



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 10, No 2, December 2020

JENGA, KAFKA, AND THE TRIUMPH OF ACADEMIC CAPITALISM

A Taxonomy of Scholars and their COVID Capital

Kate Cantrell and Kelly Palmer

Keywords: Academia; COVID-19; Higher Education; neoliberalism; the precariat

COVID Collapse

As universities around Australia sever entire schools and faculties, others face collapse entirely. An over-dependence on international revenue and an unhappy marriage with the federal government had many universities already feeling some discomfort before COVID-19 exacerbated the pain. Whether universities rapidly decline, or languish and recover, they will undoubtedly see more violent restructuring as they transition into the recovery and renewal phase. In the meantime, the absence of any tangible assistance from the government, combined with mostly short-sighted cost reduction strategies, mean that a sector-wide crisis has now been left to individual universities to manage alone. As Teresa Tija et al. explain, 'The immediate response of Australian universities was to defer capital works spending, reduce non-salary expenditure, scale back the use of casual and fixed-term staff, and introduce other short-term measures' (2020: 3). These emergency surgeries, which in many cases have been performed without anaesthesia, reveal that universities need a more innovative ethical strategy for triaging and treating the many systemic disorders that the virus has not only aggravated but also exposed. As several academics have already observed, Australian universities were sick before the pandemic (Kunkler 2020; Zaglas 2020). Indeed, the commodification and destruction of 'all the collective institutions capable of counteracting the effects of the infernal machine' (Bourdieu 1998: 4) ensures that those commodified most — that is, the precariat — can do little to save the university from its self-cannibalising tendencies.

The University Class System

In his influential work on labour economics, Guy Standing (2011) identifies seven groups of people who make up the class structure of modern capitalist societies such as Australia. In the higher education sector, three of these classes are integral to the expansion of academic capitalism: the plutocracy, the salariat, and the precariat. As with organisational hierarchies found throughout the workforce, these classes signify social capital and identity, financial inclusion and resilience, and personal health and wellbeing, which is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but rather a

complex multidimensional concept that consists of physical, social, and emotional factors. In academia, these classes also determine the limits of one's freedom, namely the freedom of inquiry (that is, the right to research and teach without 'undue hindrance' or 'fear of reprisal') (NTEU 2008: 3), and the freedom of speech (that is, the right to hold and express diverse opinions, as well as the liberty to speak freely). At the University of Melbourne, for instance, this extends to 'making statements on political matters, including policies affecting higher education, and to criticism of the University and its actions' (University of Melbourne 2009).

Yet, in the strategy game of academia — a game that closely resembles Jenga ('a classic strategy game you can play solo or with friends!') — the reality of play is that there are not only written rules and unwritten rules, but exceptions to rules as well. More often than not, a perceived violation of these rules, which regularly change, results in social alienation and, in some cases, exclusion from the game itself. In fact, Inger Mewburn (2019) describes this pastime as *The Academic Hunger Games*: a metaphorical killing sport in which the odds are never in your favour. Indeed, the sheer morbidity of this 'life-or-death' competition raises a difficult question: how do we write honestly about precarity when we find ourselves in a precarious position? Can we speak meaningfully about inclusivity and equal access to opportunity when exclusionary language and practice form part of the everyday? How do we act in solidarity when narratives of comparative misery reverberate through the virtual breakout rooms of our universities? As Sarah Sharma points out in her work on power-chronography, 'while it could be argued that all labour requires labourers to manage their time ... the explanatory power of speed works to exacerbate structural inequalities in the experience of time ... being able to freely talk about one's conditions of labour and experience of time at work is differentially experienced' (2014: 15–16).

In the university context this reality, like that of Gregor Samsa's, mutates awkwardly into another difficult question: what happens to a person when they are no longer useful? Or, more accurately, what happens to a person when no one can afford to exploit them any longer? Most of Kafka's stories, like the lives of the precariat, are tragic comedies: absurdist narratives marked by dark humour, chronic back pain, existential angst and despair, simultaneous attraction and aversion to the job, and monstrous vermin. Kafka wrote *Metamorphosis* in 1915, but he knew what all good university managers know today: the more ambiguous the monster is, the more psychological the fear becomes, and the more psychological the fear becomes, the longer one remains paralysed by the four As: 'anger, anomie, alienation, and anxiety' (Standing 2011: 19). 'O God', Gregor thinks, 'what an exhausting job I've chosen! On the move, day in, day out ... I'm saddled with the strain of all this travelling, the anxiety about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, the constant stream of changing faces with no chance of any warmer, lasting companionship. The devil take it all!' (Kafka 2010: 77).

No doubt, there is a certain doubleness to working at the bottom of the tower in one of the richest and most celebrated parts of town, as any high-class service worker knows. On one level, the precarious workforce are the overworked sycophants pretending to enjoy the 'paradox of privilege' (Barcan 2018: 105) while they calculate their periods of actual unemployment and wonder if there will be a jobs miracle any time soon. Meanwhile, the upper crusts of the plutocracy plaster their names on the next multimillion dollar Building of the Year. Tenured professors and lecturers watch their workloads

stack, while waxing nostalgic about the years of sessional slavery they endured as their rite of passage to a soon-to-be-extinct position of security. Professional staff with years of experience in a niche area simplify another convoluted process only to be shuffled on to another department to reinvent the wheel. It's worth mentioning that all university staff reluctantly accept their share of exploited work, and all universities suffer from institutional memory loss, especially now, as a mass exodus of talent, fed up with consecutive contracts and dwindling opportunity, emerge as the 'Lost Generation' of academia. Even staff below upper management consistently self-describe as 'satisfied but unhappy' (Barcan 2018: 106), while a recent workplace survey of 3,000 British academics found that 'most feel overworked, exploited, and ignored by management' (Times Higher Education 2016).

However, the neoliberal gothic monster, which now, as a result of COVID-19, has extended its tentacles into many employees' homes, leaves most of us unsympathetic to the plights of our better- or worse-off colleagues. In fact, as Australian universities experience vastly different consequences of the global pandemic, the one constant is that the precariat are the first and often invisible victims despite — or perhaps because of — their combat positions on the frontline. Casual teaching academics, for example, make up the majority of the student-facing workforce on whom the university's entire existence depends. In this way, the precariat are indeed a class of their own. This taxonomy of scholars (and other suckers) reveals that universities, now more than ever, are Jenga-esque constructions: unstable foundations of shifting bodies holding up progressively more tenuous towers, where one must fight for height before the whole stack collapses. If universities do survive the pandemic, no one will emerge from the rubble unscathed. But all things being equal, the precariat will suffer unequally, as is always the case.

I The Plutocracy

Plenty of university employees fall within Standing's category of the 'elite' of the world, with many upper-middle managers such as Deans easily clearing the \$239,000 a year threshold to earn among the nation's one per cent (Steverman & Pickert 2019). At the very top of the tower, however, sits an even tinier minority of privileged elite who are disproportionately powerful, absurdly rich, and exceptionally well-dressed. In academia, we call these people Vice-Chancellors: modern-day feudal lords on seven-figure salaries, men who are usually white and robed, married with two adult children, and usually appointed in their late fifties. In fact, the top ten Vice-Chancellors' salary packages in Australia rake in between \$1 million and \$1.5 million a year (University Rankings 2020). To put this figure in perspective, a full-time B-level lecturer earns on average \$90,000/year. Therefore, one Vice-Chancellor's salary equals ten lectureships, with a few grand left over for university largesse (O-Week parties, chauffeured cars, commemorative hoodies etc) (Duffy & Sas 2020). To put this figure in perspective for non-academics, and by way of comparison to the salaries of other public sector employees, all but two Vice-Chancellors are paid more than the Prime Minister, who takes home around \$550,000 a year (Times Higher Education 2019). Furthermore, on top of their inflated salaries, some VCs earn performance-related bonuses. In 2015, for example, Professor Peter Høj, then at the helm of UQ, received \$200,000 in bonuses, which elevated his salary to \$1.098 million — a figure that, at the time, was reportedly ten times the salaries of most UQ lecturers and twice as

much as then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (Houghton 2016). Like Høj, many senior administrators earn more in one week than some casual academics earn all year (Hil & Lyons 2018).

Aside from their fat-cat salaries and trademark myopia, these super-citizens are also known for their elusiveness: they appear begrudgingly at ceremonial events, eat lunch on their own, and occasionally commission annual audits and reviews. Their legacies are faculty mergers and restructures, new buildings with touch-screen walls, and other non-essential ventures. As one PhD candidate recently tweeted, 'My university spent \$50,000 designing a new logo only to decide that it sucked and they'd just use the one they had. That's a postdoc salary' (@VicRicchezzaGeo). While these bandbox aristocrats often converse with the smallfolk via Twitter, their preferred mode of communication is email, their drawn-out signatures often accompanied by a punchy joke, such as *I will keep you updated or please enjoy the weekend*. Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness (2019: 3) warn against searching for 'gremlins and poltergeists' in higher education, arguing instead that the university's moral flaws are deeply ingrained. The fact remains that regardless of where the fault lies — in our stars or in system fundamentals — widening pay differentials, including inequities in salary and promotion, contribute to the rapidly expanding gulf between the very rich and the very poor. As Hil and Lyons (2018) explain, 'While the lower orders scratch around in precarious employment for what in many instances amounts to a subsistence wage, the privileges enjoyed by many senior managers border on the obscene'. To add insult to injury, upper management and other nobles draw hefty bonuses for slashing budgets, which often means directly or indirectly heaping workloads, cutting crucial student services, and keeping casual staff trapped in an oxymoronic state of employment; many sessionals are, in fact, 'permanent casuals' or 'long-term short-termers' (Cantrell & Palmer 2019).

It's no wonder, then, that there is a growing body of literature that wonders *who* Vice-Chancellors are and *what* they do. In fact, doctoral research into the process of appointing Vice-Chancellors reveals that despite the growing corporatisation of universities, Australian VCs are usually academic leaders rather than individuals from the private or corporate sector (O'Meara & Petzall 2005). Therefore, one of the oddities of the recruitment process — a process that has been afforded surprisingly little attention — is 'the paradox of appointing [Vice-Chancellors] from the ranks of individuals with non-business backgrounds to run large enterprises, which are being compelled to adopt an increasingly business-oriented focus' (2005: 18). Part of the problem is a lack of democracy and transparency concerning the selection process, coupled with questions about the competency and credibility of the selection panel itself (O'Meara & Petzall 2005). As Bernard O'Meara and Stanley Petzall, in their national survey of former and current Vice-Chancellors and panel members, reflect, 'Selection Committee members did not always have experience in senior appointments and brought an overly subjective aspect to the process, appointing the wrong candidate for the wrong reasons on occasions ... Former Vice-Chancellors themselves were highly critical of the processes, and believed they needed to change' (2005: 31). With at least ten universities 'in transition' with new or interim VC appointments scheduled for this year and the next (Tija et al. 2020), the pandemic presents an opportunity to review these nebulous processes and address salary inequities across the sector. However, in seeking to better understand the role of Vice-Chancellors, the question still remains as to what it is they *do*.

As professional hand-shakers, Vice-Chancellors excel at deal-making. ‘The simple act of shaking hands,’ according to Juliana Schroeder et al., ‘can be a powerful gesture that alters negotiation outcomes’ (2014: 23). Vice-Chancellors are indeed well-versed at managing social interactions and dilemmas. As early as 1996, DW Sloper found that ‘a Vice-Chancellor’s work is essentially social, with most time being given to talking to people in relatively structured settings and less formally’ (1996: 205). In the first (and only) national study of Australian Vice-Chancellors’ work patterns, Sloper used diary analysis to audit the professional activities of 19 VCs over an arbitrary two-week period. He found that Vice-Chancellors work on average 68 hours a week, and between 0 and 8 hours on the weekend (1996: 214). Most of their work (67%) is conducted at home, in the office, or ‘elsewhere on campus’, with the most common task recorded as ‘working on papers’ or ‘dealing with correspondence’ (1996: 218), and with frequent social activities spanning formal engagements and regal functions to more informal meetings with ministers, diplomats, and benefactors. Other day-to-day activities include: writing and delivering speeches, penning obituaries for colleagues, opening buildings, fulfilling hospitality obligations including ‘formal entertaining’, and attending plays, concerts, and other cultural events (1996: 225). While Sloper concluded that Vice-Chancellors are ‘busy people’ and that ‘few, if any ... would dare bring a charge of indolence or inactivity’ against this occupational class (1996: 211), what is generally known about Vice-Chancellors, and how they distribute their time, is still largely anecdotal or archetypal. Still, upon departure from their lucrative estates, these plutocrats are honoured for their services to education and immortalised with a giant portrait or marble bust — the latter, depending on the size of the plinth, is often carved with a Latin inscription that translates awkwardly as *every man is the artisan of his future or great leadership from afar*. ‘The plutocracy,’ Standing (2015) writes, ‘are detached from the nation state’. Accordingly, the COVID capital of these lords and their unshakeable hands is negligible since their other capital is grand: a vineyard awaits, regardless of the consequences.

II The Salarial

Below the elite, but still in the comfort and shelter of the upper tower, are the salariat: tenured professors and lecturers with conference funding and travel budgets, library access and offices (sometimes with doors!), parental leave and sick leave and other luxuries once deemed genuine entitlements in this country. The salariat, though shrinking in size, are the spectres of an Australian Dream where one could work 50 hours a week and be compensated for the time. In 2018, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) reported that Australia’s level of income inequality (0.34) is more unequal than the OECD average (0.32), with the income of the wealthiest 20% of Australians growing by 53% in the three-year period from 2013 to 2016. At the same time, the wealth of the country’s poorest 20% decreased by 9% (ACOSS 2018). As the middle class diminishes, the cosy yet jaded salariat might be the last class holding long-term employment security, while the lower echelons, still clinging on, ‘live in increasing fear of falling into the precariat themselves’ (Standing 2015). With outgoing VC Peter Høj’s million-dollar salary in mind, consider the pay range of the salariat at UQ, from a B-level lecturer’s wage, which starts at \$97,000 a year, to a professor’s upper reach of \$185,000 a year (University of Queensland 2020). While the privileged salariat is a broad class, struggling with their own degenerative work conditions, they still enjoy employment security,

income stability, and opportunity for upward mobility. In other words, while tenured lecturers and professors are not necessarily levitating in a state of occupational bliss, they are — at least when compared to their precarious peers — considerably richer, more secure, and, if nothing else, guaranteed a comfortable retirement on the coast.

Furthermore, the salariat, like the plutocracy, enjoy ‘the perks’ of working in academia, though not without sacrifice. They have offices (with picturesque views of the college parks if they’re lucky), bookshelves adorned with framed photos of their kids or dogs, and scattered mementos from home. In summer, they take long lunches, flanked by coffee breaks, and holiday leave when they please. Their first class of the day is flexible, and at staff meetings the last word is usually theirs. Of course, some will eventually aspire to join the plutocracy, selling their souls to the devil, which typically involves cutting the salary budgets for their underlings, always with a crippling awareness that in the real-time strategy game of academia they’re defined by what they are, but also by what they’re not. Pre-COVID, most would have settled for a two-month sabbatical in Europe, though not without some grumbling of jetlag and their Head of School’s pesky request for a progress report (you see, Einstein’s already proven that time is relative). In fact, like the fuzzy-haired genius himself, the greying professoriate is predominantly white and male, and often qualified overseas (Welch 2012).

However, regardless of their ambitions, the salariat’s competitive edge is their distinct combination of knowledge and experience, which issues not only from their upper view but also from their simple closeness and the secrets we imagine they share. The salariat know, for example, how to defend themselves against unaccountable bureaucrats, and worse, those primitive postgrads who threaten to overthrow the tower in mass revolt. Together, they’ve unlocked the passages that lead to promotion, found a magic formula for reducing their teaching loads, and ascended the spiral staircase of A Successful Grant. For those winning the popularity contest, they’re smug and they should be. Even those more pressed down share immunity to unpaid leave and unfair dismissals, and their UniSuper is accumulating compound interest every month. They’re protected from the Dean of Research who stalks the corridors with a pet iguana, mouthing *get cited or suffer, be discoverable or die*. They’re expensive to fire, and although they’re not completely safe from the COVID scalpel, which is more like a sledgehammer, they’re the darlings of any conservative or centre government. Regardless of the salariat’s smug and often lefty intellectualism, their mugachinos are deeply earned. Even the new budget, which is designed to ‘cushion the blow’ for Ordinary Australians, most benefits the comfortable middle class. As Andrew Probyn and Stephanie Borys (2020) report, ‘Workers who earn more than \$90,000 will take home up to \$2,565 extra, with people earning more than \$120,000 receiving the maximum benefit’ from the budget. It seems, then, that the salariat are safe for now — that is, until the second wave of the pandemic hits or till Ian from upstairs orders a faculty restructure.

III The Precariat

In his recent article in *New Labor Forum*, Peter Frase (2013) asks an interesting question: is the precariat a class or a condition? For decades, sessional university staff, in a fateful case of cross-class mutation, have increasingly borne the weight of an expensive upper class. Now, sessionals are being rapidly phased out of universities due to the financial strain of the pandemic and the ill- and

not-so-strategically-timed federal budget cuts. In fact, Universities Australia (2020) estimates that more than 21,000 jobs will have been lost across 39 universities by the end of the year, with more cuts likely to follow in 2021. In the interim, recruitment freezes have entombed the already limited number of opportunities for fixed-term contracts and secondments, and casual budgets for research and teaching have been slashed across-the-board. Tija et al. predict that a conservative 25% cut in casual and research-only staff will result in the loss of 7,500 full-time equivalent positions, which, by headcount, amounts to the loss of 17,500 people from the sector (2020: 1). Considering that university staff have been largely and pointedly deemed ineligible for JobKeeper, it seems that the great convenience of sessional staff is now one that not even the university can afford. In fact, without eligibility for state-based benefits, the precariat have fewer employment protections than most casual workers in Australia. Moreover, by excluding this already vulnerable group from social security, the federal government has indicated that it has no qualms about letting two-thirds of the university sector fall through the cracks. The mass displacement of this ‘non-essential’ group of workers who, in fact, are highly qualified and skilled, is made more ethically fraught by the fact that most casual academics already find themselves on the edge of unsustainable debt: a debt they have been encouraged to build. Indeed, as Royce Kurlmelovs (2020) perceives, the latest budget is designed to shift national debt into mounting ‘personal debt’. The result, as Standing explains, is a dangerous mix of rising anger and anomie, chronic anxiety and deep alienation — the four As — all of which manifest as intergenerational bitterness and resentment. As Andrew Hankinson (2010) complains in *The Guardian*:

Baby boomers had free education, affordable houses, fat pensions, early retirement, and second homes ... We’ve been left with education on the never-never and a property ladder with rotten rungs. Our work ethic is slurred and our salaries are stagnant. Any hope of promotion is paralysed by the comatose grey ceiling clogging every hierarchy. Overtime is unpaid and pensions are miserly. And the financial system which made our parents rich has left us choosing between a crap job or no job. It’s like we’ve been handed the keys to the family castle only to discover the family sold it to Starbucks. And we’re going to have to work there.

The precariat, by all accounts, are the academic equivalent of the peasantry. They are the knights and squires for hire who live ‘without long-term, full-time employment in a single enterprise’ (Standing 2011: 8). They drift from gig to gig, campus to campus, contract to contract, spinning and juggling on the tower’s perimeter, so that they can be available for any post, at a moment’s notice. They want to settle and raise a family, but the squattocracy, with adverse possession, have claimed the best soil and left only infertile land. In this way, the precarious live off ‘the dregs of society’ (8), which in the case of the university’s ever-expanding gig economy means rummaging around the tower for leftovers and scraps: casual lecturing and tutoring (if you’re lucky), marking and more marking (the reality), editing and proofing, referencing others’ papers, digitalising others’ sources, photocopying including stapling and binding (the RA trifecta), compiling indexes and appendices, updating spreadsheets, and organising the conference lunch and drinks for the salariat (‘This will look great on your CV’). As ‘flexi-workers’, the precariat work when work is available, but their work is always unstable, frequently at the behest of others, and often uncompensated. They lease their time and resources to the salariat, only to be dropped from a menial job because they’re too enthusiastic.

Often, they survive on consecutive contracts, with the promise of conversion in reach, only to be replaced one day with a cheaper hire. Granted, the precariat also self-exploit in the hope that the drawbridge to the tower will lower and the Ladder of Opportunity will unfurl. Yet the precariat aren't complete fools. They know there's no future in what they do but, like Kafka's characters, they're motivated by fear and hope: fear of losing what little they have, hope the trade-offs will lead to more. They cling to their career fantasies, knowing that their lived reality is governed by labyrinthine futility and 'cruel optimism' (Bone 2020; Thouaille 2018). They reluctantly subscribe to the idea that academia is 'a game worth playing' because they're driven by passion rather than financial reward (Pianezzi et al. 2019). 'I love my work, but I hate my job' is a recurring mantra (Obaldiston et al. 2019).

And so, as the open market economy continues to grow, and job security continues to diminish, another hidden reality comes to surface. For many, casual employment has become a literal and metaphorical poverty trap rather than a bridge to something better. Professional staff, for example, suffer from change fatigue and relocation burn-out, while early career academics find themselves stuck in dead-end teaching posts or vying for positions that don't exist (Woolston 2020). In a recent analysis of the Australian academic job market, Mewburn found that the market is not only 'massively skewed' to health disciplines, but in 2019, the number of jobs on offer at the lower tiers of the tower were just as scarce as those available up top. As Mewburn reports, 'So far, it's as hard to get an Art lecturer job as it is Vice-Chancellor — in the some 1000 jobs I have coded so far in 2019, both of these are n=1' (@thesiswhisperer). Since an increasing number of 'career casuals' are PhD graduates with skills and experience that rival the salariat and plutocracy, the 'status discord' that the peasantry feel is another source of frustration (Standing 2011: 10). Not only have the precariat been habituated to accept inequality and encouraged to embrace their lack of occupational identity, but they are the first class in history whose level of education is above the level of labour they can expect to attain. In other words, they can't do the jobs they've been trained to do (which is the entire point of education, according to Minister Tehan). Still, the fictitious family of the university expects their wandering sons and daughters to gratefully appreciate what is essentially 'a gift relationship of subservience' (Standing 2011: 17). As Standing explains, '[the precariat] will be told they should be committed, happy, and loyal in jobs that are beneath their qualifications and must repay debts incurred on a promise that their certificates would gain them high-income jobs' (Standing 2011: 175).

Not surprisingly, then, the profound lack of purpose that the precariat experience is often prompted by the shattering of illusions and the exposure of many a manipulative ruse. As a result, the academic underclass struggle with both existential questions (for example, whether their work is meaningful and valued), as well as practical and logistical questions too (for example, whether their contract will see another year). In this respect, though Standing and others point out that the precariat is not a homogeneous group, at the end of the day they are bound by what they share: 'a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes), and precarious (insecure)' (2011: 14). For this reason, one way to think of the precariat is as denizens, since the precariat's inability to foresee their financial or vocational future means that they have 'a more limited range of rights than citizens do' (Standing 2011: 14). Unlike ongoing staff, whose contracts secure their intellectual freedom as well as their ability to advocate for particular work conditions, the precariat aren't entitled to the benefits and privileges of full citizens. They don't always have the right

to vote or equal weight in the voting process; they are less likely to be consulted on changes to workload, curriculum, and assessment; and their freedom of speech is severely impacted by their employment being conditional on being invited back next semester. In other words, they have been converted from citizens into denizens. In the process, they have been reduced to begging for work, pleading for benefits, and floating in a state of self-destructive stupor. They have lost their self-esteem and dignity, and resigned themselves to self-mockery and sardonic humour. They are the first to laugh at their plight, but unlike the salariat and the plutocracy, they are 'unlikely to identify themselves with a glow of pride' (Standing 2011: 22).

The precariat must also work against the myths and misconceptions that persist about the profitability, sustainability, and flexibility of their work. For example, those outside the tower might assume that the underclass are well-compensated for their precarity, especially with rates as high as \$120/hour to deliver a lecture. However, a lecture might take six hours to research, four hours to write, and two hours to record, for which only one hour is billable. Thus, the rate in real terms looks more like \$20/hour, which is 16 cents better than the minimum wage (\$19.84/hour). The precariat, then, as the university's on-demand producers, are paid for their output rather than their time (Stanford 2019). Even by the generous equation that counts a person as 'employed' if they work at least one hour a week, many casuals are unemployed for half the year. For this reason, the precariat can be mid-career or middle-aged, but they are not middle-class. Unlike the 'old' working class, they don't work fixed-hour jobs with stable salaries or established pathways for progression. They don't have a coherent political strategy or agenda. In fact, more often than not, their employers don't know their names; their families don't understand the work they do; and their job titles are vague epithets that don't mean anything (for example, *temporary officer* or *fixed-term*). It's hardly surprising, then, that the precariat now bring their misery home. Thanks to the pandemic and the increasingly aggressive and invasive nature of neoliberalism, gig work is now 'home-based' too. While the remote working options afforded by technology have undoubtedly saved thousands from unemployment, there is a flipside to this shift in work behaviours and patterns. As Jim Stanford (2020) predicts, 'The increase in home work will likely become permanent, even after the immediate health emergency passes. That makes it crucial to "get home work right" [by] providing home workers with appropriate support and protections, and preventing abuse and exploitation as homework becomes more common'.

Naturally, then, the precariat is tired and anxious. Despite the ultimate perk of casual work (the flexibility!), the academic underclass is struggling. In fact, at this point, the only future that looks promising for these clever serfs is the rising popularity of Quit-Lit: a new genre of non-fiction that takes, as its impetus, the impassioned testimonies of ex-academics. As Erin Bartram (2018) explains in her viral blog post, 'The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind', 'The genre is almost universally written by those leaving, not those left behind ... Quit-Lit exists to soothe the person leaving, or provide them with an outlet for their sorrow or rage, or to allow them to make an argument about what needs to change'. Sadly, these narratives of comparative misery confirm that for many Australians, and for many of our brightest and most brilliant, 'the future has turned into a threat rather than a promise, into something that is always within our grasp and yet impossible to get a hold of' (Lems 2017). Indeed, the plight of the precariat is paradoxical. They're underemployed and overemployed at the same time. They produce the wealth of the city, but they have none of it. They're

trapped in transit, and if by some stroke of luck they do arrive, they find themselves knocking on a closed door. The open-door policy in academia is ironic to say the least.

Post-Pandemic

If the sector does not instigate systematic change, the gap between the enriched plutocracy and the entrapped precariat will continue to grow. Indeed, the great explanation for universities' simultaneous victimisation and antagonisation from our betters of the federal government is boiled down to one truism that fails in its simplicity: *we have left the public behind*. But still the question remains, who is this ambiguous *we*? While the Deans and VCs nearing-retirement will flee en masse to their vineyards, those senior managers left behind will be prepped for a haircut. As both research and course administration become ever more centralised in a frenzied bid to cut costs, the central spine of the university will solidify and bear more weight, while the fancy haircut, ears, hands and feet will be lobbed off. And what will become of the precariat — those worker drones trapped in a nightmarish world of mechanistic routine and torture? Like Gregor, we must try and explain what is happening to us. We need to make sense of those 'anxious dreams' and 'confused decisions' through which we somehow became 'a tool of the boss, without brains or backbone' (Kafka 2010: 78). We need to work harder to reverse the metamorphosis. And we need our individual anger, once quiet and containable, to become a shared rage, but one that is organised and productive. As Annika Lems (2017) suggests, 'Rather than succumbing to a confessionary mode of commiseration ... one that has rendered many of us paralysed and speechless for far too long ... perhaps there is something to be gained from writing, thinking, and theorising precariously'. Together we are already developing our voices into a new critical lens that allows us to take precarious work more seriously, and to think and act collectively 'rather than view our (at times desperate) situations in isolated terms' (Lems 2017). Speaking up at work and in public, where it matters, for ourselves and for each other, is our duty as citizens and scholars. As Bartram (2018) wonders, 'What would happen if we acknowledged the losses our discipline suffers every year? What would happen if we actually grieved for those losses?' If we can't, at the very least, recognise the pain and grief of the ones we have lost, and the ones who are left behind, perhaps we all deserve to be banished forever, beyond the tower walls.

Acknowledgements

This article was supported by the Academic Precariat Writing Fund. The authors wish to thank Ben Cooke and Natalie Osborne for their ongoing support of precariously employed academics, as well as the generous donors who have offered assistance and support.

Works cited:

Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) 2018 'Inequality in Australia', www.acoss.org.au/wp-

[content/uploads/2018/07/Inequality-in-Australia-2018_Factsheet.pdf](#) (accessed 1 October 2020)

Barcan, R 2018 'Paying dearly for privilege: Conceptions, experiences, and temporalities of vocation in academic life', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 26.1: 105–21

Bartram, E 2018 'The sublimated grief of the left behind', 11 February, www.erinbartram.com/uncategorized/the-sublimated-grief-of-the-left-behind/ (accessed 6 October 2020)

Bone, KD 2020 'Cruel optimism and precarious employment: The crisis ordinariness of academic work', *Journal of Business Ethics*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-020-04605-2> 1-16 (accessed 12 December 2020)

Bourdieu, P 1998 'The essence of neoliberalism', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December, at www.mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu (accessed 5 October 2020)

Brennan, J and PW Magness 2019 *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Cantrell, K and K Palmer 2019 'The casualties of academia: A response to *The Conversation*', *Overland* (6 May), www.overland.org.au/2019/05/the-casualties-of-academia-a-response-to-the-conversation/ (accessed 1 October 2020)

Duffy, C and N Sas 2020 'Australia's university sector hit by job losses, fall in international students, and federal government reform — so what's next?', *ABC News* (3 October), www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-02/university-sector-new-era-as-international-students-reform-hit/12654828 (accessed 1 October 2020)

Frase, P 2013 'The precariat: A class or a condition?', *New Labor Forum* 22.2: 11–14

Hankinson, A 2010 'How graduates are picking up the tab for their parents' lives', *The Guardian* (31 January), www.theguardian.com/money/2010/jan/31/unemployed-graduates-credit-crunch-andrew-hankinson (accessed 5 October 2020)

Hil, R and K Lyons 2018 'Million-dollar Vice-Chancellor salaries highlight what's wrong with our universities', *ABC News* (5 February), www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-05/vc-salaries-are-a-symptom-of-whats-wrong-with-our-universities/9396322 (accessed 1 October 2020)

Houghton, D 2016 'Opinion: Universities cry poor while Vice-Chancellors make a motza', *The Courier Mail* (16 April), www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/opinion-universities-cry-poor-while-vicechancellors-make-a-motza/news-story/52b8eea62c6a30d9ae5b4faa1426e790 (accessed 1 October 2020)

Kafka, F 2010 *Metamorphosis*, Melbourne: Penguin Books

Kunkler, B 2020 'Australian universities were sick before the pandemic', *Jacobin* (26 April), www.jacobinmag.com/2020/04/australian-universities-coronavirus-austerity-funding-privatization

(accessed 30 September 2020)

Kurmelovs, R 2020 'Heat and pressure', *Raising Hell* 15 (5 October), www.roycekurmelovs.substack.com/p/raising-hell-issue-15-heat-and-pressure (accessed 5 October 2020)

Lems, A 2017 'How to write about precarity from a precarious position', *Allegra Lab* (12 December), www.allegralaboratory.net/how-to-write-about-precarity-from-a-precarious-position/ (accessed 6 October 2020)

Mewburn, I 2019 *Becoming an Academic: How to Get through Grad School and Beyond*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

NTEU 2008 'NTEU Submission to the Senate Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Committee: Inquiry into Academic Freedom' (15 August), www.nteu.org.au/library/view/id/4816 (accessed 29 September 2020)

Obaldiston, N, F Cannizzo, and C Mauri 2019 "I love my work but I hate my job" — early career academic perspective on academic times in Australia', *Time and Society* 28.2: 743–62

O'Meara, B and S Petzall 2005 'Vice Chancellors for the 21st century? A study of contemporary recruitment and selection practices in Australian universities', *Management Recruitment News* 28.6: 18–35

O'Meara, B and S Petzall 2007 'The social characteristics and demographics of Australian Vice-Chancellors, 1960–2000', *Journal of Educational Administration* 45.5: 621–34

Pianezzi, D, H Norreklit, and L Cinquini 2019 'Academia after virtue? An inquiry into the moral character(s) of academics', *Journal of Business Ethics*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-019-04185-w>, 1–18 (accessed December 12 2020)

Probyn, A and S Borys 2020 'Federal budget will bring forward tax cuts as part of coronavirus response', *ABC News* (5 October), www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-05/federal-budget-to-backdate-tax-cuts-to-july/12732534 (accessed 6 October 2020)

Schroeder, J, F Gino, M Norton, M, et al. 2014 'Handshaking promotes cooperative dealmaking', Harvard Business School Working Paper 14–117 (May 30), 1–35, www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/14-117_73032e86-d4d7-4b4b-ad5d-5253e926853a.pdf (accessed 6 October 2020)

Sharma, S 2014 *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, London: Duke University Press

Sloper, DW 1996 'The work patterns of Australian vice-chancellors', *Higher Education* 31: 205–31

Standing, G 2011 *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury

Standing, G 2015 'The precariat and class struggle', *Revista Critica de Ciencias Sociais* 103: 9–24

Stanford, J 2019 'Submission to Victorian Inquiry into On-Demand Work', The Australia Institute: Centre for Future Work (22 February), www.futurework.org.au/submission_to_victoria_inquiry_into_on_demand_work (accessed 30 September 2020)

Stanford, J 2020 'Working from home in a pandemic: Opportunities and risks', The Australia Institute: Centre for Future Work (13 April), www.futurework.org.au/research (accessed 5 October 2020)

Steverman, B and R Pickert 2019 'Here's what it takes to be part of the richest 1 per cent', *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 February), www.smh.com.au/business/markets/here-s-what-it-takes-to-be-part-of-the-richest-1-per-cent-20190206-p50vvr.html (accessed 1 October 2020)

@thesiswhisperer 2020 'So far, it's as hard to get an Art lecturer job as it is Vice-Chancellor — in the some 1000 jobs I have coded so far in 2019, both of these are n=1', *Twitter* (26 August), www.twitter.com/thesiswhisperer/status/1298467152169562112 (accessed 5 October 2020)

Thouaille, MA 2018 'Is pursuing an academic career a form of cruel optimism?', *London School of Economics*, blog (1 March), www.blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/03/01/is-pursuing-an-academic-career-a-form-of-cruel-optimism/ (accessed 6 October 2020)

Tija, T, I Marshman, J Beard, et al. 2020 'Australian university workforce responses to covid-19 pandemic: Reacting to a short-term crisis or planning for longer term challenges?', LH Martin Institute: Fellow Voices, University of Melbourne (25 September), www.melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/fellow-voices/australian-university-workforce-responses-to-covid-19-pandemic (accessed 29 September 2020)

Times Higher Education 2016 'The university workplace survey 2016: Results and analysis' (4 February), www.timeshighereducation.com/features/university-workplace-survey-2016-results-and-analysis (accessed 30 September 2020)

Times Higher Education 2019 'More Australian vice-chancellors earning a\$1 million' (9 September), www.timeshighereducation.com/news/more-australian-vice-chancellors-earning-a1-million (accessed 1 October 2020)

Universities Australia 2020 'Uni viability crucial to national recovery' (7 April), www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/uni-viability-crucial-to-national-recovery/ (accessed 29 September 2020)

University of Melbourne 2009 'Academic freedom of expression policy (MPF1224)', Melbourne Policy Library (3 July), www.policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1224 (accessed 29 September 2020)

University of Queensland 2020 'Academic staff salaries', www.staff.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/human-resources/pay-leave-entitlements/pay-scales/academic (accessed 1 October 2020)

University Rankings 2020 'Top 10 vice-chancellor salary packages AUD\$', www.universityrankings.com.au/top-10-highest-paid-vice-chancellors-australia/ (accessed 29 September 2020)

@VicRicchezzaGeo 2019 'My university spent \$50,000 designing a new logo only to decide that it sucked and they'd just use the one they had. That's a postdoc salary', *Twitter* (7 May), www.twitter.com/VicRicchezzaGeo/status/1125427919705317376 (accessed 1 October 2020)

Welch, A 2012 'Academic salaries, massification, and the rise of an underclass in academia', in P Altbach et al. (eds), *Paying the Professoriate: A Global Comparison of Compensation and Contracts*, New York: Routledge, 61–71

Woolston, C 2020 'Seeking an "exit plan" for leaving academia amid coronavirus worries', *Nature* (6 July), www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02029-6 (accessed October 5 2020)

Zaglas, W 2020 'It didn't take a pandemic to make Australian universities sick', *Campus Review* (13 May), www.campusreview.com.au/2020/05/it-didnt-take-a-pandemic-to-make-australian-universities-sick/ (accessed 1 October 2020)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Cantrell and Kelly Palmer

Dr Kate Cantrell is a Queensland writer and poet who teaches creative writing and English literature at the University of Southern Queensland. Her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in several magazines and journals, including *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Meniscus*, *Hecate*, *The Sunday Mail*, *Queensland Review*, and *Cordite*. She writes regularly for *Times Higher Education*.

Dr Kelly Palmer is a sessional academic in the School of Communication at the Queensland University of Technology. She is a unionist, writer, and editor. Her PhD explores representations and experiences of class on the Gold Coast. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, *SWAMP*, and *Rex*.

URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-10-no-2-dec-2020/jenga-kafka-and-triumph-academic-capitalism>

[Privacy policy](#) [Copyright](#)

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973