The university as an infinite game

Revitalising activism in the academy

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We offer here a metaphor of the university as an 'infinite game' in which we bring to life insight, imagination, and radical inclusion; and resist the 'finite games' that can lead us astray. We suggest that keeping the infinite game alive within universities is a much-needed form of academic activism. We offer four vignettes that explore this further: our responsibility to be 'critic and conscience of society' and how that responsibility must also turn inwards onto our own institution, the dilemmas of being a woman with leadership responsibilities in an institution that proudly shows off its 'top girls', the opportunities we have as teachers to 'teach the university' and be taught by our students, and the contradictions we face as activist scholars in our relentlessly audited research personas. We draw on the infinite/finite game metaphor, our own affective experiences as tenured academics, and feminist critiques.

Keywords: neoliberal university, infinite game, activism, feminism, academic identities, gender, resistance, New Zealand, STARs, PBRF

We start with a proposal: that in the university, as in life, there are two kinds of games. One is the infinite game, the purpose of which is to keep the game in play and invite others in; the other is finite games, in which the purpose is to win (Carse, 1986; Harré, in press). The infinite game is a symbol of our potential as people living together to be open and inclusive, and to promote the life, and growth, that helps us flourish as individuals and communities. This game imagines a world in which our heartfelt, personal response to life, our deep listening to others (especially those who don't fit in), and our careful observations and thought about the social, natural and physical world come together to create and recreate our institutions. As Carse claimed, 'there is but one infinite game' (p. 149). Thus, insofar as the infinite game is played within the academy, it seeps into, strengthens, and can draw strength from infinite play in other sites.

The other kind of game, finite games, is bound by rules that must be followed until a winner is declared. Finite games tend to replicate, like McDonalds' franchises or 'evidence-based' social programs. You must be selected to play and, if you lose, you are knocked out or have to play the round again. Finite games can be useful, indeed are essential, to organise ourselves and to train people for valuable roles. And they can promote self-development. But if they are taken too seriously, they render the infinite game obscure and the community spellbound – unable to articulate their sense that the current rules are misaligned, harmful or a distraction from what really matters.

For us, activism in the academy springs from and serves the infinite game: it is action beyond the rules that calls us to take our intuitions, lived experience and observations of injustice and exclusion seriously. Academic activism aims to document, subvert and ultimately rewrite the rules of the finite games we currently live by, so that they make more sense to us as people seeking to give of our best to an endeavour ('the university') that we cannot help but believe in. In what follows, and with the desire to

provide resources for revitalising activism in the academy, we explore the possibilities and complexities of academic activism through four vignettes. Each vignette is written by one of the four authors. We are all tenured academics, and therefore write from this perspective. Each vignette takes up a defining aspect of the academic role: our responsibility to be critic and conscience of society and how that responsibility must also turn inwards onto our own institutions (Barbara); the dilemmas for infinite play of being a woman with leadership responsibilities in an institution that proudly shows off its 'top girls' (Kirsten); the opportunities we have as teachers to 'teach the university' and be taught by our students (Sean); and the contradictions we face as activist scholars in our relentlessly audited research personas (Niki). Each account draws on the infinite/finite game metaphor, as well as the 'stubborn particulars' (Cherry, 1995) of our own experiences.

As readers may notice, the first two of our vignettes in particular draw heavily on feminist critiques. In our view, feminism – with its century-long tradition of observing the exclusions and violence of academic structures and life – offers an exemplary critical position in the 'neoliberal' academy. The neoliberal academy is one in which competitive finite games that pit individuals against each other underpin university life. The university is modelled on the free market, selling the commodities of knowledge and qualifications to students and other consumers, and striving for efficiency and excellence in the rush to win its own race against peer institutions (see Giroux, 2014; Newfield, 2016; Readings, 1996; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

The feminist position has been – and continues to be – a response to how the burden of the often-invisible precarious (Adsit *et al.*, 2016; Gill, 2010) and emotional labour (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) of the neoliberal academy is borne disproportionally by women, both academic and professional. Critics of the neoliberal academy – such as us – often adopt a critical 'positionality' (Rose, 1997) sympathetic to that burden: the feminist critique resonates with the 'minor' or 'cramped' position of activists in the academy (Colebrook, 2015, after Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). More recent feminist commentaries – drawing on the work of new materialism (see, for example, Haraway 1997; Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013) – offer new critical insights into the politics of the affective body (Grosz, 1994; Ahmed, 2014) that works and suffers in the academy. Feminist critiques, then, both echo and inform the infinite game metaphor, asking us to take account of that which sits outside the dominant finite games of the university: the body, the academic worker whose voice

is not welcomed, the relations between us. We now offer our vignettes, after which we present some concluding thoughts on activism within the academy.

Critic and conscience of the university: Some game dispositions

In Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ), universities are required to be 'critic and conscience of society'. The injunction entered the legal definition of a university in 1990, with an amendment to the recently passed 1989 Education Act. The then left-wing Fourth Labour Government had been challenged in the courts and on the campuses over the terms of its 1989 Act, many of which were seen to encroach on the autonomy of universities. Ironically, this was a government bursting with university-educated liberals. Few, however, were economically savvy and, soon after coming to power, they found themselves in the divisive grip of 'Rogernomics' fever with its deranged commitment to the supremacy of the market. Rogernomics, named after the then Minister of Finance Roger Douglas who drove the core changes (Kelsey, 1995), led to the destruction of the prevailing social democratic consensus in favour of neoliberalism's brutally swift advent, and institutions of higher learning were not spared.

Perhaps the left-leaning authors of the Act suffered a moment of remorse, their consciences frissoned by thoughts of how history might judge them? Whatever the reason, less than a year after the Act's passing, Labour produced an Amendment, which laid out several clauses with respect to matters of autonomy for post-compulsory education institutions: namely a clause guaranteeing academic freedom to all such institutions and another requiring universities alone to 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society' (1989 Education Act, §162[4]). The function contrasts with the more general grounds of academic freedom in that it specifies an active – and critical – role for the university, and its member academics, towards society as a whole.

The critic and conscience function may be unique to NZ legislation, but it's analogous with the widely recognised – and often esteemed – role of public intellectual. This position can be occupied by academics and non-academics alike: public intellectuals speak up on matters vital to past, present and future public goods – to, in words attributed to Stuart Hall, 'contest the growing inhumanity of the world' (Roman, 2015, p. 186). We might observe that the role of public intellectual seems more crucial than ever in our rapidly emerging post-truth era. We might also observe that the role does not have an

obviously immediate application to the site that employs the intellectual. Indeed, the very label 'public' suggests critical attention – or speaking truth to power – towards the wider society, the 'real world,' rather than towards the rarified and privileged 'private' of the ivory tower.

In contrast, and in keeping with the unbounded nature of the infinite game in which all play feeds into all other play, the responsibility to be critic and conscience must be taken up inside the university as well as outside. Critical thought is fundamental to who we are as academics: 'In its essence,' says Edward Saïd, 'the intellectual life … is about the freedom to be critical' (1991, p. 11). While we have strenuously fought to protect a degree of apartness between our universities and their wider society, these 'great civil institutions … that act as a bulwark between the individual and the state' (Nixon, 2016, p. 170) are also in and of our societies. The issue of growing inhumanity is at work inside them too, in the committee rooms and the reward structures, in the internal news bulletins peppering our email in-boxes, in our daily work with colleagues and students – like a slow 'tide of change we [can] not quite see' (Petersen & Davies, 2010, p. 99).

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Writing of the complex and conflicted place of women in the contemporary academy, feminist philosophers Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret and others (2014) remind us that we academics are 'non-innocent' players in the university. We are not victims but, surely, we are compromised. The university in which we work, of which we may be critical, is also our employer. Many of us are paid well (compared to the average wage at least); we do work that we profess to love; we reap reward and esteem that gratifies us and others. And, divisively, that precious work is more often now done by many under conditions that are increasingly precarious (Gill, 2010).

And yet, these compromising conditions must not shut us up. As critics and consciences, we are invited – obliged even – to do activism on ourselves. We must call out the finite plays that pull us apart from ourselves and each other and, as Stengers and colleagues offer, become the 'woman who makes a fuss,' who doesn't 'accept, at least not completely, the place that has been made for [her] and the silence that goes with it' (2014, p. 152). The socially unacceptable act of making a fuss, of being a 'damned nuisance' (ibid.), contrasts sharply with that of being the good girl, with playing the finite game of 'career'

(as Kirsten will discuss). Indeed, the career game earns a damning indictment from the writing of an early feminist critic of the academy:

> Earn your living soberly, not a penny more than necessary, [Virginia Woolf] had written, or else you will be trapped in this process that fabricates prostitutes defined by the competition for prestige, honours, and the devouring quest for a power that is always derisory, never sufficient. (Stengers *et al*., 2014, p. 150)

As Woolf argued, the compromises entailed in 'having a career' risk leaving the creeping inhumanity of our institutions unfought.

But what does it look like to be an activist who makes a fuss in those committee rooms, or in response to the incessantly bragging internal news bulletins, or in our daily work with colleagues and students? It can mean flying in the face of carefully crafted 'progressive' policies and procedures: it often looks ungrateful and unpretty. And petty. It's hard to explain because you are thinking and talking from a different place – you sound a bit crazy. In considering the example of the proliferating forms of academic management speak that produce 'unanalysable nonsense,' Marilyn Strathern points out that 'part of the problem is how to complain, how to criticise good practice [her example of such speak] and still appear moral, credible, and public spirited, and thus offer a critique that is edifying' (2006, p. 199). Women who make a fuss are unedifying: making a fuss makes everyone uncomfortable.

Given our likely reluctances toward actually being a damned nuisance, I have proposals toward the necessary game dispositions. These proposals arise from considering my own struggles as a relatively senior academic who is new and somewhat marginal in a (not unusually) troubled faculty of education and who finds herself constantly faced by seemingly small ethical dilemmas produced within that slow tide of change. In being a 'woman who makes a fuss' (even if you're a man), you will need courage – not just to think critically (after all, as Dan Barney points out [2010], that's what we are paid to do) but to make a fuss. You will need, somehow, to embrace struggle, at least some of the time. But also, seek to eschew antagonism and, instead, to foster compassion for our mutually frail humanity. More, express gratitude, hold out hope, be quick to find humour, cultivate indifference to convention and a willingness for insubordination. And, above all, seek

solidarity: find 'alternative ways of working together, being together, and thinking together' (Nixon, 2016, p. 169), although this in turn requires daily refusals in order to give oneself over to the nourishing and necessary fulfilments of the 'time of friendship' (p. 170). In other words, you will need to recognise the university's finite games – such as 'the career' – for what they are, devices that can and must be played with, in an effort to bring alive the infinite spaces that lie between.

'Top Girls' in the game: Resisting our role as 'subjects of capacity'

Feelings matter in the university (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015). These feelings can be overwhelming, and they can have a direct impact on the ability of all 'players' to resist, as Barbara has suggested, finite games such as career progression. These finite games often serve to distract us from all that initially attracted us to the academy as a place of radical possibility. I write this piece as a relatively new academic, a woman perceived as a 'top girl,' who has found herself in a senior service role in my faculty and who is caught in a daily struggle with her emotions. Right now, I am in a state of high anxiety. I have not organised the courses I will be teaching this semester, which upsets me because I feel I have already let my students down, and I haven't even met them yet. I have a meeting to chair this afternoon. I have prepared for it meticulously, and yet I feel utterly unprepared– there is always another challenge, conflict, or colleague's pressing concern around the corner. And there is always the judgement, doled out liberally in certain contexts, that the hard work has just not been done. I have already had two meetings scheduled this morning in a time I blocked out for writing. I feel that I am failing as an academic: I find myself struggling to keep up with the minutiae of the finite games into which I am thrown, while knowing well that I should actually be devoting myself to the more noble 'games' of inspired teaching and research. I do not write this for sympathy or as a call for help. I will walk out my office door, present myself to the world, and likely even enjoy it. But, at the same time, I feel like a pawn waiting to be moved to another precarious position. I feel like I am physically bearing the weight of expectation and failure on my incessantly emotionally and intellectually labouring body, and in this game I cannot control, at any given moment I could be pitted against:

a. Colleagues.

b. Invisible or visible forces that dictate my conditions of existence in academia.

c. The invisible or visible agendas of the university, individuals, or both.

d. Looming deadlines from the university or me (in the form of papers that demand attention), or both.

e. All of the above.

One of my research interests is gendered academic 'career' trajectories. I have interviewed 30 senior academic women over the past three years (see Locke, 2015; 2016; 2017; Locke & Wright 2017), many of whom echoed my feelings of psychological precarity, inadequacy, failure, anxiety and doubt. Many of them spoke of being underestimated or ignored by colleagues, and subject to the casual prejudices of those in power, as they struggled to establish themselves in overwhelmingly patriarchal working environments. They articulated a strong desire to 'rise above' this adversity, to strive to prove they were credible academics. Yet it feels like I am experiencing something quite different to these women. I am not underestimated when it comes to my academic labour. Strangely, I feel overestimated. I am expected always to say yes to a request for my emotional, physical or intellectual labour. Want to apply for an external grant? What?! Want to, you say? I have to. It has already been gently explained to me that this is a weak point in my CV (and, as Niki points out later, this judgement of my 'research' carries great institutional and emotional weight). Want to be part of this 'extremely' important initiative? Of course. The 'request' is rhetorical. Edit this, say that, do this? Yes, no problem. It may be late though? Ok, I'll try my hardest. So, I am bombarded by 'offers' to participate in finite games. And what is more, when I fail in these games (the grant application is unsuccessful; the initiative never gets off the ground), my work vanishes. In the university of finite play, failure is failure. 'It's only the endings that matter in the neoliberal university,' as Linda Henderson, Eileen Hoonan and Sarah Loch (2016) point out in their discussion of the 'academicwritingmachine'. And so, I find myself running to play games, each of which seems essential at the time, and many of which I end up losing. I can feel my body tensing, accelerating and slumping in an endless cycle of tension, anxiety and stress. The spring in my step that I had imagined would accompany becoming a tenured academic is heavy and elusive.

So what is going on? Yes, some women are now noticed rather than ignored, but the result is the same: to 'get ahead,' we are inculcated into constant and perpetual self-improvement in the service of the institution's finite games. We, the young women of academia, are framed as 'subjects of capacity,' as Angela McRobbie (2007, p. 718) puts it. McRobbie focuses on the contemporary

post-feminist sexual contract, which positions young women as subjects of capacity par excellence in late capitalist societies. These 'top girls' provide seductive images of success in a post-feminist guise of supposed gender equality. In academia, 'top girls' are everywhere – on posters, in websites, on prize lists, in the media. Universities, keen to promote themselves as winners of the 'equity game,' produce endless glossy brochures and magazines depicting smiling young women (preferably holding a microscope, but a stethoscope will do). Yet McRobbie warns, these images of 'success' obscure the ongoing presence of hegemonic masculinities. Notably, even within a watered down 'equity game' in which numbers of women equal success, universities are not, in fact, winning, as shown by the declining number of women in senior academic positions (Locke, 2016). There may be an abundance of early career 'top girls' in universities, but somehow they get stuck there, seduced into finite games that exhaust their bodies and imagination and preclude their escape by holding them captive. As a result, their (our!) self-exploitation in the workplace only ends up strengthening gender inequalities. They (we) become an inexhaustible resource to the finite games of competition and individualism that uphold the patriarchal university.

So, what is academic activism in this light? How can young women who are positioned as 'subjects of capacity' (McRobbie, 2007) resist this positioning and be supported to do so? How can top girls be invited into, and expand, the infinite spaces between games? We can embrace the simple, but radical, act of daring to say 'no' and living with the fear that brings – that we will now lose our colleagues' approval and slip into invisibility. Also, we must voice what this positioning costs, as I am doing here, at departmental and faculty meetings, and even (imagine it!) at the award ceremonies we attend as winners. In working on this piece with self-proclaimed 'old girls,' Barbara and Niki, I also realise that we can turn to them, in the hope that they will stand with us to 'make a fuss.' As relative newcomers, we may not have the institutional knowledge or capacity for recklessness and recovery that is available to those who have seen these games play out time and time again. In a performative sense in the context of writing this piece, the 'old girls' have allowed me, the relatively younger new girl, the space and time to think through my subjective 'top girl' positioning alongside them. The relationships nurtured in this collaborative writing piece are not defined by being strategic but instead outline a deeply ethical and caring mode of academic friendship that is found in and through the collective. It reminds me to try, as I rush from one meeting to the next, to remember

why we are here: it is not to further our careers or even to 'contribute' to the university; it is, grandiose as it may sound, to keep alive that which expands our corner of the 'infinite game.'

Teach the university: Nudging the university towards infinite possibilities

The university is a place of possibilities. As an institution founded on critique (Kant, 1992; see Derrida, 2004) with, at least in NZ, a mandated role of 'critic and conscience,' it is, or should be, a place at which the rules of play are never fully fixed. I, as an academic who teaches other academics how to teach, feel this openness most readily in my teaching. That is, I feel compelled to 'teach the university' (J.J. Williams, 2008): not just to impart knowledge about it, but to also impart knowledge to it.

I teach the university through alerting students to the ways in which the social, institutional and disciplinary context in which they are studying shapes what and how they study by, in particular, embodying certain values about learning and life. The values that the neoliberal academy embodies are mostly finite. For example, its audit-driven fixation on 'efficiency' and the 'transparency' of measureable outcomes (see Strathern, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2000) narrow its view from the broad values of imagination, possibility and inclusion that characterise the infinite game to much narrower values that enable it to 'win' the finite games at hand.

A teaching-related example of these finite values in play is the 'constructive alignment' model of course design that is often an institutional requirement. Courses are designed backwards from pre-determined learning outcomes (Biggs, 1999); dominant modes of assessment and evaluation are summative (e.g. tests, essays, exams, etc.; student evaluations of teaching); the model of academic writing is point-first (J.M. Williams, 1981), which involves the writer stating their thesis (singular) at the beginning of an essay, article or chapter. When I alert students to such elements in class, I want us to problematise them, or to question what values they keep in play. I agree with Michel Foucault that problematisation denaturalises and historicises an 'event,' such that its 'polymorphism' – its selection from a matrix of possibilities – becomes apparent (Foucault, 1991, p. 77). For example, not only is the point-first model just one of many ways to write an academic essay (it isn't suited to all readers, topics or modes of argument), but also it is often taken as a model because it is easier – or more 'efficient' – for teachers to read and grade. (The same goes for the academic article and its readers and reviewers, as

Niki will touch on.) The process of eventualisation, in this case, offers the possibility for point-last or even point-less essays (see Sturm, 2012). It is thus emancipatory, a potential precursor to activism if you will, as it enables us, as Gert Biesta (2008, p. 175) puts it, 'to show – and in a sense, through experimentation and action, actually prove – that things can be different, that the way in which things are is only one, limited possibility.'

And this process need not only be cognitive, it can also be affective, in accordance with Williams' (2008, p. 37) suggestion to 'have students look at their own campuses – at the ground beneath their feet' – and to use, as he puts it, 'innovative methods, beyond the ones we are familiar with' to document that process. For example, I take my class outside the classroom to document the psychogeography of the university. In one experiment, we explore the palimpsestic nature of the historical place that is the University of Auckland campus. We look for signs of its history as a pā (a Māori fortified settlement), a barracks (Albert Barracks) and a campus (the then University of New Zealand), which speaks to the links between the military, management and education (see Hoskin, Macve & Stone, 2006; Hoskin & Macve, 1986), but also of the connection between settlement (or invasion) and education. In another experiment, we map the flow of people through the lobby of the University's iconic Business School building to understand how it embodies the learning space of the university and how our presence there to document the space alters it. In such critical-creative experiments, students play with the value system of the university. They may then, in their own teaching, teach the university itself, that is, transform it in the name of what they value.

So I am talking here about activism as an underground current that slowly shifts the rules of the academic game. It is a turn to creativity and possibility, a taking of the university at its word: if universities are sites of critique and conscientisation, then here I am making it so 'at home.' Are you really going to stop me?

Research: A perfect contradiction for the academic activist

I have the task of going to the heart of the beast: research. Research is the most prestigious finite game played by and at universities, and it is also, in many ways, the game that most stymies academic activism. 'Excellence' is its yard-stick (Moore *et al.*, 2017), a marker that identifies winners and losers without needing to demonstrate any value beyond the ranking itself (Readings, 1996). Research

also lies at the core of our identities as academics, where it richly interweaves infinite and finite play. Here we are, as authors of this paper, producing a research output that will, with a bit of luck, further our careers (a finite move, as Barbara pointed out); while, at the same time, we are engaging in a challenging, creative act that advocates for open-mindedness and inclusion within the academy (an infinite move). The fact that we can appear to play both games at once presents us, as academic activists, with a perfect contradiction: successful activism is, in theory, entirely compatible with being an 'excellent' researcher and thus a successful academic. No, it is more than that. We actually suspect – a suspicion that serves the status-quo perfectly – that to be a successful academic activist, one must be a successful researcher.

Our suspicion is, of course, unfounded: 'research' as defined by our universities is a particular social product, a finite game with rules and boundaries that limits the vision of players (see Harré, In press). Despite the rhetoric that originality and innovation are rewarded, in practice the research game limits our vision not only by constraining what counts as research, but also by presenting research as the only real game in town, thus making 'everything else' secondary (including many of the tasks bequeathed to 'top girls,' such as Kirsten). To be good activists, we must, to use the words of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, temper our worship of, and desire to join, the 'tiny band of extraordinary people' who articulate grand visions for alternative social practices (and are thus both proclaimed winners by the status quo and admired by its critics) and instead accept, if not embrace, the 'indignities' that accompany resistance (Unger, 2004, p. 31). So what does this mean in practice? Here I will give two examples. The first concerns a possible response to the rules of the research game within our research roles, and the second concerns an insistence that our research roles are not all that matters.

In NZ, the rules of the research game were hardened in 2003 when the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) was introduced. The official purpose of the PBRF is to 'ensure that excellent research in the tertiary sector is encouraged and rewarded' (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016). Every six years, each academic must produce a performance portfolio in which we declare our research outputs and accolades, in other words our wins. The most important wins, as academic readers will know, are articles in top peer-reviewed journals cited by other academics; outputs that are not peer-reviewed are not considered 'quality assured' and so count for much less. Those top wins are closely followed by research

grants, especially the highly competitive ones. We must also declare what portion of our key outputs is ours. For example, we may claim that the original idea for the research is 70% ours, we did 85% of the analysis and 30% of the final writing. The final result of the PBRF process is the award of an A, B, C or a R grade, the latter meaning you are not considered research active. These individual rankings are then collated at the institutional level to allocate a pre-determined pool of money.

Talk of PBRF is continually in the air at our university and being a PBRF 'A' is shorthand for being a respected researcher. As Barbara Grant and Vivienne Elizabeth's (2014) study of 15 academic women discovered, PBRF engenders highly individualised and isolating emotions such as pride and shame. Following on from this, as they also point out, there is a notable absence of collective resistance (or activism) in relation to the PBRF. This lack of resistance makes sense if we, as potential activists, continue to harbour the belief that if we were any 'good' (as academic activists) we too would be an A. (And, by extension, if we are an A, we are rightfully superior to people with lower grades!) I do not have room here for a detailed critique of why a PBRF A is not equivalent to worthwhile research, let alone research that challenges the status quo, but one starting point is its core assumption that 'quality' can not only be best assessed by academic peers, but only assessed by academic peers.

So, for NZ academics, a possible response to the research rules (i.e. PBRF) within our research roles might include doing research that is not 'quality assured.' For example, I, a relative 'old girl,' who has become increasingly frustrated with research on social issues that seems to make very little social contribution, wrote a book that was published through my department, and so not 'quality assured.' It was based on empirical research in psychology, aimed at social justice and environmental advocates, and has resulted in well over 100 invited talks and many more conversations with people (in numerous sectors) working for social change (Harré, 2011). It is by far my most important research contribution to date, but it will do little to boost my PBRF grade in the next round. This is an indignity, and if my grade is lower than I hope, I will feel that indignity to my core, like a lead weight nestled inside. I will, however, hold the resulting shame and doubt close, private; because as a 'senior academic' I should be at the top of my (their) game. But, I also look on that book as a move motivated by infinite values as I understand them, and do not, ever, regret the time and energy it has taken. When I am in the spaces my book has opened up – spaces filled with people in the real world

who are looking for ways to create positive change, I feel light, engaged, responsive, free, and as if I am playing a game in which I belong.

Insisting that our research roles are not all that matters is the second play that can help us be activists despite the research game's sticky hold. 'Making a fuss' as Barbara has described, even as it carries the double whammy of drawing us away from research and positioning us as churlish and ungrateful of supposedly 'progressive' moves within the institution, and teaching to the university as Sean has discussed are two obvious examples. We can also help our students recognise the games being played in society at large and invite them to resist and reconfigure these, participate in networks for change within the academy, take community engagement seriously, and refuse to let 'top girls' carry so much more than their share of the institutional work. These moves are the life force that gives our scholarly critiques meaning and carries them through the system. To speak truth to power, through papers such as this, and then put almost all our energy into that which will make us powerful is an incoherent and unpersuasive play.

Finally, while I agree with Sean there are indeed possibilities in taking the university at its word and treating it as a space open to critique and possibility, I find it useful, when I am thrown by yet another decision that preserves the status quo, to remind myself that universities are still patriarchal, competitive and highly individualistic institutions, in which those with the greatest capacity to turn away from the collective are those who win most rapidly and most consistently. Yes, some academic activists will be amongst the winners of the research game, but they are a little like the woman who gets through to the top of the hierarchy: a distraction for the rest of us. We must speak and act out against the worship of research, even as we ourselves long to be research stars.

Talking of STARs (Slow, Tiny, Acts of Resistance): Some concluding considerations

In our vignettes, we have offered prompts about what it means to be an activist in the university in the early 21st century. We have proposed that activism can be seen as playing 'the infinite game' and keeping alive its values of inclusion, imagination and possibility. This vision of activism includes resisting or subverting the 'finite games' of the university that do not serve these values. We have explored our varied academic positions as critic and conscience, 'top girls,' teachers, and researchers. In

writing this paper, we hope to contribute to revitalising activist thought and conversation – and action – inside the university. More, the activism that we invite you to take up is one rooted in what you feel is needed to be done or is true. We need to remember that activists inside the university must play the long game: there has never been a time when universities did not need critics within, and there can never be. We need to imagine and find room for small creative acts of activist subversion alongside those larger, more public and emphatic but more difficult to arrange, acts of defiance (Boden & Epstein, 2011). Both kinds have the possibility to transform the business-as-usual of the university. But because it is a long game – as long as an academic life, perhaps – staying hopeful and willing, staying active, requires some tactics.

We have already outlined possible tactics, but to finish we wish to draw attention to one that we feel speaks to all of us as want-to-be infinite players: the wilful deployment of – rather than the becoming of – STARs (Slow Tiny Acts of Resistance). STARs, born from a collective reading of the work of Alison Mountz and colleagues (2015), are creative, sustainable and, ideally, fun. In their slowness and smallness, they work against the grain of the fast and flashy neoliberal university and with that of an overflowing academic life. STARs may include putting provocative notes on university property, refusing to be 'collegial' when it means passing a problem elsewhere, or raising issues for discussion at staff meetings and being satisfied with 'losing' if it at least means the status-quo is seen for a moment.

STARs embody the university at its best, as if it was not the sorry thing it has become under the sign of neoliberalism, as if it was truly the university we love and believe in. So, towards that end, let's generate and enact slow, tiny acts of resistance in the company of others whom we enjoy and whose thinking and conduct can teach us. Their companionship will comfort and sustain us. The four of us meet regularly at our university's staff club to drink wine, eat chips, and talk about who we are, what we are doing, and what we might do. We air our grievances, and share the ideas we have for projects that usually come to nothing. We coo with admiration and laugh with delight when someone tells a brave story of making a fuss. When one of us is tired, disappointed or inarticulate with rage, we pat her or him on the arm and agree that their response is entirely reasonable.

This is not to suggest the presence – or necessity – of some kind of utopian relationship in which we all agree with each other about what is wrong and what needs to be done. (Throughout the writing of this paper, we wrangled without resolution over what is and is not activism.) Our vision of the university accords with Bill Readings' (1996) 'community of dissensus' – in which, as we think together about how to keep the infinite game in play, about what it means to be activist in our universities in this time, we struggle in a welcoming way over the inevitable differences in our views.

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