

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



Edited by
Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin (eds). Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapter's authors



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin (eds), *Higher Education for Good: Teaching and Learning Futures*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023,
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0363>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at
<https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0363#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-127-6

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-128-3

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-129-0

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-130-6

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-132-0

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-133-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0363

Cover image: George Sfougaras, *Hope*, CC BY-NC-ND

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Section II
Making Sense of the Unknown and
Emergent



1/20

Old Tree

Alex Abrahams 2021

'Old Tree' by Alex Abrahams. All rights reserved: used with artist's permission.

Note from the artist:

The branches of the tree tangled over my head and I struggled to find my way. Where is the path? In which direction do I go? As a young student, I looked for the sun rays in the thicket of higher education, but often it was dark and clammy. "Keep chopping," they said, "you will find the opening and the light of learning." Higher education is for good, for your good, for life's good. Just beat down the thorns and you will be there.

3. On public goods, cursing, and finding hope in the (neoliberal) twilight zone

Su-Ming Khoo

To solve political problems becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety (Bataille, G. *The Accursed Share*, 1991, p. 14)

This chapter traces the predicaments of public higher education in the neoliberal “twilight zone”, stuck with the choice between neoliberal globalism and global neoliberalism (Khoo, 2017; Schuurman, 2009). Confronting a rising sense of darkness (Fleming, 2021) and dread (Goldberg, 2021), this chapter reverses the aphorism that “it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness”. Cursing the darkness that neoliberalism visits on HE might be a critically generative thing to do, as it surfaces the normative foundations that are otherwise occluded by a pervasive sense of dread. The chapter discusses the importance of hope in the face of dread, turning to gentler educational darkness and generative aspects of dark pedagogies. To dare to think about what we mean by public good, educational good, or higher good requires more than the lighting of candles. It calls for energetically rejecting the cursed times that we are living through and opening the possibility of reclaiming reality.

Introduction

Why has higher education become stuck in a twilight zone of boring choices between global neoliberalism or neoliberal globalism? Discussing the fate of critical futures, Schuurman (2009) suggests that we need

more “middle-range” theorising to address “the new imperialism” of neoliberal globalisation from the ground up. Such middle-range thinking should engage with empirical situations and search for “pertinent questions” instead of “correct answers” (Schuurman, 2019, p. 847). The pertinent questions trouble the efficacy of critical thinking itself. How far can critique really go? We are not sure if it is possible for critiques of neoliberalism to escape the iron laws of oligarchy, the iron cage of bureaucracy, or the relentless drive for efficiency that expresses the power of governmentality in myriad ways. This chapter provokes these critical questions, even if it cannot fully answer them, and thinks through their implications for the possibility of social democracy.

Alternatives to neoliberalism should have gained ground following the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, when global neoliberalism arguably lost its triumphal claims (Gerbaudo, 2016; Khurana & Narayan, 2021). And yet, alternatives have not gained ground and neoliberalism continues to evolve its uncanny non-death (Crouch, 2011). Existing broad and deep economic and sociopolitical crises have continued, spreading the slow violence of structural harm, inequity, and precarity, starkly illustrated by the distribution of losses and harms of the global COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing since early 2020.

In this chapter, I address a sense of rising darkness and dread brought by neoliberalism in higher education. Instead of “lighting a candle” to optimistically wish that things will turn out well, I discuss the rise of neoliberal darkness and dread in higher education and its voiding of public things. I curse the darkness to expose foundational assumptions and assaults that work to void the public good, erode public “somethings” and turn them into “nothings”. As the poet, Seamus Heaney, remarked while reflecting on the challenge of transformation facing South Africa after apartheid, hope is not merely optimism that things will turn out for the best, hope is a sense of service, commitment, and readiness to work for a common “something”: “... hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work” (Johnson, 2002, para. 11). I explore the critical alternatives offered by dark pedagogies and negative capability as well as a substantive alternative economics of publicness and public good that resists the cruel optimism of liberal public good theory. Theories of the gift economy and performative assembly against the cruelties of neoliberal austerity and hope for

a more liveable life offer hope for a public and socially democratic higher education beyond the neoliberal twilight zone. Not all forms of darkness result in the voiding of public good. Dark pedagogies and educationally generative darkness may serve the regeneration of public things. However, the regeneration of public things requires decolonial demands for restitution and restoration to be taken seriously, if hope for the public good is not to founder on the rocks of colonial-imperial legacies that continue to trouble democratic societies as they currently exist.

Darkness and dread

My starting point was a sense of rising darkness and pervading dread. I had no idea when starting to write this chapter that “Dark Academia” was a meme, a social media trend engineered for millennials born in the strangely specific timeframe of 1997 to 2012 (Brinkhof, 2022). The Dark Academic responds to the brutalist modernity of marketised neoliberal higher education with solitary romanticism. Rejecting the modern world and other people, Dark Academics are nostalgic for a lost world of higher education, a world of cosily special, elite, and privileged places of distinction (Horgan, 2021). But Readings (1997) admonishes that a return to a past state of innocence is impossible. Academics today already dwell and work “in ruins”. Dwelling in the ruins is neither a cosy nor comfortable experience, but it offers more real, if ambivalent hope.

The title of Peter Fleming’s (2021) book *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* is hardly optimistic. The neoliberalisation of higher education is linked to many examples of psychological, social, and bodily harms and deprivations, including the absence of the basic decencies of health insurance, and, tragically, even death by suicide. Academic death has been spurred on by the pressures of commercialisation, managerialism, competitive individualism, bureaucracy, and acceleration — all of which have transformed once-privileged academic jobs into hellish dystopias and put an end to ideals of autonomy, craft, intrinsic satisfaction, and vocational motivation. Fleming’s complaint is that traditional academic values based on these ideals have become irrelevant or reduced to nostalgic quirks and eccentricities. One review dismisses Fleming’s

complaints as nostalgic, unwarranted, and based on a fantasy that never lived up to its own ideals. Perhaps academia was never worth saving in the first place? (Guo, 2021). This move from suspicion to surrender confirms, with resignation and sadness, that the failure of the ideal is only too real. Little can be done about the misfit between academic ideals and the “brave new world” of higher education (Fleming 2021, pp. 5 & 7). Dark academia’s complaints list many ills — degraded and precarious working conditions, wage theft, authoritarianism, and callous behaviour by senior management who seem to inhabit an entirely different reality — “La-la Land”, in Fleming’s words. Ordinary staff and student experiences of the “edufactory” and metrics nightmare are jarringly at odds with the blandly aspirational cheerfulness conveyed by marketing departments. Corruption, the corrosion of character, bad faith, acceleration, and declining trust characterise this dark affect, accompanied by pathological states of egotism and anxiety (Mahon, 2022).

The academic “collegium of peers” that Fleming mourns may never have existed for many in the first place. Yet merely confirming that top-down, command production economy has replaced the collegium of peers represents a tacit acceptance of a new reality ruled by censorship, suppression of dissent, and the remediation of bad news with public relations. Accounts of exhaustion and burnout are feeding a new academic genre, “quit-lit” (Shreve, 2018), recommending exit as the only sane choice. The only way for academics to survive is to quit the “factories of knowledge” and “industries of creativity” (Raunig, 2012), leaving the captains of industry to do what they will.

Dread is the sense of futures becoming futureless, social screws turned, social fabric torn apart (Goldberg, 2021). Structural transformations underpin this growing sense of dread: the individualisation, displacement and precarisation of employment, eroding work benefits and pensions, intrusive surveillance and monitoring, and a continuous stream of mediatised news and comment, bringing either bad tidings or nauseating corporate spin. Low intensity conflict and slow violence feed this sense of dread, increasing anxiety and unsettlement, which Goldberg (2021) describes as “a tightening knot in the social stomach”, the social fraying at the seams, with “nothing but quicksand all the way down” (pp. 13 & 19). We sit in dread like frogs brought to the boil,

only with some awareness that our environment is getting more and more uncomfortable. Are resistance and hope even possible to counter the social life of dread? As the writer, Franz Kafka said to his friend Max Brod (1960), there is plenty of hope, hope abounds... "but not for us". Can we even hope against hope that things will not worsen? Perhaps things might just stay good enough, even if we cannot hope for improvement? Is public higher education already trapped in Kafka time, with no hope for us?

Cursing the darkness

"It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness", or so the saying goes. But is it? Lighting a candle is a gesture of hope and mourning across many different cultures, symbolising grief, and satisfying the need to commemorate. Hope looks for signs of reprieve, and a flicker of light may feel like a welcome gift of a moment of contemplation as darkness descends.

Cursing the darkness, however, is different. To curse the darkness is to name that which you curse and engage in an everyday form of resistance. A curse is more than just an expletive or a complaint (Ahmed, 2021), it is to employ a weapon of the weak (Scott, 1985), to respond to the adversity of powerlessness with word magic. This chapter curses neoliberalism in higher education at twilight. "At twilight" is not necessarily the same as "in twilight". "At" twilight is a temporal moment, not an intrinsic condition, inviting speculation about the point between fading light and falling darkness.

The magic of cursing is psychologically and psychosomatically potent, perhaps because it is ambivalent. Cursing serves to intimidate, attack and haunt — to counter one form of dark power with another, but it also can heal, invigorate, and inspire. Considering the violently occult nature of academic darkness, does it not make sense to respond to one occult attack with another? To curse the dark side of working and studying in the neoliberal university is to call out the falling darkness, to refuse to surrender to dread and resignation. Cursing refuses the marketing hype, with its forced celebration of problem-free success, and rejects the endless insistence that we must substitute our work

of teaching, learning, or researching with pseudo-competitions for publicity and funding.

Cursing is a pragmatic attempt at human communication with forces that seem incapable of listening to us. What makes a curse a curse is the cultural distinction between acceptable versus taboo. This line is never self-evident since offensiveness is always a property of a very particular context. Of course, I write from Ireland, where the proclivity to curse goes back for millennia. Unlike in other places, where cursing may function as an incantation to bring future harm or to make an offensive utterance, in Ireland, cursing is far more flexible and ambiguous, considered to be a righteous art, honed, and practised against occupiers and their intermediaries (Waters, 2021).

Cursing's word magic lies in the testing of the limits of the cultural context, and in testing the limits, it lays bare the norms that are operating behind the veil of taboo. This is why Mona Eltahawy (2020) encourages feminists to practise cursing as one of the seven "sins" that should be committed to resist and overcome the oppression of a "universal and normalized" order. Maybe it is not enough to "forget neoliberalism" and to decide that we don't need it. No. One should "fuck neoliberalism. Fuck it to hell" (Springer, 2016, p. 289). In this moment, at least, cursing releases psychic energy, breaking through the relentless normalisation of the accursed and dread-inducing neoliberal twilight. At that moment, the world is opened for remaking and re-inhabitation. Springer asks, *what if cursing is a call for enactive agency that goes beyond mere words, combining theory and practice into the beautiful praxis of prefiguration?*

Cursing is physically like laughing and it is often followed by laughing. It causes an intake of breath and a turn of the mind that may otherwise continue on a trajectory of thoughtlessness. Thoughtlessness is an absence of thought, an absence that is at the root of what Hannah Arendt (2013) called the "banality of evil". Who has not faced powerful bureaucrats' clichéd protestations that they are merely "doing their job"? Cursing, like laughing, interrupts this deadly train of thoughtlessness with a "sudden expulsion of air" and shows, a little fiercely, with "the fence of your teeth" an unwillingness to put up with something (Knott, 2013, p. 19). The apparent lightness of cursing and laughter does not indicate a lack of seriousness. Thought, effort, rumination, and courage may have gone into that sudden expletive, cackle, or curse. The dogged

continuity of banality and resignation are interrupted, space is cleared, norms are laid bare, the scene is oxygenated, and, suddenly, possibility may emerge for something and somewhere being returned to, with the possibility of the present being inhabited differently, perhaps even with a future.

Voiding publicness: From somethings to nothings

One main reason we should curse neoliberalism is for the way it transforms goods by processes of voiding. Neoliberal policies and procedures mandate the transformation of specific “somethings” into generic “nothings” (Ritzer & Ryan, 2002). This *nothingification* contravenes the three axiomatic dimensions of publicness, i.e. public procedures, institutions, and services. Public things are eroded and corroded when they become less procedurally democratic, when distributional inequity is deepened, and when broadly beneficent characteristics such as health, safety (Khoo, 2014), scientific integrity, and/or respect are compromised.

Honig (2015) defines “public things” as things that equalise relations among people and wonders if they can survive the onslaught of neoliberal austerity. She argues that people must fight for public things by gathering publicly as diverse equals in opposition to austerity, inequality, and privilege hoarding. The regeneration of social democracy depends on the regeneration of its public things (Honig, 2022). Public things are things that, by their very existence, serve a kind of psychological-developmental role necessary to the maintenance of democratic life (Honig, 2015). Combining Arendt’s theories about the “common world” and Winnicott’s developmental psychology centred on transitional objects, Honig (2015) argues that public goods’ durability is under threat and this erosion diminishes the prospects for public life.

Brown (2015) echoes Honig’s warning about the undoing of the demos as neoliberalism’s stealthy revolution. Arendt (2013/1958) characterises the public as the *space of appearance* that enables a sense of political freedom and equality to come into being whenever citizens act in concert through speech and persuasion. Likewise, in *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey (1927) defines publicness as a collective communicative response to shared problems. A “public” does not exist until a problem

brings a public together to solve the problem by deliberating about it as a community. Honig uses Arendtian concepts to defend public things as things that help the public to define and enact social democracy. This is like the collective enactment that Dewey has in mind — democracy as constituted by people acting in concert to solve problems as shared public concerns.

Higher education descends into darkness when neoliberal mechanisms appropriate public goods and surrender the obligations to publicly provide them with other “fixes” of markets, financing, and technology. Neoliberal market fixes are distinct from liberal axioms as they involve dark forms of surveillance, disciplinary control, and authoritarian and summary exercises of power. Marketisation and the introduction of “new public management” into what was previously public higher education erodes it as a public good, while barbarising its enactment of public life. This barbarisation is what we mostly cannot see but can still sense as dread (Goldberg, 2021), a sense of public life and the public good becoming hollowed out, and transformed into something futureless (Brown, 2015; Honig, 2015). In a previous era of public goods thinking, the 1950s-60s, hopes for higher education to serve common good, equitable social provisioning, and the remediation of social injustice were answered with promises of economic and social mobility. The theoretical, conceptual, and empirical impasse of the 1980s replaced Keynesian fixes with a much darker zeitgeist. In the subsequent era, yawning inequalities of absurd wealth and callous welfare austerity have been “fixed” by promoting xenophobia and the murderous borderisation, a determined rehabilitation of patriarchal misogyny and racism, a resort to imperial nostalgia, and re-militarisation (Giroux, 2005). Neoliberal barbarisation can justly be described as necropolitics — the power and capacity to dictate who (or what) may live and who (or what) must die (Keval & Wright, 2021; Mbembe, 2003, 2019).

Privatisation is a dark process because it pursues the neoliberal globalisation of nothing in the name of efficiency, relevance, and “global” positioning. “Nothing” involves the substitution of local forms of life having distinct content with globalised, empty forms: templates that are centrally controlled, standardised, and lacking in distinctive content. *Nothingification* produces something — property — and privatisation

enacts a historical technique of segregation that divides and diminishes the publicness of education (Harris, 1993; Honig, 2022). In the United States, racial segregation of children in public schools was deemed unconstitutional by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954. This ruling catalysed white collectivisation of investments in private schooling and their subsequent withdrawal from public education in some states, thwarting the formation of integrated education as a public good that could bring people together in an integrated, democratic manner. The strategy of privilege hoarding, in tandem with the withdrawal and destruction of public schooling assets, amounts to nothing less than violent “democracide” (Honig, 2022).

Dark pedagogies

Although the darkness brought by neoliberal voiding dominates the sector, higher education’s “darkness” is heterogenous, not homogenous. The voiding, corruption, and corrosion of public higher education and the pathological states and harms documented by Fleming (2021) should not be minimised. But higher education’s darkness is more than just neoliberal darkness. “Darkness” also offers the possibility of change, that the world might be other than what it currently is (Barnett & Bengtson 2021, 2022).

“Dark pedagogies” imply a pivot to embrace darkness when Enlightenment goals and expectations are found wanting. Lysgaard, Bengtsson and Laugerson (2019, 2020) suggest that darkness should be constructively engaged with, within, and for an environmentally threatened world. Dark pedagogies embrace uncertainty, catastrophe, and terror, by taking an affective turn to add urgency to shared ethical commitments in an already broken world (Mulgan, 2014). Indeed, the dread situation of the current planetary crisis including, of course, the climate crisis, may necessitate the power of dark pedagogies to face planetary darkness and effect a necessary turn towards different, more bearable futures. Educational darkness is a “thing” that exceeds the didactic slog, harnessing aesthetic and affective aspects to spark learning and transformation (Lysgaard et al., 2019).

Darkness is a complex with inner tensions (Barnett & Bengtson, 2021) that also stands intrinsically for pedagogical aspects of education,

including considerations of pedagogy's own limitations, constraints, contradictions, ironies, and contingencies. The tasks of higher education acknowledge and enact being-with ontological darkness. However, higher education's pedagogical tasks also simultaneously include that of emancipation — freeing students, the wider public, and academics from over-dependence on epistemological, phenomenological, and ideological darkness. Darkness can be an interruption that serves to foster creativity and imagination. A significant tension remains between dark pedagogies and the neoliberal darkness of profit-motivated domestication and commodification, turning higher education into “factories of knowledge and industries of creativity” (Raunig, 2012). As educators, we strive to move ourselves and our students out of the neoliberal twilight zone and yet remain caught within it. We also harbour the hope of thrusting them (and ourselves) back into the kinds of darkness that foster a certain cluster of pedagogical virtues, goods, and necessities. These include Keatsian negative capability, being capable of inhabiting a zone of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without immediately needing to fall back upon the answers that are already rehearsed and incanted.

The cruel optimism of liberal publicness

Can anyone dare to speak about public higher education and hope for public good when the public realm in almost every context has never *not* been constituted by imperial, colonial, racialised, and sexist forms of exclusion, dispossession, and erasure? Today, it seems almost impossible to imagine public higher education that is not thoroughly neoliberal, by which we mean “capitalist” and, by the same token, inegalitarian and imperialist in its extractivist tendencies, since that is what neoliberalism is — the reconstitution of capitalism and imperialism in a new form (Khoo 2022; Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021).

Public good as it is currently constituted may be incommensurable with demands for decolonisation and the necessity of reckoning with the colonial legacies of higher education. Restitution and reparation are required to remedy structural inequities if postcolonial public goods are to become more inclusive and legitimate. This does not, however, resolve the objection that the liberal public sphere is incommensurable

with different, decolonial epistemologies and ontologies “beyond the abyssal line” (de Sousa Santos, 2007) — the abyssal line being an onto-epistemic divide instituted within Euro-Western thinking that radically divides social reality into “this side of the line” replaying colonial-modern ordering, with a supplement of social fascism from its radical negation. The “other side of the line” constitutes emancipation from abyssal ordering, through the formation of a counter-hegemonic subaltern cosmopolitanism. Subaltern cosmopolitanism is characterised by a deep and enduring incompleteness, ecologism, radical co-presence, diversity, and attention to the sociology of ignorances and absences. Some decolonial critiques (Stein, 2022) warn that decoloniality and the “public” and “public good” may be incompatible, since irreducibly different ontologies and epistemologies are involved (p. 79). Besides, many public goods including those of higher education have been and continue to be accumulated through racialised processes of exploitation, accumulation, and extraction, in much the same way as “private” goods. These decolonial critiques question whether the very notion of public goods can ever be made benevolent. I agree that the claim of incommensurability and past exploitative foundations trouble, yet do not think that these critiques entirely cancel out the potential of publicness. Critical-decolonial claims of incommensurability can be accommodated in an open and imperfect conception of a contingently constituted public good. Public goods are not necessarily incompatible with a beyond-abyssal “ecology of knowledges” as outlined by de Sousa Santos (2007). It is precisely the function of the public sphere to hold different and possibly conflicting perspectives without being annihilated by the existence of differences. In terms of public things, public higher education can provide space for disputes and function as a holding environment for such legitimate disputes.

Is it even desirable or possible to try to bring different theoretical and praxiological traditions to bear on a commitment to the public good? In *New Public Goods theory* (Khoo, 2014), I outline an axiomatic approach to public goods that is open-ended without demanding absolute convergence. Yet, criteria of equity and beneficence limit how far disputes can be resolved by relativist or nihilist claims that difference is always the trump card. *New Public Goods theory* requires the plurality of democratic participation to be triangulated with possibly clashing

goals of equitable consumption and generalised public benefit such as safety or public health. The three axioms of democratic deliberation, equitable enjoyment of goods, and broad beneficence can offer support and counter threats to an achievable ecology of knowledges.

Conclusion: Enacting alternative publicness beyond the neoliberal twilight zone

Public goods and gift economies offer alternative ideas about economics and the economies of higher education in the spirit of recreating an alternative social imaginary to that of neoliberal higher education (Khoo, 2016). These alternatives offer a ground for world-making in ways that better articulate social democratic and human concerns while critically challenging and rejecting ongoing neoliberal reforms.

Judith Butler's (2015) concept of performative assembly offers a banister to lean on when thinking about the possibilities of a public good without guarantees. Lives may be incommensurable but all lives are always already public and social, situated in a larger social, economic, and infrastructural world that exceeds individualised perspectives and ethics. Butler notes that the public presently defines the human and life in contradictory terms, treating some human lives as grievable and others not. Tuck and Yang (2012) reject non-performative decolonisation with their assertion that decolonisation is not a metaphor when there are concrete demands to reconstitute Indigenous rights, lands, and sovereignty.

Social and economic concerns are grounded in the body and cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions within which bodies live and act (Butler, 2015). Under conditions of precarity, performative politics (assembly) require bodies to act together, facing the precarious conditions that undermine the very conditions of acting. Gatherings enacted by bodies under duress give rise to a form of solidarity that is both mournful and joyful, where the gathering itself signifies persistence and resistance (Butler, 2015). As struggles continue for fair treatment at different points of entry, progression and attainment, workers and students in higher education also struggle with worsening work conditions and declining earnings, increasing fees, and rising costs. These worsening conditions increasingly necessitate hardship funds, food, and hygiene banks to maintain the basic needs of

students, academics, and other higher education workers. It has become more crucial than ever to keep fighting against worsening conditions for the least securely employed and the worst-paid, against overwork and the theft of time and health, and to secure wages, wellbeing and even life itself. It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain such basic bodily needs for food, shelter, and healthcare, both inside and outside higher education, due to the broader devastation of public ways of life. In the face of the neoliberal erosion of joint and public welfare, bodily needs come up time and again, to make moral and political claims for fair treatment and the just distribution of public goods.

Thus, while the ideals of the public good may be criticised for being partial, exclusionary, and failing to gain universalising voice, the precarity wrought by the destruction of redistributive mechanisms and public services may still galvanise an assembly of protesters to secure a more liveable life for themselves, but also for all (Butler, 2015, p. 183). Butler advocates for nonviolent protest to constitute a different world from the one that people encounter and resist. Collectives of protesters may encounter violence from the state and other authorities, but Butler argues that they must refuse to reproduce the terms of violence. Butler poses a similar question to that of Adorno — can one act as if a good public life is possible while living in a bad public life? Adorno pithily pronounces that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (Butler 2015, p. 193). This is echoed by those who point to the structure of inequality, exploitation, and effacement that continue to persist and the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), haunting the people who continue striving to improve this bad structure which keeps on structurally and systematically closing itself to so many.

The public sphere as we currently know it is a space in which higher education is deeply contested. All around the world, students and staff are mobilising against conditions and policies that have continuously disadvantaged certain types of bodies and persons, deeming their work and lives to be less than human, less intelligible, less rewardable, and less grievable. All body politics must begin by recognising interdependency, and this establishes a relation between precarity and performativity, vulnerability, and performative politics (Butler, 2015). When people gather to rally against neoliberalism-induced conditions of precarity, they are assembling and acting performatively against

that precarity. The performativity of protest politics emerges from conditions of precarity, with an overarching demand for a liveable life. Shared vulnerability makes it both necessary and possible to demand that bodies have what they need to survive, and survival is surely a precondition for all the other claims that might be made (Butler, 2015). The imperative of survival brings into focus how principles of equality and interdependency might be fairly realised in opposition to the unfair distribution of precarity.

The “higher” aspects of higher education relate to its educational economy beyond the restriction of production. Publicness can be linked to “good” by reference to academic integrity, the proper exercise of autonomy afforded by the principle of academic freedom, but also to its function as a “holding environment” in Honig’s terms. The alternative economy of higher education includes aspects of darkness and the pedagogical possibilities that they bring. The educative “obstinacy” and “higher” characteristics remain in tension with myriad and insistent demands that higher education serve society (specifically, employers), be “engaged”, have “relevance” and “impact”. The gift of time and space (Williams, 2012) and the resistant and “obstinate” nature of the pedagogical activity and the educative enterprise (Biesta, 2019) are crucial to the development of democratic and epistemic capabilities, fostering generative “negative capabilities” to entertain “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts”, without immediately having to reduce understanding down to bald forms of fact and reason.

Aine Mahon’s delightful collection *The Promise of the University: Reclaiming Humanity, Humility, and Hope* gestures towards a dawning of a very different sort of higher education as “a humane, humble and hopeful project whose unique potential is staked on a very delicate trust between participating parties” (Mahon, 2021, p. 1). This delicate hope feels like an unexpected balm. Perhaps we have become too used to rough treatment. I began this essay with malediction because higher education’s falling darkness sometimes feels to me like a mentally and physically violent assault. At other times, it feels like a bucket of voided waste being tipped onto my head. Sometimes I feel like higher education is trying to kill me, so it wasn’t surprising when the words and metaphors to describe higher education were dark and violent — attack, corrosion, even death. None of these descriptions of darkness

harbour the gentler sense of anticipated darkness, the darkness of regular, cyclical crepuscular descent, boding rest and restoration with the anticipation of dawn.

This chapter has cursed the darkness of neoliberalism and considered the uses of public things. We may conclude by moving from occult darkness to dwelling within darkness' more gentle ethos. The insightful, restful, restorative, and regenerative aspects of darkness may prove invaluable for sustaining public things and continuing the social-democratic, educational, and research work of higher education in dark times. As darkness falls, we may curse it because we are not ready to surrender to neoliberalism's voiding. We need public higher education to persist as a repository of transitional objects that offer a holding environment for the generation of social democratic possibilities (Honig, 2015). Liveable lives, health, and public higher education are ideas to postpone the end of the world. Instead of pushing the disadvantaged further into a zone of difference marked by discrimination and deprivation, public things keep alive the possibility of building back a common, social-democratic shared world. Returning to Heaney's hope, that "hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work" (Johnson, 2002, para. 11), perhaps we can still harbour hope for higher education as a public and democratic something — fostering a sense of commitment and readiness to work towards possibilities for a shared and more socially just world to come.

Acknowledgements

Irish Research Council project grant Coalesce/2019/88 provided opportunities that contributed towards the writing of this chapter.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Duke University Press.
- Arendt, H. (2013). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1958).
- Barnett, R., & Bengtson, S. (2021). Into or out of the light? Four shades of pedagogical darkness. In A. Mahon (Ed.), *Debating higher education: Philosophical perspectives: The promise of the university* (pp. 147–58). Springer.

- Bataille, G. (1991). *The accursed share* (H. Robert, Trans.). Zone Books.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bhambra, G. (2021). Colonial global economy: Towards a theoretical reorientation of political economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(1), 307–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1830831>
- Biesta, G. (2019). *Obstinate education: Reconnecting school and society*. Brill.
- Brinkhof, T. (2022, January 22). *What is “Dark Academia,” and why is it trending on social media in 2022?* BIG THINK. <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/dark-academia/>
- Brod, M. (1960). *Franz Kafka: A biography* (R. Winston & G. H. Roberts, Trans.). Schocken Books
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism’s stealth revolution*. Princeton University Press.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard University Press.
- Crouch, C. (2011). *The strange non-death of neoliberalism*. Polity Press.
- de Sousa Santos, B. (2007, 29 June). *Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges*. EUROZINE. <https://www.eurozine.com/beyond-abyssal-thinking/>
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Holt Publishers.
- Eltahawy, M. (2020, December 18). *Why I say “Fuck”*. FEMINIST GIANT. <https://www.feministgiant.com/p/essay-why-i-say-fuck>
- Fleming, P. (2021). *Dark academic: How universities die*. Pluto Press.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2016, November 4). *Post-neoliberalism and the politics of sovereignty*. Open Democracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/post-neoliberalism-and-politics-of-sovereignty/>
- Giroux, H. (2005). Cultural studies in dark times: Public pedagogy and the challenge of neoliberalism. *Fast Capitalism*, 1(2), 75–86. <https://doi.org/10.32855/fcapital.200502.010>
- Goldberg, D. T. (2021). *Dread: Facing futureless futures*. Polity.
- Guo, C. (2021, September 2). Book review: Dark academia: How universities die by Peter Fleming. [Review of the book *Dark academia: How universities die* by Peter Fleming] *LSE Review of Books*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lse-review-of-books/2021/09/02/book-review-dark-academia-how-universities-die-by-peter-fleming/>

- Harris, C. (2020). Reflections on whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 134(1), 1–10.
<https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/134-Harv.-L.-Rev.-F.-1-2.pdf>
- Honig, B. (2015). *Public things: Democracy in disrepair*. Fordham University Press.
- Honig, B. (2022, January 18). *Maid in America: Whiteness as property*. Politics and Letters.
<http://politicsslashletters.org/commentary/maid-in-america-whiteness-as-property/>
- Horgan, A. (2021, December 19). *The “dark academia” subculture offers a fantasy alternative to the neoliberal university*. Jacobin.
<https://jacobin.com/2021/12/instagram-tumblr-humanities-romanticism-old-money-uk>
- Johnson, M. (2013, April 7). *Bataille’s “the accursed share” and Absence: An analytical approach to data, decision and economics*. Improvisation Blog.
<http://dailyimprovisation.blogspot.com/2013/04/batailles-accursed-share-and-absence.html>
- Johnson, S. (2002, October 31). *Seamus Heaney: “Hope is something that is there to be worked for”*. Independent.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/seamus-heaney-hope-is-something-that-is-there-to-be-worked-for-141727.html>
- Jones, P., & Stokke, K. (Eds), (2005). *Democratising development: The politics of socio-economic rights in South Africa*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Keval, H., & Wright, T. (2021). Necropolitical constructions of happiness, COVID-19 and higher education. *Critical Studies on Security*, 9(2), 169–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2021.1978644>
- Khoo, S. (2014). Public goods: From market efficiency to democratic effectiveness. In R. Andrews (Ed.), *Commonwealth governance handbook 2013/14* (pp. 97–100) Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Khoo, S. (2016). Public scholarship and alternative economies: Revisiting democracy and justice in higher education imaginaries. In L. Shultz, & M. Viczko (Eds), *Assembling and governing the higher education institution democracy, social justice and leadership in global higher education* (pp. 149–74). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khoo, S. (2017). Engaging development and human rights curriculum in higher education in the neoliberal twilight zone. *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, 25, 34–58.
<https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-25/engaging-development-and-human-rights-curriculum-higher-education-neoliberal-twilight>

- Khoo, S. (2022). Decolonising political economy: Reading: "Capital and imperialism" at neoliberalism's crisis conjuncture. *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, 34, 76–94.
<https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-34/decolonising-political-economy-reading-capital-and-imperialism-neoliberalism%E2%80%99s-crisis>
- Khoo, S., & Floss, M. (2022). Surviving necropolitical developments amidst democratic disinformation: A pandemic perspective from Brazil. In G. McCann, N. Mishra, & P. Carmody (Eds), *COVID-19, the Global South, and the pandemic's development impact* (pp. 9–23). Bristol University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529225679.ch001>
- Khurana, I., & Narayan, J. (2021). (After) Neoliberalism? Rethinking the return of the state. *Discover Society: New Series*, 1(4).
<https://doi.org/10.51428/dsoc.2021.04.0003>
- Knott, M. L. (2013). *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*. Penguin Random House.
- Krenak, A. (2020). *Ideas to postpone the end of the world*. House of Anansi Press.
- Lysgaard, J. A., Bengtsson, S. H., & Laugesen, M. H. L. (2019). *Dark pedagogy: Education, horror and the Anthropocene*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lysgaard, J. A., & Bengtsson, S. (2020). Dark pedagogy, speculative realism and environmental and sustainability education. *Environmental Education Research*, 26(9–10), 1453–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2020.1739230>
- Mahon, A. (2021). The gift of an interval? Revisiting the promises of higher education. In A. Mahon (Ed.), *The promise of the university: Reclaiming humanity, humility, and hope* (pp. 1–13). Springer.
- Marks, S. (2011). Human rights and root causes. *The Modern Law Review*, 74(1), 57–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2230.2010.00836.x>
- Mbembé, J. A. (2003). Necropolitics (L. Meintjes, Trans.). *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>
- Mbembé, J. A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press.
- Meer, N. (2022). *The cruel optimism of racial injustice*. Policy Press.
- Mulgan, T. (2011). *Ethics for a broken world: Imagining philosophy after catastrophe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Patnaik, P., & Patnaik, U. (2021). *Capitalism and imperialism: Theory, history and the present*. Monthly Review Press.
- Raunig, G. (2012). *Factories of knowledge, industries of creativity* (A. Derieg, Trans.). MIT Press.
- Readings, B. (1997). *The university in ruins*. Harvard University Press.

- Ritzer, G., & Ryan, M. (2002). The globalization of nothing, social thought & research. *Postmodernism, Globalization, and Politics*, 25(1/2), 51–81.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23250006>
- Schuurman, F. J. (2009). Critical development theory: Moving out of the twilight zone. *Third World Quarterly*, 30(5), 831–48.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590902959024>
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Shreve, G. (2018, April 4). “Quit lit” then and now. Inside Higher Ed.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/04/04/comparison-quit-lit-1970s-and-today-opinion>
- Springer, S. (2016). Fuck neoliberalism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 15(2), 285–92.
<https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1342>
- Stein, S. (2022). *Unsettling the university: Confronting the colonial foundations of US higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1(1), 1–40.
<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>
- Waters, T. (2020). Irish cursing and the art of magic, 1750–2018. *Past & Present*, 247(1), 113–49.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz051>
- Williams, K. (1989). The gift of an interval: Michael Oakeshott’s idea of a university education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 37(4), 384–97.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00071005.1989.9973826>

