and through whatever, when someone finds themselves digging through the ruins... I pray

that somewhere in that wreckage they'll find me, somewhere in that wreckage that they use something I've left behind. (Glaude, 2021)

The quote reminded me of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" — a poem that is at least partially responsible for making me a college English major. At the crossroads of these two writers, each one offering up the shards of broken systems that had almost broken them, I found the fortitude to begin this chapter. Baldwin and Rich catalyse my work here not just because of how they specifically wrote against the racist, sexist, heteronormative contexts that surrounded them and which deeply inflect higher education today, but also because I came to their work through the study of literature. As literature degrees are accused of failing to train students for the realities of today's labour market (nobody is advertising for a *humanist* after all!), it seems to me both ironic and not coincidental that literature degrees are also excellent at equipping students with the critical thinking skills we need to see through that absurd accusation.

Across many parts of the world, we are being spoon-fed a dominant narrative about higher education: that we need to cut institutional spending, that public funding is never returning, that universities are rigid and outdated, that learning that serves markets is always best for learners, that teaching has given way to indoctrination. However, a close reading will demonstrate that these are parts of a calculated grift. In this chapter, in the spirit of the poets, playwrights, readers and humanists who have inspired me, I hope to lay out the detritus of a deeply broken system and refuse the easy solutions that would package it all up into something we do not need, something that we pay for with our humanity.

23 years ago, I started teaching as an adjunct at my regional public university in a small, rural town in New Hampshire, United States. I was finishing my dissertation at a university near Boston when I moved up here as a trailing partner to Phil, who had a one-year position as a sculpture professor. Within a year, Phil had secured a tenure-track position in art, and within three years, I was on the tenure-track in English. We loved our colleagues! We loved our students! We built a house in the mountains, adopted a dog, and had a daughter who grew up on campus. It feels now like that was another era.

This year, at the age of 59, Phil left our university in a massive buyout that ended up in a 25% reduction in the college's full-time faculty. We are not sure we will be able to afford his early retirement, but he was not sure he would physically or mentally survive the pressure to innovate his program into something newer and shinier (newer and shinier than art!). I go to work now, and it feels lonelier there without him and without so many of my other colleagues who have left. Some of their own choosing, and others — especially staff — due to being “right-sized” out of their jobs. The sculpture major was abandoned when Phil left. As programs get cut, I worry that one day we will have only criminal justice, nursing, and business courses left.

Despite it all, this little university has phenomenal caring faculty and staff and its earliest history as a teachers' college probably has much to do with its persistent belief that education is core to a community. But in the shadows of our teaching-focused mission and our bucolic mountain views, harsh realities are lurking. You can count on one hand the faculty of colour at this predominantly white institution. BIPOC students here can feel surveilled and unsafe, as locals with confederate flags on their trucks cruise up and down Main Street. Students with mobility-related disabilities cannot manage the deteriorating walkways, especially in winter when they are not shovelled promptly. Almost every student I talk to is facing money-related issues: high tuition, student debt (both of which are among the highest in the nation), food insecurity, juggling a job on top of school, and on and on. In 2020, when COVID-19 came calling, professors like me lamented how hard life suddenly became, but for many of my students (and contingent faculty and undercompensated staff), the general message I heard was: “yeah, it's harder now, but for the most part, we were already just barely getting by”.

How have public higher education systems, not just in America but in so many places around the world, devolved into such a gut punch? Or perhaps more accurately, how have public higher education systems always contained within themselves the seeds of the gut punch that is right now, at this moment, bringing so many of us to our knees? I am writing this to/for/with the gut punched. Maybe you are like Phil and you were forced into an early retirement as your college's budget contracted. Maybe you aren't that lucky, and you are an underpaid contingent faculty member working at four different institutions, hoping

you don't get COVID-19, because you have no health insurance. Maybe you teach in the liberal arts, and you fear retrenchment. Maybe you are a staff member who has absorbed the jobs of two other people who were let go, so you have three times the workload even though you haven't had even a cost-of-living raise in years. Maybe the lab you manage can't afford to replace broken microscopes, or maybe the last time it rained, the ceiling of your library collapsed just a short distance away from your desk (yes, it happened to me a few weeks ago). Maybe you teach at Harvard, and you have no idea what I am talking about. But probably you don't teach at Harvard. Since most faculty don't teach there, and most students don't go there.

You can get a sense of just how engulfing this austerity is of faculty, staff professional, and personal wellbeing as you read the interspersed boxed quotations from people working, struggling in colleges and universities, who shared their experiences with me as I prepared to write this piece. My own experience is situated in the United States, but the voices that reached out to me in response to my call about labouring under austerity were from multiple countries including the UK, India, Canada, Mexico, and Australia. Unfortunately, while the contexts and details are distinct, there are many common threads in the stories I hear from colleagues around the world.

I worry that the 20% of my salary going into retirement savings won't be enough because my body and brain will be broken far before their time. I worry that I will not be able to survive. In times past, money was tight but people cared about one another. And that's what's different about the austerity logic of today--it's not just that money must be saved, it is that administrators cannot even bring themselves to admit how their choices and words hurt the real people around them.

I likely don't have to tell you what "austerity" is. Those of us labouring under austerity know in our bones that it goes far beyond anaemic budgets and endless bean counting, and that there is a pervasive austerity logic that constricts not just our budgets, but every facet of what we do. It permeates our bodies and our minds and changes our experience of

working in higher education. But to begin to deconstruct the logic of austerity, we must look to the framework that surrounds it.

The vocabulary of austerity

The word “neoliberal” has an odour of jargon about it; it is part of neoliberalism’s insidiousness that every time you bring it up, someone will roll their eyes because the term feels so very *academic*. My goal here is to try to break it down in plain language, because austerity describes what it’s like to labour and learn at most colleges and universities these days. But neoliberalism tells us *why*.

Broadly, the principles that guide neoliberal logic cohere around (Mintz, 2021):

the efficiency of the free market and the deregulation and privatization of the public sector that markets require; tax reduction; abandoning the welfare state; and replacing the notion of the public good with a personal responsibility for one’s own welfare. (para. 2)

Despite these broad commonalities, the manifestations of neoliberalism are historically and geographically specific. As an American writer who is most familiar with the US context, I am mindful not only of how Americentric analyses can colonise other analytical possibilities, but also of how US influence has colonised educational systems in ways that serve to engender neoliberal trends in other countries. In 2010, one UK report called the privatisation of UK universities the “Americanization of higher education”, explaining that both the Labour and Tory parties envision the emergence of a system more like that in the US (University and College Union, 2010). In other parts of the world, the privatising forces of the United States are less merely influential than they are violently colonising. In the 1980’s, the US had stated policy (as did the IMF and World Bank) advocating for privatisation in sub-Saharan Africa and tying aid missions to activities that cultivated privatisation (Fenske, 2007). Today, Bridge International, an American company, has more than four hundred “innovative” schools in Kenya and Uganda. In January 2016, the Liberian education minister announced that the entire pre-primary and primary education system would be outsourced to Bridge (Tyre, 2017).

Whether it is India’s shift from funding educational institutions with government grants to funding them with “resources from the market on the basis of equity from individuals or corporate entities through bonds” (Parey, 2019), the rise of the for-profit university industry in

Switzerland (Lanci, 2022), or the fact that over 70% of college students in some countries in Latin America (Chile, El Salvador, Peru) are educated in private universities (Internacional de la Educación, 2020), across many parts of the world, there is a shift from public infrastructure to private. With this shift comes a shifting of funding away from direct instruction, increasing inequities, and a troubling confusion about the role and value of “public” institutions worldwide.

The words “public” and “private” become murky when we use them to talk about neoliberalism in education. Certainly, one obvious example of neoliberalism at work in a US context is with school vouchers, which allow parent-taxpayers in many states to use tax funds that would normally go to public schools to fund private educations for their own children instead. This is what Ball and Youdell call “exogenous” privatisation, where private interests — represented as partnerships or initiatives — absorb public dollars and infrastructures. It contrasts but shares core values with “endogenous” privatisation, where public schools use organising principles and strategies from business, where academic leaders explicitly claim that their schools and colleges indeed *are* businesses because they require the logic of business to operate (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 18). It works both ways: transfer resources from public to private investments or transfer operational models from private to public organisations. Either way you slice it, you’ve got a lot of slippage between two words that most people think of as antonyms.

Proponents of both exogenous and endogenous privatisation obscure the fact that they are replacing the public good with private interest. Instead, neoliberalism depends upon a fundamental belief (or ruse) that capitalism is indeed good for society. But free market capitalism, where consumers get to decide how to spend their money, and their decisions control prices and drive innovation as different products compete for their attention, is not as well suited to some “products” as it is to others. When you are not talking about products at all, but processes that undergird quality of life (education, health, communication, safety, justice), it can be problematic to apply the logic of markets.

The cuts in education are not made because education is too costly but because capitalism demands continuous growth and (un)naturally encroaches on systems and relationships that are not a good match for market logic. There are dramatic parallels to be made between for-profit

hospitals, for-profit prisons, and for-profit education (I would posit that it is not coincidental that two of the more robust majors at my precarious public college are nursing and criminal justice). But it is not just the exogenous examples like this where profit is the point. It is the endogenous examples as well, where our non-profit and public *organisations* in health care, in criminal justice, in education, begin to behave like for-profit organisations. This is capitalism not as an economic system, but as an organising logic, and this is why austerity is not only about cutting costs, but also about measuring what matters by using metrics that come from the world of business.

Our team has grown by 50% while our responsibilities have grown by 200% and our pay has stagnated—and this was before the added stress of Covid. Students notice how busy we are and apologize for taking up our time. Everyone is just constantly in a state of near burnout while earning low wages in a high cost-of-living location. I know we could do amazing things to transform the learning experience if we just had a bit more invested in us, both as individuals and as a profession.

Counting beans is not just a way of doing more with less, being efficient, lean, or frugal. Counting beans is most notably about calling things that are not beans, “beans”, so that they can be counted. A parallel in teaching might be when you quantify a student’s learning in a course on American literature as an 87.25 — whatever scientific

rubrics you might have used to assign that grade. I think we can agree that student learning or performance cannot be quantified so precisely. The neoliberal university insists on grades not so much because it is unenlightened, punitive, rigorous, or objective, but because grades are the logical outcome of a system that is essentially a widget factory that launders complex relationships, processes, and ideas (learning) into a commodity.

From the public good to private goods

For-profit colleges in the US have recently taken a lot of heat for how they exploit students looking to invest in themselves and their own learning. They are persuasive illustrations of what Giroux (2016) calls “casino capitalism” which he describes as “driven by an unchecked

desire to accumulate capital at all costs” fully apart from any kind of social responsibility. Tressie McMillan Cottom demonstrates the grift of the for-profits in her 2017 book, *Lower Ed.* But for-profit colleges are just the most explicit layer of a larger neoliberal pattern, which now insidiously undergirds the entire US higher educational system — a system in which the burden of educational costs is transferred from public communities to individual private consumers. In a 2022 opinion piece for *The New York Times*, Cottom (2022) tells the story of how a group of benefactors paid off all past due tuition bills in collection for graduates of Bennett College, a historically Black non-profit women’s college:

We knew that student loan debt was most expensive for the families who had the most to lose, and we kept offering the loans with the same cheerful promise: It’s worth it. When you are scammed by a friend, it is a shame. When your country scams you, it is a fraud.

In discussing the benefactors’ gift, Cottom (2022) writes:

The biggest deal is not the cash that forgiveness might free up and which could be spent on rising housing costs or used to pad their savings. The Bennett leaders I spoke with say the most tangible benefit is that students who owe the college money can now get access to their academic transcripts, proving that they have in fact attended school.

The withholding of transcripts is a telling marker of how commodified education has become. Its value inheres as much in the credential as in the learning that the credential symbolises. As learning is shifted from a process to a transaction, and students are shifted from learners to consumers, public funding can be reduced, because why should the “public” pay for a private good?

Despite the amount of time that journalists spend reporting on the Ivy League or online private behemoths, 80% of all college students in the US attend public institutions that are, in fact, not even close to being fully publicly funded (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Welch (2015) reports that the state share of revenues for Michigan State, the University of Illinois, and the University of California at Berkeley “reduced by more than half between 1987 and 2012, and state support for the University of Oregon plummet[ed] in that period from 36 percent to 9 percent.”

This defunding often dovetails with fiscal crises such as the 2008 global financial crisis. But even during periods of economic recovery, funding in most places still looks like a downward spiral. California demonstrates this pattern: “In the early 1990s, California contributed 78 percent of the total cost per student, a number that had shrunk to 37 percent by the 2015–16 academic year.” This adds to a decidedly non-public bottom line for the public university budget:

In 2019–20, state contributions were only around 10 percent of UC core operating funds, which provide permanent support for the mission of the university and the administrative and support services needed to carry it out. Other revenue came primarily from private sources, especially tuition and fees. (Hamilton and Nielsen, 2021)

As public funding declines, the burden to cover a college’s operating expenses falls more and more to students and their families. Similar cycles of public defunding, economic crisis, failed recovery, and the transition of costs to students and their families are playing out across the globe. In India, both the centre and the states have divested from public higher education, and expenditure on higher education has declined from 0.86% of the GDP in 2011 to just 0.52% in 2020 (Qamar, 2022a). In 2022, the union minister of higher education, Dharmendra Pradhan, advised the Indian people that they should let go of the idea that universities must be funded only by the government (Qamar, 2022b). In South Africa, the 2022 academic year began with significant student protests, as public universities faced ZAR10 billion (US\$650 million) student funding shortfall (Naidu, 2022). Even China, which from 2006 to 2013 saw massive increases in public funding of higher education, has seen public funding allocations increase by less than 2% per year since 2013, meaning that on a per student basis, public funding in China is declining (Usher, 2022).

The ramifications of public defunding are sometimes clear, as in the case of American student loan debt — an obvious display of the transfer of college costs to individual student consumers. Still, we don’t talk as much about institutional debt which combines with public defunding to promote institutional corporatisation: “Between 2003 and 2016, institutional debt at public and community colleges more than doubled, rising from \$73 billion to \$151 billion. In that time, interest payments

on this debt nearly doubled as well” (Schirmer, 2021). The effect of this kind of debt on the public mission of our colleges is severe:

These loans are not innocuous sources of financing for our institutions. Legally binding debt service obligations stipulate that repayments must be an institution’s first budgetary priority; debt covenants constitute powerful drivers of university austerity. Thus, when institutions encounter financial troubles (such as a global pandemic), they must respond first and foremost to their obligations to creditors before addressing the needs of the educational communities they serve. Debt financing creates an asymmetrical power relation between creditors (big banks) and debtors (colleges and universities). This relationship subjects public higher education to free-market evaluations of a school’s risk and value, often reinforcing racist and classist ideas. Because securing funds depends on an institution’s credit rating, credit rating agencies operate as universities’ shadow governors. These private financial institutions are anything but democratic. They are not elected or even appointed by elected officials. Their chief concerns are not the public good but returns on investments. (Schirmer, 2021)

Schirmer asserts that from 3% to 10% of institutions’ total revenue goes to the interest and fees for private creditors. She cites this whopper of a statistic about the City University of New York: “37 percent of students’ tuition and fees goes to paying CUNY’s annual debt service” (Schirmer, 2021).

As institutional debt rises and public funding shrinks, it’s imprudent to spend time criticising the one or two desperate “lazy rivers” that have been installed by colleges looking to make themselves more attractive to student consumers. The dominant narrative of our institutions is not gross overspending, it is that nothing is safe from tactics that could make anything, even direct instruction cheaper. The overreliance on contingent faculty is the starkest example of the under-resourcing of instruction. Welch (2015) notes:

While 75 percent of US college and university faculty at the start of the 1970s had the security of long-term tenure-track employment, today more than 75 percent of instructional faculty are classified ‘contingent’, teaching on contracts as short as a single semester, typically without healthcare, disability, and retirement benefits.

Between 1990 and 2012, “part-time faculty employment increased 121 percent, with adjunct positions in the public 4-year sector increasing the

most" (Anthony et. al, 2020). And while it is hard to meaningfully compare percentages between systems in different countries, the casualisation of postsecondary faculty is an escalating trend across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North and South America.

Positions like this are the reason so many young(ish—I'm 40), excellent scholars and teachers are leaving the academy. If you're going to bargain with our lives and livelihoods—and quality of life, because good luck getting a mortgage on a temporary contract and good luck having kids if you don't know whether you'll have health insurance in a year—you don't get our loyalty, excellence, or expertise.

Cuts to instruction are coupled with a focus on the generation of new revenues. While this can sometimes look like splashy, consumer-targeted spending (lazy rivers, million-dollar scoreboards, extravagant dorms), more common are clever partnerships that shift funding models from public to private sources. This is a double-edged endeavour

where students shoulder costs, but the private market promises a return on investment. For example, "workforce development" is a model where private companies spur public colleges to create curriculum that essentially outsources the training of the future employees to the educational system, and colleges in turn can promise their graduates that they will be in-demand by the labour force when they complete their degree. The casino is open, and we are laying down bets fast and furious to keep the lights on.

If casino capitalism is about selling degrees and debt, another way that learning is commodified is what Welch (2015) calls academic capitalism, where a "new army of academic administrators carries out a long-term project of repackaging education and research as profitable commodities in an economy presumed to depend on the production of services and ideas rather than the production of durable goods" (Welch, 2015). This is less about fast profits and more about turning a knowledge commons into a knowledge economy, where education itself — not just its credentials and certificates — operates to serve markets that depend on information, skills, and innovation. We can even promise preparation for jobs that have not even been invented yet, a "futureproofing" of

graduates by exposing them to hi-tech makerspaces filled with robotic equipment that will likely be outdated in eight months.

And of course, what matters most here are our students, whose very bodies are poised on a precipice above this public-private riptide. This is no more painfully evident than in discussion of “the demographic cliff”. While some regions face growing higher education enrolments (even as public funding still contracts), many areas of the United States, including in the Northeast where I work, are facing the shrinking of the college-aged population. Many scholars foresee these declines continuing. There is really no way to overstate the intense panic this produces amongst enrolment managers and the extent to which that panic tightens the academic budgets they influence. The “student body”, then, is transformed from a collective body (that generates collective benefits through education) into individual bodies (that are valued by their tuition dollars and competitive earning potential). As consumers and products, students in this scenario are targets of both investment (the customer is always right!), and exploitation (hobbled by debt and often years shy of graduation, many students leave college cheated out of the returns they were promised).

Enjoying the view from the top of the demographic cliff that helped to make him famous is economist Nathan D. Grawe, whose 2018 book *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* supplanted many contributing factors to the enrolment crisis (public defunding, student debt, tuition limits, mismanagement, rampant financialisation) with just one overdetermined variable (demographics). This turned a

Our university has moved toward a decentralized budget model called "Responsibility-Centered Management" in which individual schools are awarded funds based on class enrollments and number of majors, basically a "butts in seats" model. It runs the risk of pitting colleagues against each other in the pursuit of growing enrollments and can provide motivation to water down curriculum to appease students looking to maintain a high GPA with little time or effort.

complex landscape into “a technical problem with only technical fixes” (Nemser & Whitener, 2021). A slew of consulting companies quickly stepped in to help clarify the demographic trends and offer enrolment management solutions. This seems to me to be a pattern worth paying attention to — when solutions are sold

by the same source that shapes the problem, there is cause for scepticism. It reminds me of what open education advocate, Rajiv Jhangiani (2019) says about trusting textbook companies to solve the problem of high textbook costs through programs like automatic textbook billing or inclusive access: “It’s like leasing a fire extinguisher from a serial arsonist.” This is a cycle that inflects higher education under neoliberalism. It is very hard to locate a starting point or separate cause from effect because the problems and the solutions are mixed.

This “devolutionary cycle” explains how public defunding and public universities’ privatising solutions are enmeshed in a dysfunctional symbiosis (Newfield, 2016). It is impossible to disconnect the cultural faith we have in private solutions from the pressing need our public institutions require to seek them out. Thought leaders like Grawe (2018) are not only recognising a problem (demographic challenges); they are generating one (public higher education is broken). Naomi Klein called out this phenomenon in her 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine*. She charted how “disaster capitalism” manufactures crises to open opportunities for austerity and market-oriented solutionism.

On March 23, 2020, days after COVID-19 pushed a majority of higher education institutions online (the “remote pivot”, which sounds like a lovely *pas-de-deux* instead of the chaotic horror story that it was for most faculty and students), the lead story on Yahoo Finance was positively giddy: “Amid novel coronavirus outbreak, for-profit education stocks are expected to gain manifold as online educators are viewing shutdowns as an opportunity to increase its reach among students” (Zacks Equity

For me the nightmare has been of being on short-term contracts for almost two decades. The longest contract was three years - that was incredible. Sometimes there was a break of a few months between contracts which meant that the regulations stopped applying to me because when I started the next contract it was considered to be starting all over again.

Research, 2020). A headline on *Inside Higher Ed* stated it matter-of-factly: “Ed-Tech Vendors Confront Sudden Opportunity and Risk” (Seltzer, 2020). The diction of opportunity and risk demonstrates how crisis functions to drive capitalism. The opportunities here are not about

serving learners; they are about profit margins. The risks here are not about global pandemic and death; they are about unrecouped financial investment. How can we understand the needs of students and serve learning goals when our “solutions” are solving a problem that is not shaped by either?

Pandemics, changing demographics, recessions, wars, natural disasters, climate change, shifting labour markets — I don’t know, take your pick. They are real, difficult, many of them are undeniably awful, terrifying, and could be called a “crisis” by any reasonable person. However, there is also a slippage where the object of the crisis is blamed for the crisis itself. As in any situation where a victim is blamed for crimes against them, public colleges and universities are characterised not as healthy systems that need to respond to a challenge but as broken systems whose failures are at least in part responsible for the state of crisis itself.

Yet, instead of sounding alarm bells, most colleges and universities are obscuring the ideological effects of austerity by adopting a pretence of agency, as if it is an empowering choice to pull our institutions up by our bootstraps and innovate our way to sustainability: “Terminologies of right-sizing, student-centred, restructuring and reimagining are being used to create committees that recommend the elimination of

I was “asked” to manage a campus-wide retention intervention with no financial resources, a lack of campus buy-in, and no staffing. I was doing the role of three people plus part of my old role, all while being a first-time parent of a newborn. It became clear that it was no longer healthy nor safe for me to function in this environment. I left that role, and was not replaced. The division was dissolved, and my work was split off onto others...who did not receive any title changes or compensation.

disciplines, programs and majors that no longer serve the market-driven corporate universities that are built on revenue-generating enterprises”

(Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2022). As public institutions, we mix public-oriented diction (togetherness and needs) with privatising diction (right-sizing, brands, value propositions, consumers),

reflecting the way that we have internalised privatisation, allowing our missions to be shaped by forces that are more aligned with the corporate world than with public education. So, when “partnerships” with

corporate America come knocking, we open the doors wide because these partnerships are perfectly aligned with the academic capitalism of our institutions, where we seek solutions to fix what we are told (by corporate influence) is broken.

We might think about whether we are using the word “broken” as an adjective or a verb. Does it describe the condition of public higher education itself, or what is being done to it? One clue comes from the fact that the demographic cliff hitting my public university in New Hampshire — which has caused us to cut several long-standing liberal arts majors and minors in the last couple of years — is not hitting Ivy League Dartmouth, just an hour down the road. Welch (2015) argues:

In the neoliberal reordering of higher education, students at elite private and state flagship universities may still major in...women’s studies, Africana studies, German, music performance, public history, and linguistics; it is from campuses meant to produce skilled workers that such programs are cut. (Welch 2015)

One of the “problems” with the liberal arts, in fact, is that its purpose is not primarily tied to economic markets. Busted (2019) calls this out as “collusion in the growth of an intellectual oligarchy in which only the very richest and most prestigious institutions preserve access to liberal arts traditions.”

The devaluation of the liberal arts is directly related to the increase in public-private partnerships that are changing the ideological dimensions of colleges and universities, and not, I should add, in the way that the extreme right is claiming. One key stage of this process has been the explosion of OPM (Online Program Management) deals which can be anything from technical infrastructure to help schools offer online courses to a complete outsourcing of everything related to delivering an online degree, e.g. “all-inclusive distance-learning programs rebranded under the institution’s name” (Mattes, 2015). In 2011, the US Department of Education issued guidance that permitted a new profit-sharing model, where OPM companies which are not accredited as schools, assume the bulk of the financial risk in launching online offerings, but also the bulk of the financial rewards if the program is successful. Today, at least 550 US colleges have such arrangements, and the OPM industry has global revenue of an estimated \$8 billion, with much of that money flowing directly from federal student loans (Bannon & Smith, 2022). Students

sometimes enrol in courses at public universities such as the University of Oregon or the University of Central Florida and never realise that none of the curriculum or instruction is coming from the school listed at the top of their course website (Bannon & Smith, 2022). What this means is not that the door to corporate influence is open but that there are essentially no walls at all between the corporate world and public education.

It should surprise no one when the University of Nike emerges. Joshua Hunt's 2018 book, *University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education*, tells a sordid story about how the University of Oregon bent to the will of corporate mega donor, Phil Knight. However, the tale implicates neoliberalism itself as much as it critiques Knight and the university leadership that got in bed with him to enrich the military industrial complex during the Cold War (Crepeau, 2018). At Brown University (my alma mater), faculty recently voted against the creation of a new Center for Philosophy, Politics and Economics. The student newspaper reports:

For those opposing the PPE Center, the principal concern lies with the influence of dark money in higher education... PPE and similar centers at other universities, such as Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have been funded by...billionaire and conservative political mega-donor Charles Koch. (Cigarroa, 2022)

I remember being an undergrad at Brown. I can almost imagine myself teaching there, seated at a fancy seminar table underneath a ceiling that is caving in on me. It would probably be easy to walk away from even a billion-dollar Koch check. But at Flagler College, a private liberal arts school in Florida with a graduation rate in the 50% range, it will likely not be so easy to pass up the five-million-dollar gift offered for an "Institute of Classical Education", championed by a college trustee who also chairs the board of a nationwide charter school network created by Hillsdale College — a private Christian college that has become a major player in America's culture wars. Kathryn Joyce (2022) describes the trend: "Big-money conservative interests are proposing and creating a roster of educational centers dedicated to conservative ideology or laissez-faire economics, often wrapped in the language of 'classical education', 'civics' or 'freedom'."

It's more than fair to see a distinction between smash-and-grab for-profit universities and struggling public colleges forced into difficult

My director decided to "right-size" our library. Five out of five librarians left, and he replaced them with one: me. I cannot cover everything which needs be done, and I end up feeling so guilty. I've had panic attacks before work, cried myself to sleep. The stress has exacerbated my chronic illnesses; I'm afraid some of these issues will end up being with me for the rest of my life. I understand that everyone is coping with financial binds, but surely there are less damaging ways. I love academia, but it's trying to kill me.

cuts. The American for-profit FastTrain College allegedly enrolled 1300 students lacking eligibility requirements (like high school diplomas) so they could take in \$6.5 million in federal student grants and loans. The CEO hired "the sluttiest girls he could find" to act as admissions reps (Quandt, 2015). It's so hideous, it's hard to believe!

On one level, it's nothing like the painful erosion of the Women's Studies program at my own public university, which year by year lost more faculty and courses due to budget cuts and declining enrolments. But the neoliberal logic that drives FastTrain also drives cuts to publicly funded Women's Studies programs. The misogyny that lurks inside each of these examples is not a bug but a feature of neoliberalism, eroding not just public universities but the "public" as a citizenry. This is neoliberalism as corrosive to social justice and to democracy itself.

Call it what it is

Across the globe, fascism, authoritarianism, neo-Nazism, and populism are all on the rise. In Europe, far right parties have participated in coalition governments (Finland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Estonia, Latvia), become major political players (Italy, Sweden, Spain, France), and infiltrated formerly moderate parties (Poland) (Freedman, 2022). The Assistant Commissioner of Australia's national police agency warned in 2021 that far right extremism is the country's fastest-growing threat (Xinhua, 2021). In recent years, conservative governments or governments with significant anti-democratic elements have gained increasing political power in Japan, India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2018). Brazil is leading a "third wave"

of the Latin American far right shaped by neoliberalism and military power illustrated by the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (Goldstein, 2022). (Lula's defeat of Bolsonaro just as this book goes to press changes that landscape somewhat.) Though the particulars shift by year and by region, this is a disturbing political trend.

The United States, basking in the frightening afterglow of the Trump presidency, makes for an apt case study in the relationship between

We recently saw our administration slow down the implementation of a "Race, Equity and Inclusion" General Education requirement and make optional a first-year book (previously a requirement) that was related to the history of racism in our country. The fear was that such activities on our campus would draw the ire of the state and they would punish us by further decreasing our funding. So the less the state supports us financially, the more control they have.

neoliberalism and the rise of authoritarianism. Donald Trump, educated at elite private institutions from kindergarten through college, once gloated at a political rally "I love the poorly educated! We're the smartest people, we're the most loyal!" ("Trump", 2016). While popular author and political conservative J. D. Vance exclaims that

because they indoctrinate young people, "professors are the enemy" (Reichman, 2021). It is not scholars or teachers who are rapidly indoctrinating the masses. Whether it is Trump "making America great again" or Akesson "making Sweden good again", there is a correlation between the oppressive politics — xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, racist, misogynistic, ableist — of rising conservative extremists and neoliberalism. Oppressive politics cannot help but develop when dehumanising systems place profits over people. Nevertheless, the free market logic of neoliberalism is being supplanted by a more politically pointed goal. What people like Trump and his counterparts around the world are pushing now is illiberalism or "the destruction of liberal democracy, in order to create a theocratic-based state with controlled elections, education, and culture" (Sexton, 2022). This landscape produces anti-trans legislation in schools, "divisive concepts" laws that bar class discussions about systemic racism, and an ironic backlash of accusations against educators for their "woke" indoctrinating curriculum.

The neoliberal university has not led us to these oppressive politics as much as the history of oppression has been built into our higher education systems since their beginnings. In the United States, it is an (un)settling fact that 99% of the land “granted” to our land-grant institutions by the 1862 Morrill Act came from violence-backed land cessions, where Indigenous people were forced to give up land that would become the basis of the public university system in the U.S. (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). Scholars such as Adam Harris have probed how historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have accommodated students of colour displaced by racism from our “public” institutions that denied them admission and educated them with just a fraction of the public funds that have flowed to predominantly white schools. The current neoliberal thrust is a *return* to the historical root of American education, not a departure. Similarly, in Canada, where seemingly every month the bodies of more First Nation children are unearthed from residential school grounds, educational systems have literally been built on a foundation of violence and oppression. Again, this is a complicated cycle or spiral, not a linear course that we could easily correct; it’s as much a horrifying backslide as it is a frightening new reality.

Diving for hope

One of the troubling features of this neoliberal backslide into the socially unjust world that spawned our current systems is that every “solution” makes the problem worse. As we work to save our institutions, we accept the terms of the debate that dictate *why* they need saving. But what’s breaking us is not a budget shortfall or a demographic cliff. It’s not that there’s no market for Art History or that faculty haven’t been innovative enough in our uses of technology in our teaching. Rich, powerful people are still sending their children to residential universities where they can study Engineering, yes, but also Philosophy and Painting. Some people who are not rich and powerful will also be admitted and supported at these elite schools, so that the facade of the meritocracy can be preserved. However, the other 80% of students will find they are being sold a different bill of sale: far fewer (but more costly) options, all of them designed only to provide the labour pool for the preservation of a broken world.

I am wary (and weary) of the fact that if I try to offer a solution, I would be offering something that would quickly be co-opted and

Some say I am resilient, I don't see it that way. I am a survivor. More layoffs are coming, this will be the third go round at the institution. It is uncertain how I will fare. I have done this work because I believe in the good in people. I am tired yet hopeful. Thank you for reading this. It is my story and I have lived it.

repackaged by a nefarious system that is far more cunning than I could ever be. Instead, I will take a page from scholars, artists, writers, and activists who, before me, have recognised that the systems that enveloped them were causing such harm and violence. I offer the wreckage, exposed for what it is. For me, as it was for James Baldwin and Adrienne Rich,

diving into this wreckage is a gesture of hope. Throughout my writing of this piece, I have been reading Glaude's biography of Baldwin. Towards the end of the book, Glaude (2020) quotes part of a speech that Baldwin gave less than a year before he died of cancer: "Liberation from the languages and categories that box us in requires that we tap the source of it all, free ourselves from the lie, and start this whole damn thing over" (p. 200). It is not above the wreckage but into it and through it we must go. We must use all our critical reading skills to free ourselves from the lies we are being told and sold and tap into our humanity to design what comes next. Every day at my own school, I am struck repeatedly by the care, hope, and joy that infuses the daily work that my colleagues do with students and with each other. They exercise this care, express this hope, and uplift me with their joy even as they wonder out loud how long they can continue at a job that is also killing them.

I will close with a nod to Paulo Freire, who inspired so many of us to think of education not as a series of answers to be banked, but as a series of problems to be posed. I don't have answers, but I feel empowered for posing the problems, and I commit to being creative and collaborative as I address them every day with my colleagues: faculty, staff, students, and those who hope to see a future that is the opposite of extractive, exploitative, and exhausting. It is not too much to ask: we must ask it not of this wreckage, but of each other. This is why this collection matters

to me. The authors who have carried each other along in the process of working across our individual pieces are mapping the future. I think it is a map that looks unlike anything we have seen before. It is not a straight line to a destination, with carefully calculated mileages and driving times that maximise efficiency. It is a detrital map, shards spread into a million possible patterns by those of us who see clearly what is happening and who know for certain that anything can still happen.

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