



Academic Freedom and the Role of the Academic: Resistance, Solidarity, and the Politics of Knowledge

The Feminist Collective¹

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In a world of intensifying crises—marked by concerted crackdowns on freedom of speech and protest (inter)nationally, the suppression of non-binary, gender nonconforming and trans rights, as well as the erasure of indigenous struggles against settler colonial land dispossession, imperialist wars and genocides—the role of the university cannot be understood as neutral or detached in times of immense suffering. These conditions shape our classrooms, our public engagements, our research, and they go to the heart of education, knowledge, and democratic life.

The university has since its inception been imagined as a space in which political and social struggles are confronted, engaged and thought through, rather than simply disavowed. As Said (1994) reminds us, when academics grow silent and institutions withdraw from critical engagement with political realities, they risk becoming instruments of dominant forms of power. At stake is the defence of the university as a site of critical inquiry, reflection, and dissent. We take this warning seriously, not as a call to restore a singular figure of the ‘public intellectual’, but as a collective responsibility that is an imperative of academic work itself.

There is no such position as academic neutrality. The failure to critique the status quo is a political act of complicity in its inequalities, its injustices, and exclusions. As academics and educators, we acknowledge the urgency of engaging with such struggles, concerns, and developments and their situatedness within broader structural forms of power (misogyny, white supremacy, coloniality, neoliberal fascism, and capitalist enclosure), even if they are continuously shaped as contentious and politically charged. We must teach, research, and speak publicly about critical and justice-oriented thinking in the current moment for global epistemic justice and the cultivation of resistance, solidarity, hope, and civic courage (Butler 2022). This is a call to justice for all, which must begin by attending to the question of knowledge

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production—Who makes it? What counts as knowledge? Who owns it? Who has access to it? Who is allowed to produce it? Who is harmed by its deliberate occlusion and silencing? And how can academics challenge the monopolistic manipulation of algorithms that is creating a grotesque simulacrum of openly accessible knowledge whilst privileging some sources and excluding others? These are questions that go to the heart of the institution of the university and therefore ought to be core sites of concern and politicisation by all those who claim the roles of academics, researchers, and educators today.

We write this manifesto in the collective ‘we’, a coalitional subjectivity that holds together our interconnected struggles as we dare to name and imagine a manifesto for just arrangements. Our togetherness comes amid ruptures caused by the demise of the hopes and aspirations that only a few years ago declared the need for “a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future” (UNESCO 2021). Our language works with and against this rupture as we bring our diverse voices working with the textured language that cuts across the poetic, prosaic, political, creative, aesthetic, and didactic. We have not sought to smoothen our textured language. Rather, we crafted this *language*d struggle to respond to this historical moment and the contradictions and harms it carries for all those committed to human rights and fairer societies.

We write about knowledge production as a key role for academics and educators while being mindful of the neoliberal enterprise of decolonial buzzwords that insist on reproducing the ‘Except for Palestine’ mantra. Commenting on this, the following poem identifies the contours of this struggle:

Decolonial Thought Plus.

In this hellscape of living,
we are instructed.
not to name the killers,
not to mention the killing,
and not to look too closely.
at the manufacturing of death.
Instead, we are disciplined.
into hygiene —.
language scrubbed sterile,
sounding ‘academic enough’,
standing safely,
at the centre of the abyss.
It then gets stamped,
approved by.
the editors of silence,
before it’s sold back to us.
as decolonial thought plus.

Poem by Khawla Badwan (Khawla in Grief).

The poem raises many of the concerns that affect not only knowledge production in academia but also the hierarchy of voice, the legitimacy of language, the censorship of struggles, and the erasure of identities and struggles. All of these issues affect research, knowledge exchange, public engagement, academic debate, as well as classroom pedagogic values and practices.

In increasingly polarised academic and political climates, many of us find ourselves either silenced or practicing forms of self-censorship—conscious or unconscious—as contemporary academic freedom policies and practices within institutions leave us more precarious and exposed within the already existing (gendered and racialised) inequalities of the university. This risk is more acute for those who speak from, or stand in solidarity with, positions that are marginalised or politicised: trans and non-binary identities; critiques of settler-colonialism and racial capitalism; and demands for Palestinian liberation. At stake here is not only the role of the academic, but the broader question of the intellectual's place in public life: what is the responsibility, or even the possibility, of the intellectual in responding to how the world develops.

The point is not simply to interpret the world but to change it. The duty to question demands a challenge to assumptions and forms of thinking which label and dehumanise. It requires a refusal to accept the world as it is and instead to explore ways of making a better one, whether through addressing the solutions to the social and technological problems—from refugees to water shortages—stemming from an anthropogenically generated climate crisis, or tackling poverty, ill health, or injustice.

Academics are not just employees of this and that institution, we have responsibilities as educators and scholars to ensure our intellectual work does something meaningful in the world.

Academic Freedom? Right or Responsibility?

Academic freedom, according to (UNESCO 2021), is essential to fostering critical thinking (see also Giroux 2013). It entails the freedom to teach, to research and to publish, to engage in trades union activity, and to criticise one's institution or one's government without fear of retribution. Academics also have rights to freedom of speech, which means the right to express opinions on subjects that lie outside our areas of expertise. Freedom of speech comes with a responsibility not to infringe on the rights or freedoms of others; *academic freedom with integrity* implies a responsibility to use this freedom to question, to speak truth to power, and to imagine and work towards better worlds. This is part of a broader set of responsibilities for academics to invest in the societies and communities that have invested in us, and to use our research and platforms with integrity, compassion, and care.

We call upon all in academia to use their platforms and voices, and to channel their collective energies into a moral commitment to justice. We especially call upon all academics who write about justice to turn their words into actions. It is time for us all to 'walk our talk'. Academics, feminists, indigenous people, and those who are marginalised and excluded within and beyond the academy, are already organising

In coming-together and practicing our own capacity to develop new “habits of assembly” (Callahan 2019, p. 376; Harney and Moten 2021, p. 103) we (re)learned how everything is political. Every act, every statement, and every assumption, every action and interaction reflects and is refracted through existing power relationships. Accepting the status quo and failing to challenge structures of oppression may be done silently. Nonetheless, this silence is every bit as political a form of behaviour as speaking out against those same structures. We need to challenge an insidious discourse which presents silence as non-political and resistance as disruptive. We need to reclaim the term ‘academic freedom’ from those who use it only in order to stifle its actual expression. That is why we have created this manifesto; that is why we propose not just a politics of *calling out*, but to hold open a space through this text for the possibility of *calling in* (cf. Herbison and Podosky 2024). If these words resonate with you, please join us.

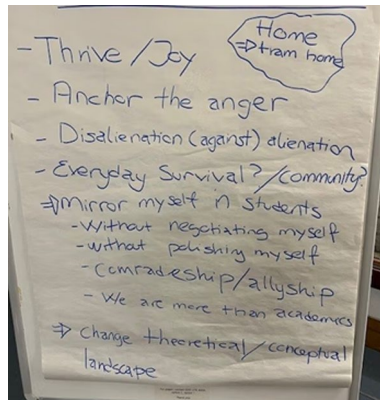
Struggle, Organisation, and Solidarity

Speaking truth to power is made safer and more bearable when it is a collective act—when we stand together in solidarity across difference to confront the entrenched systems of patriarchy, racial capitalism, and border carcerality that shape our lives, we stand stronger and more powerfully (Wilson Gilmore 2022). Such solidarity requires an ongoing commitment to connection and understanding—recognising how struggles across the Americas, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Europe are neither isolated nor exceptional, but deeply entangled through shared histories of colonialism, extraction, militarisation, and dispossession. Organising and rallying to amplify each other’s voices, and to protect one another from attacks by our own institutions, becomes essential when confronting the conditions that foreclose the possibility of global justice.

Practices of collective organisation are best cultivated through spaces of connection, discussion, and collective learning (e.g. workshops, assemblies, networks), where difference is not flattened but held as a source of political strength and potentiality. Immense freedom and support can be gained in coming together to think, critique, and question the status quo, while continuing to refuse complicity in the violence(s) carried out in our name. Education, critical and relational modes of pedagogic relationship building, remain the last site of revolution, or the memory of what it might mean at least.

As we come together on the challenges we face, and the responsibilities we must reclaim, we are reminded that critical and collective forms of education begin with critique, move toward refusal of injustice, and culminate in the development of ideas, practices, techniques, and powers to re-world together, and across borders.

We ask, once more as an invitation to be together anew: How do we imagine the university could be? If we had academic freedom, what would it look like? What would we do? And how would we feel?



Academic Freedom as Reparative Practice: A Call to Action

This manifesto is anchored in the present as a reparative intervention. It refuses future-speak that only serves to postpone justice while harm in the present persists. By acting now in the present, we can work to create inclusive, equitable and just relationships and spaces within the classroom, in our institutions, and in our practices of knowledge production.

How?

By treating knowledge as political.

We reject neutrality when it conceals power, exclusion, and institutional violence.

By organising our resistance collectively.

Resistance is not individual dissent, but relational work developed alongside marginalised communities.

By practising care as a form of justice.

Attending to affects as well as shared and unique forms of vulnerability and precarity is integral to ethical academic practice.

By transforming classrooms into sites of ethical struggle.

We teach our students as well as ourselves that the desire for comfort cannot replace responsibility. Discomfort is a condition of critical learning.

By naming institutional harm and beginning to demand repair.

Our universities must confront their colonial and exclusionary legacies and assume civic responsibility for the harms they produce. Doing so ought not to be considered by our employers as conduct bringing our universities into disrepute but the courage to face our responsibilities.

By reclaiming academic values and standards publicly.

Knowledge must serve justice, amplify marginalised voices, and resist silencing. Knowledge that hides behind narratives of neutrality and objectivity reproduces power and maintains the status quo.

This manifesto is not a conclusion but an opening. We call on academics, students, and institutions to continue connecting, sharing, organising, and acting together. To extend this work across disciplines, classrooms, and institutional spaces. To refuse isolation and cultivate solidarity. To insist that the university remains accountable in a moment when humanity stands at a crossroads.

Academic freedom is not a shield. It is a responsibility.

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