



## On quitting

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### abstract

Over the past few years, there has been an ostensible growth in ‘quit lit’, a new genre of literature made of columns and opinion editorials detailing the reasons why scholars – with or without tenure – leave academia. This paper examines the impact of the neoliberal academia on subjectivity. In the neoliberal university, subjectivity is caught into a web of conflicting expectations. On the one hand, it is expected to live up to high standards of competition. On the other hand, the body experiences competition as a celebrated form of self-abuse. In this context, quitting is not merely about resigning an academic position. It is a symptom of the urge to create a space between the neoliberal discourse and the sense of self; an act of rebellion intended to abdicate the competitive rationality of neoliberal academia and embrace different values and principles.

### Introduction

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, Keguro Macharia wrote a piece for *The New Inquiry* called ‘On quitting’. It was a courageous, painfully beautiful piece that started with a diagnosis: ‘bipolar disorder, an oscillation between periods of frenetic activity and periods of profound depression’ (Macharia, 2013). This is a condition perfectly compatible with the academic calendar, he added, chronicled by an alternation of almost drug-induced bursts of mental productivity followed by a near-catatonic state of exhaustion and prolonged delays.

I spend glorious summer days in bed, unable to move, unable to muster up the energy to turn on the fan, unable to shower, unable to think. I find solace in trash romance and children’s books. Reading sustains something, a faint flicker of something. It gets far worse than I will ever confess. And then worse than that. (Macharia, 2013)

Keguro Macharia's is a story of psychic health and academic production. The story of a black man in post-racial U.S. who simply was unable to bear the enduring violence of Western modernity. Tenure and full professorship 'come with immense benefits... Being located in a research institution provides privilege and access: from here, the gaze is always upwards' (Macharia, 2013). Yet, the pursuit of excellence exudes toxicity and turmoil.

I read his article over and over. It was painfully familiar. It brought me back to an uncanny territory that was both attractive and repulsive, like a pain I knew only too well. I did my PhD in the United States. I arrived in the summer of 2001, just a few weeks before the collapse of the Twin Towers and a few weeks after the 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa. Despite the tremendous shock caused by 9/11 to the social psyche, those were years of academic conformity and competition. The Occupy generation was still nascent, high tuition and debt were still portrayed as private responsibilities, graduate students were still teaching full time as a cheap, underpaid labor force and, especially during the early years of my experience, nights were still haunted by the ghosts of 9/11. Notwithstanding its racial contours, there were words in Keguro Macharia's story that stirred my soul. They reminded me of the dynamics of competition and coercion that cut across racial boundaries – gestures of interpersonal violence so wearing that my body responded to the memories of those years with spasms of anxiety and repulsion.

I have been enamored with Keguro Macharia's words for a long time, with his poetic evocation of our darkest secrets and our most shameful frailties. Yet it took me years to work out why I felt so vulnerable and exposed as a PhD student in the US. All I could articulate was that the demand for efficiency and functionalism made my life dysfunctional. For me, Ayn Rand's *Virtue of selfishness* (1964) and the preclusion of cooperation translated into a chronic feeling of peril. As John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick argue in their beautiful book *Loneliness* (2008), competition impairs our ability to connect and trust each other. In my case this translated into long periods of silence when I was simply afraid; afraid of people, afraid of judgement, afraid of hostility and afraid of retaliation. It reminded me of an article by Tom Terez (2001) which describes a market-research firm where management uses intimidation and punishment to implement efficiency. 'Did you see all those rats?', said one employee watching a TV show called *Fear Factor* where each person was strapped in a pit with hundreds of rats. 'That's how I feel when I'm at work', he added. 'It's that scary' (Terez, 2001). That is how I felt too. Being in that competitive space created a sense of tension as if rats were crawling over my body. For several years I sedated the anxiety with binge eating followed by feelings of self-condemnation. At the end of my PhD I left the United States with a one-way ticket to Bangkok, after

packing up my life into a rucksack. Similarly, Keguro Macharia resigned from his job, left the United States and moved back to Kenya.

Several years later I realized that it was not just about me or Keguro Macharia. 'Quitting' was a widespread trend in academia and it involved over-exploited adjuncts as well as full professors. In fact, exhaustion and self-abuse were symptoms of a conflict much broader than I could grasp back then. The transition from industrial to cognitive capitalism had transformed universities into a new frontier of accumulation, the feeding ground intended to produce human capital, value and truth (Coin, 2014; 2017). Within a context of crisis chronicled by a transition into post-Fordism, universities were the golden goose meant to bring the profit rate back up to the levels enjoyed many years before. Gradually, universities became market enterprises characterized by a neo-liberal governance, stakeholder expectations and a culture of entrepreneurship. The academic subject was facing an *impasse*. On the one hand, it was 'fixed capital' in charge of economic growth. At the same time, it was a bundle of hopes and desires longing for self-expression. In the neoliberal academia, subjectivity became a battlefield. While capital used casualization to command subjectivity and crowd-source innovation, the academic subject hankered after room for self-determination, a pursuit that ought not to be sidetracked by the dire need for social recognition or financial security.

This paper analyses the causes of quitting academia: the growing discomfort of cognitive laborers whose ethical values, material needs and social ideals are increasingly at odds with the isolated entrepreneur of the neo-liberal university. Over the past few years, there has been an ostensible growth in 'quit lit', a new genre of literature made up of columns and op-eds detailing the reasons why scholars – with or without tenure – leave academia. These public columns transform the act of quitting into a political process whereby the subject abdicates its competitive rationality to embrace a fundamental loyalty to different values and principles. In neo-liberal academia, the subject is requested to embrace the entrepreneurial values as its own. In recent times, many scholars have felt a growing conflict between their ethical ideals and the array of measured, meaningless and bureaucratized tasks that fill their lives. An ambivalent phenomenon, quitting describes a choice often made in isolation which signals a sense of powerlessness before the growing demands of neo-liberal academia. At the same time, quitting chronicles the desire to rebel against its values. A symbol of the uneasy relationship between academic labor and the organizational strains of neo-liberal academia, quitting can be interpreted as a sign of weakness before the invasive demands of market competition as well as an attempt to interrupt the neoliberal discourse and its self-positing structures. Margaret Thatcher used to say, 'Economics are the method: the object is to

change the soul'. In this context, quitting can be understood as a spontaneous act of disobedience. A political decision aimed at creating a space for self-crafting.

In order to analyze quitting, this paper frames it within the neoliberal attempt to capture the general intellect and use it as a source of innovation. Within this context, it looks at the double-bind that confronts the academic subject. A phenomenon rooted in the need to un-tie a different self, quitting can be interpreted as a last resort to resolve the disarray between what people are asked to do and what they wish to become. At the same time, it is the stepping stone in a collective discourse that ought to transform an inner conflict into a political alternative.

### Claiming apathy back into academia

Let us start from the beginning. It was in the late Sixties that the purpose of higher education changed. During a press conference held by Ronald Reagan on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1967, a month into his term, the Republican Governor of California assured everyone that 'there is no one in this administration that intends to do anything that will be harmful for education. But', he added, 'we do believe that there are certain intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without' (Reagan, 1967). When asked to define the notion of intellectual luxury, Reagan described a four-credit course at the University of California at Davis for learning how to demonstrate and organize demonstrations (Berrett, 2015). 'I figure that carrying a picket sign is sort of like, oh, a lot of things you pick up naturally', he said, 'like learning how to swim by falling off the end of a dock'. 'Taxpayers', he concluded, shouldn't be 'subsidizing intellectual curiosity' (Reagan, 1967; Berrett, 2015). What was happening?

As Andrew Ross reported in his book *Creditocracy* (2014), in those years 'the college-educated population merited special attention' (2014: 103). The effective functioning of a democratic political system requires 'some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups', maintained Samuel Huntington in the Trilateral Commission report, *The Crisis of Democracy* (Crozier et al., 1975: 169).

The growing discomfort of the Reagan administration with the liberal conception of education as a public good intended to enlarge the capacity of all to access and produce knowledge (Caffentzis, 2005) was symbolic of a major shift. As suggested by the analysis of cognitive capitalism (Vercellone, 2007), the development of political skepticism towards an emancipatory use of knowledge reflects the crisis of the progressive development of capitalism. During the

Fordist years, the progressive development of capitalism was the propulsive heart of an unprecedented growth of science and technology which created the conditions for the development of mass production. At the same time, such unprecedented intellectual activity nurtured the most informed generation in human history. At the end of the Sixties, the scientific and technological growth of industrial capitalism came to a halt. The tremendous growth in the organic composition of capital was no longer able to ‘suck surplus-value from working-class living labor’ (Marazzi, 2011: 30). To put it with Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, in the long run the organic composition of capital grows to such an extent that the rate of profit will fall even if the rate of exploitation is rising (1971: 280). In this context, social antagonism took the form of a conflict between knowledge as innovation and knowledge as power (Vercellone, 2007). In other words, knowledge was no longer considered as a common good intended to create aware citizens and a free society, but as a private commodity instrumental to economic growth. In this sense, subsidizing knowledge was useful only insofar as it produced discernible impact on innovation and competitiveness. As Milton Friedman maintained since *Capitalism and freedom* (1962), higher education has some positive externalities and many negative ones. Moreover, knowledge was an intellectual luxury that came at a high a political cost. It produced unruly citizens and unnecessary social turmoil. In sum, it had to be made accountable. Since then, the restructuring of higher education echoed an old Marxian prophecy whereby:

beyond a certain point, the development of the powers of production becomes a barrier for capital; hence capital becomes a barrier for the development of the productive powers of labor. When it has reached this point, capital, i.e. wage labour, enters into the same relation towards the development of social wealth and of the forces of production as the guild system, serfdom, slavery, and is necessarily stripped off as a fetter [...] This is in every respect the most important law of modern political economy, and the most essential for understanding the most difficult relations. It is the most important law from the historical standpoint. It is a law which, despite its simplicity, has never before been grasped and, even less, consciously articulated. (Marx, 1973:749)

### Subjectivity as a battlefield

After the Seventies, the purpose of education changed. In those years, the Thatcher administration called for the reform of curricula as a public backlash against student protests (Ferlie and Andresani, 2009). At the same time, US President Ronald Reagan was becoming infamous for his condemnations of protesting students, arguing that ‘hippies, radicals and filthy speech advocates’ should be ‘taken by the scruff of the neck and thrown off campus – permanently’ (Ferlie and Andresani, 2009: 180; also see Clabaugh, 2004; Turner, 1966). In

line with the main argument of Human Capital Theory and Endogenous Growth Theory, policy interventions focused on giving incentives for the production of innovation, and considered synchronizing academic production with market demands (Livingstone, 1997: 5). Slowly, the enclosure of academic production became the strategy expected to fuel economic growth and employment rates. The assumption was that growth could be endless if only human capacities were effectively exploited. Since academic institutions are provided with extensive public support, private actors became increasingly interested in research that may have a positive impact on the corporate world. Slowly, universities became accountable for delivering innovation and human capital according to market demands, encouraging the development of innovation as a direct force of production. In this context, subjectivity became a battlefield, the target of technologies that forced each individual to implement their performance in a global pipeline of talent and skills.

Since the Eighties and Nineties, the neoliberal reform of global education supported the international restructuring of the entire supply-chain of education from the top down, hence tailoring teaching, pre-establishing research objectives, filtering international curricula and transforming research into a form of *deliverology*, a notion used by the Blair administration to demonstrate the progress of public services in delivering established results – in our case, *research on demand*. From primary school to tertiary education, curricula were re-defined according to specific teaching goals and desired learning outcomes. Research practices also underwent a profound transformation, relying on different technologies to measure academic performance across national boundaries, but ultimately relying on evaluative metrics to enumerate, classify, group and rank productivity, with the ultimate goal of placing each individual and institution into a hierarchy that would allow stakeholders to restrict funding to those projects that respond to market needs (Arrow, 1975; Morrissey, 2013). Evaluation metrics have often been explained as a technology of governmentality capable of producing performative subjects and entrepreneurs of the self (Rose and Miller, 2008).

Deleuze's notion of control, however, facilitates an analysis of the effects of governmentality on the subject, highlighting how recognition and merit often translate on the body into sources of self-abuse. In *Postscript on the societies of control*, Deleuze (1995) uses the notion of 'salary according to merit' to describe the transformation of subjectivity in the society of control. Paraphrasing Deleuze's expression, we could argue that academic capitalism relied on external funding to guide the transition from industrial to cognitive capitalism. Since the Eighties, 'financial vocabularies, grammars and judgments have infiltrated higher education, transforming teaching and research into outputs that can be calculable in financial terms' (Rose, 1999: 152). This process amounted 'to a re-

examination and eventual rejection of deeply entrenched traditional concepts and beliefs' (Mokyr, 2003: 36), a process whereby knowledge can find validation only if it reflects market priorities. Be it researchers who compete for grants, students who compete for loans, or seventeen thousand universities competing for reputational credit, evaluation acts as a filter, 'a screening device, in that it sorts out individuals of differing abilities, thereby conveying information to the purchasers of labor' (Arrow, 1973: 194). Through evaluation, capital measures, compares, ranks, validates or dismisses forms of conduct according to their ability to meet its goals. In so doing, it

diminishes labor time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition – question of life or death – for the necessary. On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. (Marx, 1973: 706)

We are right in the middle of the so-called 'Fragment on machines' in Marx's *Grundrisse*, and it feels normal because it is a daily experience for many of us. The transformation of academic labor into a precarious occupation binds the pursuit of funding to the achievement of pre-established goals. Here the introduction of grants, loans or external resources, reduces paid labor time to a minimum while it increases labor in the superfluous form, thus ensuring that capital acts as a subjectivity of command enforcing working as much as possible as the only conduct capable of securing access to credit. In this context, self-exploitation is defined as a meritorious form of conduct. Under these conditions, subjectivity is forced to constitute itself according to the market priorities and at the same time is wounded by a constant process of self-abuse.

Imprisoned in a web of conflicting expectations about how one is supposed to be, subjectivity is caught in a double-bind, expected to live up to high standards of competition and at the same time unable to fulfill them or, to put it as Mark Fisher does, 'good for nothing' (2014). In this context, Keguro Macharia's diagnosis of a bipolar disorder seems not an exception but rather the symbol of the neoliberal age. As Mark Fisher (2014) explains, neoliberal rationality maintains 'that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be', while the same population that has all its life been sent the message that it can do anything it wants, feels 'the underlying conviction that we are all uniquely responsible for our own misery and therefore deserve it'. The construction of subjectivity is split between a coercive command that posits market recognition as a reward for competition and an embodied experience that

perceives merit as ‘a glorified and socially acceptable form of self-abuse’ (Beusman, 2013).

## **Undoing the neoliberal academic**

In time it would become clear that the problem was not just me or Keguro Macharia. Quitting was a widespread trend in academia and it involved over-exploited adjuncts as well as full professors. Over the past few years hundreds such letters have been published on this topic, part of which were collected into an open Google Doc by Sydni Dunn (2013). The question is why so many academics jump off the ivory tower – why do they leave what is considered to be one of the most prestigious jobs in the world?

As Scott Burns (2014) argued in his article, the current situation requires scientists to devote an increasing proportion of their time to secure funding. As mentioned above, the externalization of funding reduces labor in the necessary form and increases it in the superfluous form, thus transforming unpaid labor into a structural component of neo-liberal academia for both tenured and untenured faculty. Writers such as Rebecca Shuman and Katie Ropie who have eloquently written about the neoliberal reform of academic labor have maintained that the university is becoming a de facto exploitative labor market (Collier, 2013). Graduate students, post-docs and adjunct professors often work long hours in hopes of nebulous rewards such as co-authoring papers, receiving recommendation letters or vague promises of future employment. In these instances, precarious workers are often confronted with an overloaded schedule, insufficient reward and growing casualization (Malesic, 2016). At the same time, they are forced to use unpaid labor as a hedge against future unemployment (Ross, 2014). Trapped in the urge to be competitive in the labor market, a growing contingent of PhD students and adjuncts take on debt in order to outsource reproduction tasks hence buying time to compete more (Rampell, 2013). Taking on debt to outsource tedious, unskilled reproductive tasks becomes an opportunity to buy more time for higher-value activities in the future. This paradoxical situation is symbolic of the exploitative arrangement that structures the neoliberal academia, which thrives on casualization to ensure efficiency while it leaves precarious workers no other choice than working as much as possible to increase their hopes of future earnings. In the meantime, an adjunct who teaches several classes to make ends meet while struggling to find time to publish in order not to be at a disadvantage in the labor market, may enter the slippery slope of debt. In this context, the labor of academia can lead to a vicious cycle of overload and burn out, producing a tremendous dislocation within the academic subject. The constant mis-match between organizational strain and personal



values produce burn-out and ethical conflicts particularly in those individuals who perceive academic labor as a passion or a labor of love (Malesic, 2016; Maslach, 2003).

In the Seventies, Silvia Federici argued that one of the main challenges in the 'Wages for housework' campaign lay in the fact that women's exploitation was presented as a 'labor of love', a natural attribute of female personality. In other words, housework was a predisposition:

a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. [In fact] housework had to be transformed into a natural attribute rather than be recognized as a social contract because from the beginning of capital's scheme for women this work was destined to be unwaged. (Federici, 1975: 2)

Similarly, intellectual labor is often presented as a personality trait of the academic subject, an internal need and even an inner aspiration of its character. Though such labor may have penetrated the affective domain of our lives, its material conditions can be so demanding that it makes it a hard passion to endure.

Especially for part-time or contingent instructors who have no benefits, no office and often no reimbursement for their expenses, quitting their job sometimes outweighs the benefits of staying. According to a recent UC Berkeley report, a quarter of all part-time college faculty and their families are enrolled in public assistance programs, relying on food stamps or Medicaid to help cover basic expenses (Jacobs et al., 2015). It should be added that in many instances contingent faculty outnumbered permanent faculty (Erwin and Wood, 2014). In general, rampant casualization and persistent financial stress put tremendous strain on individuals, often leading them to reduce their expenses, seek a secondary job and ultimately take advantage of weekends and vacations to earn more or finish their work. In this sense, the labor of academia is often said to take a toll on relationships leading to a breakdown of community and long periods of isolation. Rather than a labor of love, academic labor sometimes appears an abusive relationship, an exploitative system characterized by high expectations and uncertain prospects. Neo-liberal academia uses the promise of future employment as the affective currency of unpaid work (Bascetta, 2015). Yet at the same time, rather than a real plan for the future, such promise feels as a soul-sourcing device, a hook meant to capture desire and transform it into a lever for exploitation.

In 2014, Maurizio Lazzarato wrote a critique of the notion of governmentality that speaks directly to the relationship between the academic subject and neo-

liberal academia. Referring to Michel Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, Lazzarato (2014) argued that the 'entrepreneur of the self', who can be understood as the very embodiment of an individual who seeks reward in its labor, needs to be rethought. From the Eighties, the notion of governmentality has sometimes been interpreted aesthetically as a sophisticated description of the entrepreneur of the self. Yet neoliberal subjectivity does not represent a natural byproduct of bio-capitalism nor are we talking about an ontological mutation. It is rather the result of coercion and blackmail. The academic subject works an unrealistic, 24/7 schedule chronicled by constant overload and frequent burnout. It acts as an individual enterprise whose desire for self-realization translates into being constantly frustrated by feelings of dissatisfaction and an unmanageable workload. What I intend to do here is keep some distance from those interpretations of governmentality which consider competition as an internalized trait free from coercion. As Lazzarato argued elsewhere,

To become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only – far from it – those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health system, housing shortages, etcetera. (Lazzarato, 2012: 51)

It would be useful to read the entire debate between Lazzarato and the post-workerist milieu, which for the most part was published in the Italian Journal *Quaderni di San Precario* (Chicchi, Lucarelli and Mezzadra, 2013) because it highlights the inner dislocation that tears the neoliberal subject. The neoliberal attempt to crowd-source the general intellect and use it as a source of free labor has confronted academics with an aching conflict between the prominence of their ideals and the reality of their daily lives.

Foucault wrote, 'There must be an uprooting that interrupts the unfolding of history, and its long series of reasons why, for a man "really" to prefer the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey' (2005: 263). The uprooting describes the moment of rupture whereby obedience is a greater threat than rebellion. When competition becomes so costly that it entails a constant betrayal of dignity, then all of a sudden the risk of quitting appears less frightening than the prospect of staying. As counter-intuitive as it seems, academic burn-out has become so impairing that some prefer to quit. In this sense, there is sometimes a blurry boundary between an act of defiance and an act of rebellion. In fact, when Camus speaks of the rebel, he may as well refer to the subject who quits. 'What is a rebel?', he asks. 'A man who says no'.

What does he mean by saying 'no'? He means, for example, that 'this has been going on too long', 'up to this point yes, beyond it no', 'you are going too far', or,

again, 'there is a limit beyond which you shall not go'. In other words, his no affirms the existence of a borderline (Camus, 1956: 13).

In saying 'no', the rebel reveals the existence of a borderline. Just like Foucault's uprooting, Camus' borderline indicates the boundary beyond which self-abuse cannot be tolerated, a borderline beyond which the status quo must change.

In this sense quitting can be understood as a process of rebellion and self-preservation. Subjectivity is no longer defined by the values of neoliberalism: it unveils a certain loyalty to different values and principles. For more and more academics, the inner dislocation between their inner longing and their obligations finds resolution in an audacity that leads them to choose the risk of unemployment over the betrayal of dignity. In this case, quitting is also a way to find one's own voice. Several times, quitting academia reflects a process of self-preservation and at the same time, a process of self-revelation that shift expectations about who one wants to be (Backer, 2013). Often these writings unveil a sense of excitement at the very decision to quit, as if quitting meant unmuting a neglected part of themselves. Some reports speak of an excited nervousness and disbelief at the very act of resigning, as if creating some distance from academia marked a possibility for liberation and relief (Musselman, 2010). In these reports, the toxic architecture of today's academe seems to devour rather than nourish individual creativity, shedding light on the human cost of academic recognition.

Over the past few years, there have been several instances of activists and academics who have enacted alternative experiments in cooperative universities. From students' activism against the marketization of education (Edu-Factory Collective, 2013) to radical alternatives based on not-for-profit, co-operative models of higher education (Neary and Winn, 2017), these projects intend to build progressive forms of autonomous education based on a more general socialization of access to knowledge, critical theory and cooperation. As far as I am concerned, I have currently a tenured job in Italy. Like many colleagues, I resolve the dislocation between what I have to do and what I wish to do by doubling the amount of work. Ultimately, it is radical alternatives such as the ones I have just mentioned that keep me rooted in the purpose of this job. I have come to believe that the entire purpose of the global restructuring of education that has taken place over the past thirty years was training individuals to accept growing rates of social inequality in our society. Neo-liberal academia trains students to think that everyone is in debt unless they earn credits and that inequalities are inevitable in our society just as inevitable are merit and guilt. I am not at peace with the 'disvalues' that nurture academia and that academia itself contributes to nurture, its cynicism, its accent on individualism and

competition. At the same time, I am persuaded that the cultural conflict that is currently taking place in academia has great importance and broad implications. Neoliberal violence is concealed in narratives of merit and guilt. It follows that producing counter-narratives is paramount to the production of a less unequal world. In this sense, I thoroughly understand why sensitive academics are unwilling to cope with the neoliberal values. At the same time, I believe it is corporate interest that should quit academia, rather than them. In this sense, I am persuaded we should take the act of quitting very seriously as it speaks the truth about learning and teaching conditions in today's academic system. Yet I am afraid that quitting alone should be interpreted rather as a warning sign than as a solution. Quitting is a sign of the growing discomfort academics feel in their labor. My wish is that it also be a stepping stone towards a political alternative where collaboration is the method and the object is to change our world.

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