

## Reflections

# Cherishing the reproductive work within academia for securing emancipatory work outside academia – commentary to Refstie

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This commentary to Refstie’s article for a more reflexive co-production of knowledge grounded in critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable imperatives aims to expand her critique on the role of an ethics of care in dismantling the neoliberal university. It highlights the need to build transformative practices that start in our workplaces and where reproductive labor is collectively rewarded. This can result in an inclusive space of care for one another, a conducive working environment for the radical production of knowledge and the joyful engagement in education as a truthfully transformative practice.

Keywords: neoliberal university, ethics of care, reproductive labor, transformative academia

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Hilde Refstie’s (2021) article is both an urgent and timeless invitation to push for a critical reconfiguration of research relevance in academia. Her article calls for a more reflexive co-production of knowledge grounded in critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable imperatives. I have many points of conversation to make with her insightful reflections, but I will limit my reading to, what is to me, her most compelling argument: *the care and responsibilities* in the call for ‘doing our part’ to radically resist the neoliberal university.

I choose this point of departure as it comes at a time when I feel exhausted by the never ending demands of a neoliberal academia, and perhaps skeptical on the role of current academia in shaping meaningful transformation. Perhaps this is not because I lack faith in our academic work to effectively be transformative. It has to do with the fact that the neoliberalization of university has systematically alienated our possibilities to shape our worktimes, desires and priorities and instead has created the cultural and material conditions that make academia unbearably supercilious and self-absorbed. This is also a feeling overwhelmingly shared by many colleagues of mine juggling with the multiple pressures that the neoliberal university put upon us.

I write this commentary in an effort to expand Refstie's (2021, 169) critique on creating "*the right conditions*" for dismantling the neoliberal university. Refstie (2021, 166) references Mountz and colleagues (2015) to define the neoliberal university as an "institution where logics, techniques, principles, and values from the sphere of commerce – such as competition, privatization, efficiency, and self-reliance – are applied to the university to instill productivity and excellence." This reinforces a perverse system sustained by criteria of economic efficiency and strenuous competition that commodifies education, research, outreach and public engagement, and ultimately exacerbates processes for cooptation of radical ideas, the mainstreaming of sustainability practices and the greenwashing of solutions.

Refstie (2021) also argues that research relevance in the pursuit of social change is challenging and backbreaking at minimum, due to the pressure for fast research, rush deadlines and metric-oriented production that disciplines the time and space of scholars. This is indeed pernicious for young scholars – mostly experiencing temporary and precarious working environments – who navigate an arena of competition and individual self-achievement. These practices not only promote neoliberal and patriarchal notions of meritocracy and distinction, but they endure legacies of exploitation and reinforcing injustices. This is particularly harder for female scholars, indigenous scholars, people of color and scholars from the global south (Collective 2019), as we navigate an academic space that tends to disfavor us and celebrates white, male and individual academic exceptionalism.

Neoliberal university does not protect young scholars, yet, a core principle within any university is to advance the future of its scholars. These scholars suffer heavy pressure to play with the keynotes of the dominant academic culture and the effervescent production cycle of academia. This poses serious challenges in finding the radical potential and political impact for academic work. Considering this, Resftie (2022, 168) claims that to resist a neoliberal university implies slowing down. Her call for "more reflexive coproduction" supposes having an adequate space in research to stop, reflect, resist, address and subvert the forces that sustain power structures of subordination, as otherwise scholarship implicitly or explicitly reinforces inequality and prevents societal change. She explains that this is a call for an "ethics of care" (*ibid.*, 166), a form of action-oriented research that engages with different publics, scrutinizes certainties, holds institutions accountable, engages in activism/advocacy and amplifies the social impact of our work for concrete political actions.

While I unequivocally back her invitation, I believe research relevance is only one part of an organic continuum of our role in shaping transformative practices in academia. I am certain that she will agree with me in the need to expand the ethics of care beyond research and co-production of knowledge themselves. For example, transformative practices need to start in the places we work in. Yet this has proven to be strenuous. We call for emancipatory practices outside of our own daily life spaces and routines, and advocate for radical change, while we have lost the ability of governing our own workplaces. We assign the work of transformation upon others, while feeling disenfranchised to contribute to the internal reconstitution or take part in decision-making of the places where we spent most of our weekly time.

The hectic rush of the neoliberal university exhausts people and dismantles collective organization. But securing emancipatory work outside academia needs in the first place cherishing the reproductive work within academia. Our academic work entails far more reproductive labor and relationships of care we might even acknowledge. The production of knowledge and education will always be a commons and the result of the labor of a large group of people building relationships of care. Yet, socially reproductive labor is not collectively rewarded inside our universities. As such, not only our production needs to be accountable, but our reproduction needs to be reshaped. It is essential to transgress the system of a neoliberal university that spotlights scholars in their role for social transformation and invisibilizes all of the reproductive forces that sustain them: all the partners, mothers, families, friends, cleaners, caretakers, cooks, students, other colleagues, administrative staff, among others. All of them and their intertwined relationships fill the needs for all the ideas, practices and knowledges to emerge.

We need to openly recognize and collectively reward the work done by everybody that makes academia possible, including all the critical forces within. This is a call for an ethics of care that builds upon emancipatory politics inside our own spaces. This means a radical examination of institutions in

order to shape honest and constructive relationships based on collective well-being that include the needs and desires of everybody participating in productive and reproductive labor. It is about improving our internal working spaces and flourishing them with radical and transformative possibilities. It is also about assuming the collective responsibilities that this entails from within. For that, we need to amplify deliberative spaces and learn to be defiant in pushing these demands. We are all co-responsible for shaping an ethics of care and self-care where all people's works are embraced and we need the time and the space for building these relationships with daily actionable tasks.

A push for a slow academia implies not only to be able to reflect more and produce less but to celebrate our reproductive practices: a collective engagement in communal supportive actions and a safe place where our feelings are acknowledged. This commitment is not only symbolic, it implies guaranteeing the material conditions for that, the time pace to do so, the valuation of collective practices, and the institutional support that enhances that the creative, transformative, but above all emancipatory work can flourish.

We deserve a university that supports an inclusive ethics of care for one another, a conducive working environment for the radical production of knowledge and the dedicated and joyous engagement in education as a truthfully transformative practice. In that sense, creating critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable academic practices takes place through daily collective reinforcement. That implies having the possibilities to explore practices collectively recognized as valuable and a space that encourages critical action without the fear of being risky to our self-development. Resisting the increasing neoliberal university requires a push back from all imaginable spaces. Spaces that ultimately can be filled with joyful, constructive and emancipatory passion. For that, we all are accountable for the changes in the radical practices we envision elsewhere.

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