



**Anxious academics: talking back to the audit culture through collegial, critical and creative autoethnography**

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**ABSTRACT**

Our New Zealand university recently us required to produce portfolios for a research evaluation process. At a presentation promoting and explaining the process we raised questions and objections. Pointlessly, it seemed. But we continued to rail and rant about it. One of us set in motion the following discussion, presented here as a series of critical and creative autoethnographic responses. We have resisted, with some anxiety, the urge and the expectation to theorise our experiences or to situate them within 'the literature'. Our proposition is that 'giving voice' in the manner in which we have done so is an *affective* means of 'talking back' against neoliberal regimes of performativity which may also be *effective* as a form of localised resistance, strengthening our ability to cope with the anxiety such regimes provoke. We hope our efforts encourage others to develop critical, creative and collegial responses to academic audit regimes.

## Introduction

We are academics at a New Zealand university recently required to produce portfolios of our 'research outputs' for an evaluation process called the Institutional Review of Research (IROR). This was instituted as preparation for the 2018 government-mandated Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) audit, a process somewhat akin to the UK's Research Excellence Fund (REF) process. At a presentation promoting and explaining the IROR which we all attended we raised questions and objections. Pointlessly, it seemed. But we continued to rail and rant about it. One of us set in motion the following discussion. (It doesn't matter which one, as each of us intend to claim 100% of the credit for this, as is encouraged by such audit regimes.)

In what follows we offer a series of critical and creative autoethnographic responses to the IROR which emerged as a consequence of our collegial efforts to grapple with its individual and collective effects. We have resisted, with some anxiety, the urge and the expectation to theorise our experiences or to situate them within 'the literature'. Our proposition is that 'giving voice' in the manner in which we have done so is an *affective* means of 'talking back' against such neoliberal regimes of performativity which may also be *effective* as a form of localised resistance, strengthening our ability to cope with the anxiety such regimes routinely provoke. We hope readers may recognise aspects of their own experiences in our stories and that our efforts provide encouragement for others to develop their own critical, creative and collegial responses to academic audit regimes.

As we walk back to our offices after the first IROR presentation our reactions can be summarized thus:

1  
2  
3 Natalie: "I wanted to cry."  
4

5 Rangi: "How do I resist?"  
6

7 Benedict: "I am unattached and entertained."  
8

9 Justin: "I am frightened and furious."  
10  
11

12  
13  
14 Afterwards one of us recalled a key scene in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, American  
15 author Thornton Wilder's second novel, first published in 1927. It tells the story of several  
16 people who die in the collapse of an Inca rope bridge in Peru, and the events that led to  
17 their being on the bridge. A friar who has witnessed the tragic accident enquires into the  
18 lives of the victims, seeking some sort of cosmic answer to the question of why each had to  
19 die. Thornton Wilder said that he was posing a question: "Is there a direction and meaning  
20 in lives beyond the individual's own will?"  
21  
22

23  
24  
25 We have contemplated this scene as we ask ourselves why we do what we do. We  
26 are academics at different stages of our careers, having coming to it from different places.  
27  
28 We find ourselves at a point – is it a crisis point, a point of self-revelation, a point of  
29 decision? Or is this all too grand a posture? Perhaps we are simply pissed off critical  
30 management scholars, liberals who have been finessed by the neoliberals. In the long run it  
31 doesn't matter anymore, for we need to earn a living in a dying world.  
32  
33

34  
35  
36 We decide that we will write our stories of how we came to be here. We will be our  
37 own friar, and each of us will relate our way to this point.  
38  
39  
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41  
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44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51 **Natalie**  
52

53  
54 I started by working hard to ignore the IROR and sustained this effort for several  
55 months. Eventually I accept it is not going away, so reluctantly start adding 'items' to my list  
56  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 of 'research outputs' in the prescribed database. I am resentful of the extra work on top on  
4  
5 my teaching, which is all consuming with 500 plus 1<sup>st</sup> years. Can't 'they' just google scholar  
6  
7 me to see most of the information they want anyway?  
8  
9

10 The IROR briefing session I attend is 'led' in a masterfully commanding, emphatic  
11  
12 manner by a very senior academic of the university. Their discourse initially seems intended  
13  
14 to suggest some common bond between us 'we academics' are to understand the audit  
15  
16 system 'definitely isn't perfect'. There are 'valid criticisms' that can be made of it, just not  
17  
18 here and now it seems. However, 'despite its flaws' it is a 'legitimate and reasonable  
19  
20 expectation by government to find out how its money is spent': rhetorically we are set up,  
21  
22 then, to accept that there is no alternative. Simultaneously, however, the audit regime is  
23  
24 also presented to us as an 'opportunity' to tell others 'how fantastic you are and your  
25  
26 research is' - even though it is also portrayed as 'a game – a game about how to get as much  
27  
28 money and pedigree as possible'. That's the 'big picture, strategic view' of it all, then: the  
29  
30 audit regime is simultaneously 'definitely flawed', 'unavoidable', 'legitimate', 'reasonable',  
31  
32 'an opportunity', 'a game' – but none of that are we here to talk about, instead we are just  
33  
34 here to understand the rules of this perverse game, namely shameless self-promotion.  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 As we get to the tactics of how to actually prepare one's portfolio, the tenor of  
41  
42 commentary also becomes more demanding: it's clear that inadequate performance relative  
43  
44 to the desired standards simply isn't good enough. We are now clearly those who must be  
45  
46 instructed, commanded and managed in order that we enhance our performance. There is  
47  
48 no scope for a wandering mind simply moved by curiosity here.  
49  
50  
51

52 Alarming, if we publish with others we should 'claim everything, if the other  
53  
54 authors are overseas' (yes, that was said) and make sure that our narratives highlight 'what I  
55  
56 contributed, how am I contributing, what I did', with the emphasis clearly on the "I" not the  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 “we”. When it’s clear the audience is starting to squirm uncomfortably in response to such  
4  
5 comments we are told ‘that is unfortunately the way you have to play it’. Then, in direct  
6  
7 contradiction to what was said just moments earlier, we are told that ‘the code of research  
8  
9 conduct sits above all this’ and we must ‘be a community of good conduct – be honest and  
10  
11 generous about the contribution of others’. The blatant contradictions in the advice given  
12  
13 are not acknowledged.  
14  
15

16  
17 There is no substantive debate about any of this: people know that to challenge this  
18  
19 particular office holder is a career limiting move for this small-town university. The  
20  
21 discourse used seeks to legitimate this exercise and its various crude and manipulative  
22  
23 tactics for ‘success’. I feel disgust that an institution which I (naively? idealistically?) believe  
24  
25 should advance community values and encourage integrity in research, is now expecting us  
26  
27 to engage in this morally bereft piece of game-playing. I also feel powerless, as it’s clear  
28  
29 whatever concerns I and others have about this, nothing will be discussed publicly and the  
30  
31 expectation to comply will be achieved.  
32  
33  
34

35  
36 I complete my portfolio with a grim sense of my own lack of power. I write of prizes  
37  
38 and journal rankings and esteemed professors with whom I have worked. Sources of  
39  
40 pleasure and pride have become matters I can now call on to keep the institution at bay. I  
41  
42 feel disgusted in myself and the university for what I have written. But I really want my  
43  
44 conference funding and I fear losing it if I refuse to comply. I go for a long run to try to sweat  
45  
46 away this sense of disgust, but it lingers on. We academics comprise the most highly  
47  
48 educated amongst the population. If we know so much, how come we have let ourselves  
49  
50 become such slaves to this regime? I might howl with frustration at all this, but I know no-  
51  
52 one who can change it is listening.  
53  
54  
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60

### Rangi

Reminder e-mails keep coming: have you submitted your draft portfolio? Closer to the deadline for submission, IROR specialists call for attendance to workshops or drop-in sessions: please join us so that we can teach you how to present yourself in terms of excellence. We are expected to learn how to choose our 'research elements' wisely and how to write narratives of our research 'excellence'. In our performance reviews, progress in relation to the requirements of PBRF or the ABDC<sup>1</sup> list is examined, so that we may become good organisational citizens who can bring in additional funding. We are asked to submit to highly ranked journals, even as we are told the choice of journal is ours to make. While we know there is no written rule or penalty that stops us doing otherwise, we mostly comply with these expectations. We all know that rankings are not good for genuine research, that the expectations of managers are different than ours, that the success of research should not be tied to such mechanisms. Yet, I see little resistance to this system to which we are subjected.

We complain and whine about the stupidity of ranking structures at staff meetings or in our coffee chats. We want to open up new discussion avenues. We write about all of these in our journal articles (possibly at A\* journals), but still we cannot intervene into these institutional mechanisms and managers following the orders from the top. Some take part in decision-making mechanisms to challenge the system from inside, yet the overall system wins: we mostly just play the game, publish in high ranking journals, get higher grades in PBRF and follow the rules set by others. Some enjoy playing the game, some question the rules of the game, and some do not want to accept the overall idea of the game. Yet, we still play it, either intentionally or unintentionally. Some suggestions to accommodate the

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<sup>1</sup> ABDC = Australasian Business Deans' Council, which oversees a journal rankings list that is then used in the IROR and PBRF audit processes. An "A\*" is the highest ranking, followed by 'A', 'B', 'C'.

1  
2  
3 system alienate me further from the idea of scholarship (e.g. first give what system needs,  
4  
5 play the game and then do whatever you want).  
6

7  
8 The questions follow: what are you complaining about? Why do you not resist? What  
9  
10 do you want?  
11

12  
13 Scholarship has changed significantly and the reason for our existence is now  
14  
15 imposed via ranking and grading regimes. We are expected to publish continuously in high  
16  
17 ranked journals - but these have limited epistemologies and ontologies. However, it is not  
18  
19 possible to publish continuously, since as academics we need to read, discuss, digest and  
20  
21 write and re-write what we have been dealing with. And, high ranking journals mean  
22  
23 orthodoxy and mainstream, hence alternative research agendas (such as critical work with  
24  
25 unconventional methodologies), may take years to get published. How can you survive  
26  
27 when asked what have you published *this year* in high ranking journals??  
28  
29

30  
31 Resistance may arise by giving voice at meetings, discussing these issues in journals,  
32  
33 constructing alternative subjectivities, or taking part in decision-making organs. Perhaps  
34  
35 these are the only actions we can take, however the system remains unchanged. As long as  
36  
37 we are part of this we can only mess around with the idea of resistance or creating some  
38  
39 fractures in the system. However, overall, we are squeezed, stuck, and do not know how to  
40  
41 resist.  
42  
43  
44

45  
46 Can we imagine an alternative university? What do we really want? Beginning from  
47  
48 the latter question, we want to do research that is relevant to our own scholarly  
49  
50 community. For me this means doing critical work, criticising the system and letting others  
51  
52 know how it works, how it disciplines us. It means creating our own outlets (creating  
53  
54 fractures still?). It means fighting for legitimacy every time you publish, no matter how  
55  
56 exhausting this is. It means believing small steps can bring broader change options (or is this  
57  
58  
59



1  
2  
3 fantasy?). Most likely we will be alone, marginalised and disappointed, and probably there is  
4  
5 no alternative and ideal university. Yet, our genuine work is the only thing we have and we  
6  
7 can at least resist for its integrity and change potential.  
8  
9

### 10 11 12 Benedict

13  
14 For almost all of my education and working life people have told me that I am  
15  
16 bordering on excellence. That all I need to do is work a little harder/smarter/differently and  
17  
18 I'll have made it! Yet for almost all of this time I've giggled at the ridiculousness that the signifier  
19  
20 'excellence' is with regard to work. Before I met with Lacanian theory I found the  
21  
22 'excellence' game part-and-parcel of the desperation that seemed to accompany the  
23  
24 uncritical belief in the requirement for success. That we needed to be successful in order to  
25  
26 be moral. This never really troubled me in terms of work, perhaps because I found it difficult  
27  
28 to conceptualise of a moral/ideological framework that made sense to me: Religion – no.  
29  
30 Capitalism – no. Nationalism – no.  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 Where 'excellence' does infiltrate my life is with regard to my embodiment – here I  
37  
38 excelled at equating my body with an ideal and hating/berating/backdating it. Here I made  
39  
40 every attempt to demonstrate my 'excellence' and completely failed. The Other judged me  
41  
42 by their exacting (but constantly shifting) standards so I never knew where I was – and I still  
43  
44 don't. This is how I can understand the suffering of my colleagues under the incessant gaze  
45  
46 of the 'excellence' framework. For me it is a humorous fiction – a ridiculistic game of clones  
47  
48 – populated by peculiarities and a logic that no-one understands, particularly those who  
49  
50 constantly reinforce it, precisely because it is structurally un-understandable.  
51  
52  
53  
54

55 Following Jones and Spicer (2005) it must be clear to Lacanians that 'excellence' in  
56  
57 academic systems of quality is an empty signifier, *par excellence* (please excuse the pun). A  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 perfect example of a signifier without substance, something that needs a lacking subject to  
4  
5 gain any clarity – a speaking being willing to populate it with their field of signifiers in order  
6  
7 to build an ‘excellence’ narrative to plop into the PBRF portfolio. Without the subject, there  
8  
9 is no ‘excellence’, just a hole. In this way, I personally take great pleasure in looking into the  
10  
11 abyss and, as Neitschze would probably appreciate, ‘getting off’ by seeing what looks back  
12  
13 at me. In practical terms, I really enjoyed arguing with the hierarchy over the ‘quality’ rating  
14  
15 of the journal *Critical Public Health*. So I tossed ISI ratings, citation levels and the like into  
16  
17 the abyss and giggled uproariously at the tripe that bounced back, as well as being slightly  
18  
19 perturbed by their apparent belief in their own judgement systems! The beast in the abyss  
20  
21 was uglier than I first imagined, but no less impotent.

22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27 The question that then emerges for me is what if anything is the point of resistance?  
28  
29 Here I must turn back to body weight. I resist the continued threat of ‘excellence’ here by  
30  
31 never being weighed. Through this tiny act of resistance, I deny the empty signifier just one  
32  
33 piece of data, thus demonstrating its inconsistency, and forcing it to deal with its own  
34  
35 anxiety. Most of the time this is very simple, because I don’t own scales and it is easy to  
36  
37 avoid it – but what happens when medicine needs to know my weight for a size dependent  
38  
39 drug dose? And, of course, there are many more data points available with which to clobber  
40  
41 myself over the head – pants size, comments from people I know, running performance to  
42  
43 name a few.

44  
45  
46  
47  
48 We can already see a certain resistance within our own collegial climate with regard  
49  
50 to the so-called IROR. Apparently half the Science faculty ignored the requirement. A great  
51  
52 many people fudged the results or purposefully missed important information. These acts of  
53  
54 resistance do not equate to a rejection of the empty signifier ‘excellence’, in fact most are  
55  
56 simply resisting the bureaucracy of ‘excellence’ but probably accept that they need to be  
57  
58

1  
2  
3 judged. Our challenge is to point the empty signifier back at itself. Lacan would call this  
4  
5 hystericizing the signifier, we need to resist by saying – that’s not it! That’s not excellence!  
6  
7 and crucially by ignoring the hierarchy’s reaction, which is to say: “Well tell us then,  
8  
9 academy, what is it?” If we answer that query, we are fucked.  
10  
11

### 12 13 14 15 Justin

16  
17 First there is the frustration. I can’t cope with the software and the constant struggle  
18  
19 to track details and act like an anal bureaucrat. I see the value of being organized, but this is  
20  
21 not getting organized, this is feeding the machine. And the machine has a badly designed  
22  
23 mouth that wastes my time.  
24  
25

26  
27 I am sick of myself. I repeatedly invent something called Justin for various  
28  
29 consumers; a promotion committee, a performance review, a prospective employer.  
30  
31 Inventing opportunities. Putting myself up for sale. The plastic consultant. I do this to  
32  
33 myself. So on what grounds do I ask those 4x4 A\* professors, “when did you become an  
34  
35 intellectual whore?” Or is there a difference here? One presents the facts of a life, at a slant,  
36  
37 for a particular purpose. We do it when we are courting a partner or an employer. We have  
38  
39 personas and CVs. What is the problem?  
40  
41  
42

43  
44 The problem is the value base and choice I can make about what to present. I come  
45  
46 to some sense of what I value, and that provides the criteria by which I judge the value of  
47  
48 my actions. In the face of performance review linked to rubbish criteria, I have no basis on  
49  
50 which to present my work.  
51

52  
53 Or is all this just self-justification for not being good enough? Would I be writing this  
54  
55 now if I had just received a few successful submissions to an A\* journal? And don’t the  
56  
57 rejections just prove that I cannot write good enough stuff? And so we go round and round,  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 because I know it is not about whether I can write good enough stuff. It must be partly so,  
4  
5 but it is also true that I just cannot bring myself to write the tedious nit-picking trivia that  
6  
7 does get published. At the same time, I have sometimes – only sometimes though – read  
8  
9 good stuff in ‘top’ journals. Where is the way through?  
10  
11

12 There is maelstrom of fear, anxiety and inadequacy that is being stoked by the  
13  
14 confrontation with IROR. It does things to me. It feels toxic and harmful. It raises my anxiety  
15  
16 levels.  
17  
18

19 But all of that is distinct from the rage, although they may be linked. I can see that  
20  
21 we are, with the IROR, moving towards the destruction of much that I hold dear. It doesn't  
22  
23 just feel toxic. It is so, and the evidence is plentiful. It is part of a larger picture, and I think  
24  
25 that it is the sight of intelligent colleagues conniving in their own destruction and playing  
26  
27 into a larger game of destruction that appals me. I do not see the IROR as an isolated event.  
28  
29 It is part of the same process that has University Councils reduced to clones of wealthy  
30  
31 white male commercial lawyers. It is part of the de-democratisation of societies. It plays into  
32  
33 the concentration of wealth, power and privilege that is being advanced globally. In a way,  
34  
35 my question “what about those of us who aspire to be normal?” (rather than ‘excellent’)  
36  
37 could be altered to “what about equity, transparency and justice?” And from that, “what  
38  
39 about a healthy diversity of thought?” I have in mind that great tradition of contestation and  
40  
41 insight exemplified by George Orwell, Martha Nussbaum, Henry Giroux, David Orr, Eli  
42  
43 Wiesenthal, Paolo Freire and so many others. When I start writing from this point of view,  
44  
45 fear, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy evaporate. But this point of view does not get  
46  
47 published in A\* journals.  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

54 This point of view *cannot* routinely get published in A\* journals. A\* journals by  
55  
56 definition/ranking engage in an endless cycle of self-serving banality. This is also well-  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 documented. Thus, by feeding the machine we are not just playing a game; we are active  
4  
5 construction workers, doing our bit to undermine and exclude marginal discourse. That is to  
6  
7 say, we connive in creating that which we detest.  
8  
9

10 Where does that leave me? Do I now on principle not submit work to A\* journals?  
11  
12 How self-defeating would that be? Do I actively and explicitly contest at every public event,  
13  
14 such as IROR workshops? Any in any case, to what extent is what I am experiencing only  
15  
16 true of CMS scholars and those informed by the humanities? Do physicists, chemists, civil  
17  
18 engineers, accountants and others have the same issues? Well, apparently not, and in any  
19  
20 case, the humanities have been undermined for decades. I mean, who needs art? Just look  
21  
22 at Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* or listen to Orff's *Carmina Burana* and obviously all one need  
23  
24 ask is "does this contribute to economic growth? Will listening to this improve my  
25  
26 employability?"  
27  
28  
29

30  
31 Can we draw some productive contrasts with art and artists, social workers? I am an  
32  
33 educator, and education is research. That is what makes me a researcher, not processing  
34  
35 customers. In the long run, according to Keynes, we are all dead. Long before then, we are  
36  
37 all losers. All of us; academics, students, institutions and society at large.  
38  
39

40 And now I must complete my IROR portfolio. I have just received a curt email from  
41  
42 my HoS: "Can you please ensure you have completed your portfolio and submitted it by  
43  
44 5pm today." And I will, because I can see what is coming. All future conference/funding  
45  
46 applications will be granted or refused on the basis of one's IROR portfolio. And I want to go  
47  
48 to conferences this year and next year. So I comply. It's called enlightened self-interest. Or  
49  
50 prostituting myself. Is that too harsh? Let's call it a trade-off.  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55

56  
57 **And now what?**  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 Justin suggests we explore analysing each other's stories, for more critique  
4  
5 embedded in collegial trust. Perhaps this may lead to greater trust in ourselves and thereby  
6  
7 greater authority and authenticity. This is an end in itself, but it is also the grounds for  
8  
9 resistance. Well, at least that is the idea. First, we must pursue the claims we have made  
10  
11 about how we cope with a situation we detest. And why we cope with it.  
12  
13

14  
15 He suggests that we each write up individual reflections on us, our personal  
16  
17 responses to each of each other and how **we** are. "This," he writes, "will push along the  
18  
19 narrative. We are now all on the bridge together. What are the individual stories that led us  
20  
21 to this place? That is another possible way of expanding our contribution – our individual  
22  
23 stories to date. What do you think?"  
24  
25

26  
27 And he writes the final sentence: "Also, note that submissions close in 20 days".  
28  
29

### 30 31 **A view from the bridge**

32  
33 So we each now write on us, separately.  
34  
35

### 36 37 38 **Justin on us**

39  
40 In *How to be an intellectual* Jeffrey Williams recounts the degeneration/ decline/  
41  
42 deterioration of the status/ image/ reputation of academics. It's a sad story, but one that is  
43  
44 perhaps more piquant to Justin rather than Natalie, Rangi or Benedict. Justin is older than  
45  
46 the others and has been an academic for 25 years. This is not irrelevant. Justin feels that  
47  
48 Benedict and Rangi do not know what they have missed: a golden age of University. Justin  
49  
50 fears/feels that Natalie knows better/more than him. After all, Justin has not had a great  
51  
52 corporate career like her, and he always feels he is yearning after it – oh how he would love  
53  
54 to claim an illustrious list of corporate clients! But alas, he is merely an academic and not  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 one of those wonderful hybrids who traverse the academic, corporate and media worlds. At  
4  
5 one of our meetings, Justin hears Natalie say that she could earn three times as much back  
6  
7 in the corporate world, and he heard Benedict say that he was offered \$200k a year but  
8  
9 turned it down. That's about twice Justin's salary as a senior lecturer, and more than the top  
10  
11 scale of a professor, and Benedict is a junior lecturer. Justin feels shame. He should have  
12  
13 done better. He is, if he were to subscribe to such frames of reference, in the twilight his  
14  
15 career, but he refuses to engage with this perspective. He wonders if Benedict is  
16  
17 exaggerating and then feels ashamed that he questions this. Why would Benedict do so?  
18  
19 Justin notes what seems to him Rangi's discomfort at these disclosures. Justin feels an  
20  
21 irritation with Benedict at Benedict's apparent sang froid, his confidence in self-  
22  
23 proclamation. He distrusts it and appreciates it at the same time. Justin feels an affinity for  
24  
25 Rangi, who seems to be anguished by his position as an academic, a father, a family man  
26  
27 with responsibilities, who has loyalties to both a profession and a love of family and maybe,  
28  
29 Justin hesitates to claim, a keen sense of exile and alienation, and therefore, vulnerability.  
30  
31 He suspects that this is something neither Benedict nor Natalie would easily understand.  
32  
33 Also, Justin is the product of a political struggle in South Africa, where he learnt early that  
34  
35 education was a potent political weapon. He thinks that Rangi has some sense of this  
36  
37 political urgency, and again, is not sure that Benedict and Natalie have it, certainly not to  
38  
39 the same extent.  
40  
41  
42  
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45  
46

47 What are the implications?  
48  
49  
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51

### 52 **Natalie on us** 53 54

55 What I see in our stories is the varying ways in which the audit and 'excellence'  
56  
57 regime works upon us. It makes us angry, fearful, resentful, anxious or bemused by its  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 arcane and bizarre nature, at the same time as we cannot ignore its capacity to discipline  
4  
5 our behaviour, to measure ourselves against its standards of perfection and find ourselves  
6  
7 wanting. It preys upon us by finding specific points of vulnerability, generating the sense  
8  
9 that our reaction to this is a reflection on ourselves, not a consequence of its intended  
10  
11 effects. It seeks out and finds the Justin who worries far more than he should about  
12  
13 whether his work is good enough, who is harsh toward himself, and it stirs that Justin up. It  
14  
15 finds the Rangi who doesn't simply want to study resistance but to incite it, to practice it,  
16  
17 and it is unrelenting in demanding compliance, submission, seeking to shame this Rangi into  
18  
19 a being that is to be ashamed of itself. It discovers the guilty, anxious Natalie, the one whose  
20  
21 partner now works long hours because of her rejection of a corporate career, and it keeps  
22  
23 asking of her 'what makes your work good enough, that your partner should suffer for you  
24  
25 to do it?' It finds the Benedict who wants to provide better for his family, to feel less  
26  
27 trapped by the bills that must be paid, and demands a down-payment on a future  
28  
29 promotion.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34

35  
36 It finds, too, particular points of exchange it will have us enter into. Justin and  
37  
38 Natalie both crave conference attendance, will put up with this nonsense to ensure our  
39  
40 chances of getting on a plane to somewhere, anywhere but here, where the opportunity  
41  
42 arises to be present with those we normally only read, where we can listen and speak and  
43  
44 be heard. All of us, despite the nonsense of the journal ranking systems, want our ideas read  
45  
46 by others and know more people will read us if we publish in high ranked journals. Perhaps  
47  
48 we all hope that maybe our work *is* good enough that we will get such publications,  
49  
50 promotions will follow and at some point we will no longer be anxious about our work,  
51  
52 about ourselves. To which the portfolio says 'yes, rehearse your case with me, try it out for  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



size here, see how impressive you can make yourself sound' - in the 2348 characters allowed.

Yes, there is suffering being induced by all this. But I can also sense the shame we have in speaking of this suffering: first world problems, these. I don't want to be this person who complains in this fashion, who gripes and moans in this manner. I imagine adopting a cool, professional detachment from all this. I try to conceive myself that it is merely an administrative task. Can we deride it as a feeble mechanism of control relative to the many hours of freedom we do have? Perhaps these are strategies for coping. But they are not strategies for achieving change.

Justin thinks that the email exchanges are telling. He has pushed the group to produce and a kind of – kindly – teasing develops.

**Natalie to Justin**

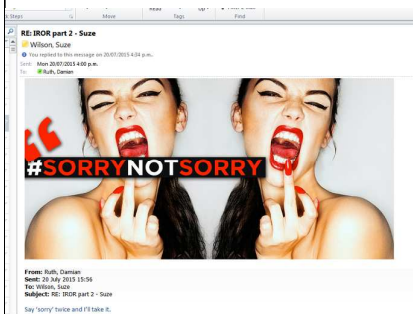
master, master, you said 500 words. Here they are. I hope they please you master. Actually its really only 498 words. Will that do master?

**Justin to Natalie**

Say 'sorry' twice and I'll take it.

**Natalie to Justin**

Like this you mean:



Humour helps....

### Rangi on us

I cannot help thinking how pathetic all these reflections seem. Privileged and well-educated academics complaining about the accountability regimes imposed upon us. Should we have been expecting something different? Have we assumed academia is a rose garden? Where does autonomy end and accountability begin? Are we supposed to be the free minds who are supposed to teach and do research? For whom are we here? For whom do we teach and research? What is our function here? Do we believe a fantasy that we created together about business schools, management departments and scholarship?

We are broken, we are alone and we are marginalised and who is to blame other than us? Where is the enemy here? How to fight? I cannot find answers, only whining and complaints. Complying with the discipline for the sake of attending conferences, for the sake of promotions, for the sake of reputation. Is this the way of defending our dignity, is this the way of protecting the integrity of our work? We have already become the cogs of the bureaucratic-managerial evil sitting in the ivory tower, to what extent are we close to the real problems? To what extent can we change the grim realities of the world – poverty, inequality, environmental destruction? Shall we talk about them or whine about ourselves? To what extent do we do real critical work? We have already sold our bodies and souls for a career, for a conference, for a reputation, for an A\* publication. How can we speak about Marx and the possibilities of changing the world while we are so much engaged with the system and have failed to confront what is given to us? I wonder whether Foucault would submit his IROR portfolio today. Would Lacan still be part of a university? We are kings and queens of self-deception in the kingdom of selfishness. Why do we bother to write about

**Justin thinks it is important that we include Rangi's email to which the above was attached:**

Kia ora les miserables!

As attached is how I feel after reading our reflections, I am definitely part of it and, yes, I also hate myself now!

See you tomorrow!

URL: <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/gsco>

Rangi

1  
2  
3 ourselves anyway? It is a war already lost; we either suck this up, play our game of self-  
4  
5 deception that we are doing something good or we should find another job.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 Benedict on us

11  
12 In 1980 Lacan disbanded his own school (which he suggested had become like a  
13 university). His concern rested on what he calls the discourse of the university – the social  
14 bond that positions knowledge in such a way as to produce, faithfully, citizens that  
15 reproduce its own knowledge. Reading our ‘scholarship’, for me there is no doubt that we  
16 are firmly in the university, we are compliant citizens of this institution, producing the same  
17 CMS speak that has oozed from the margins of the business school for more than 20 years.  
18  
19 Why do we do this? I think that anxiety is complicit.  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27

28  
29 In psychoanalysis, anxiety grows as the gap between desire and jouissance narrows,  
30 it grows as we become perilously close to the unsymbolizable Real. Perhaps then it is the  
31 IROR – with its flattening of subjectivities to facades of ‘excellence’ – that works as one  
32 mechanism to expose the fragility of our Real existence as subjects in the university. The  
33 institution simply does not care for our scholarly integrity: it does not care for our ‘space’;  
34 we are EFTs on the spreadsheet of the finances. Usually we are able to insert a spacer into  
35 this vacuum, to place the community of scholars between us and the Real-ity of the  
36 ridiculistic game of clones that is today’s neoliberal university. Indeed this exercise we are  
37 undertaking right now is rebuilding our scholarly subjectivities and thus undermining the  
38 anxiety that the IROR system exposes. It resists the Real.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
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48  
49  
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51  
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53

54 Justin thinks Benedict’s email is important as well:

55 Mine is added to Rangi’s... Together we have only 580 words – Natalie is more compliant ;-)  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### Trying freeform

And now, suggests Justin, let us try to write freeform. Imagine the bridge is falling, this is the chance to say your last words. No need to be modest. How about:

"Is there a direction and meaning in lives beyond the individual's own will?"

The ropes have broken. We are falling. We grasp the last opportunity to write.

### Natalie

#### **A new Socratic dialogue for discovering the truth about the modern university**

##### *Imagined Memo #1*

To: The masters of the university

From: Natalie, the junior academic

Re: IROR

Dear Sirs

Please be advised my colleagues and I are suffering anxiety, fear, frustration and anger at your requirement that we document our excellence. We are quite undone by all this. We are revolted by your methods and their reliance on 'quality' 'standards' that are actually profoundly unreliable indicators of 'quality', whatever that is. These requirements distract from our focus on teaching and research. What can you do to make things better?

Yours etc.

##### *Imagined Memo #2*

To: Natalie, the junior academic

From: The masters of the university

1  
2  
3 Re: your un-dated memo re IROR  
4

5 The purpose of the IROR exercise is to enable staff to reflect on their research  
6  
7 achievements, articulate their contribution to knowledge and identify the plans by which  
8  
9 you intend to enhance that contribution. We agree that you are indeed quite revolting, with  
10  
11 your complaining attitude simply an annoying distraction for us in advancing our careers as  
12  
13 strategic leaders of the university. What we want, to make things better, is to have you all  
14  
15 stop this whinging and get on and publish in some more A\* journals. We really don't care  
16  
17 what you publish, so long as it gets in high ranked journals: that is the degree of freedom  
18  
19 you have and you should be grateful for it. And by the way, we don't care about your  
20  
21 feelings: we have an Employee Assistance Provider to deal with those.  
22  
23  
24  
25

26  
27 Yours etc  
28  
29  
30  
31

32 *Imagined Memo #3*  
33

34 To: The masters of the university  
35

36 From: Natalie, the junior academic  
37

38 Re: your un-dated memo regarding my un-dated memo re IROR  
39  
40

41 So, if I've got this right, the nature of the Faustian pact you offer is that we can write  
42  
43 whatever we like, including work that derides the thinking that guides your every action, so  
44  
45 long at that work gets published in high ranked journals? You simply don't care about what  
46  
47 we actually produce, so long as it appears in 'excellent' publications. Your concern is form,  
48  
49 not substance. Would you have us apply the same thinking to our teaching?  
50  
51  
52

53  
54 Yours etc  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *Imagined Memo #4*  
4

5 To: Natalie, the junior academic  
6

7 From: The masters of the university  
8

9 Re: your un-dated memo regarding our un-dated memo regarding your un-dated memo  
10 re IROR  
11

12  
13 Why must we go to such lengths to spell things out for you? What we expect from  
14 you is excellent research and excellent teaching. The more the better! We will measure your  
15 efforts using standards and methods that are fundamentally arbitrary and not to be trusted.  
16  
17 You will shut up about this, because without adherence to such practices we won't get the  
18 funding that pays your salary. Now do you understand?  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24  
25 Yours etc  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

31 *Imagined Memo #5*  
32

33 To: The masters of the university  
34

35 From: Natalie, the junior academic  
36

37 Re: your un-dated memo regarding my un-dated memo regarding your un-dated memo  
38 regarding my un-dated memo re IROR  
39  
40

41 Crystal clear, masters. But given the great vacuity that is your intended universe-ity,  
42  
43 if it all just gets too much for those who still think their work should mean something is  
44  
45 there a hemlock allowance in our collective agreement?  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52

53 **Justin**  
54

55  
56 **A letter with attachments**  
57  
58  
59  
60

Dear Dad

Times are turbulent. I might be sliding towards the end of a career. I had hoped for better. I am now at the age, maybe a bit older, that you were when you were made redundant. I remember the shock and anxiety (I had already left home so it's a bit hazy) followed by the smug satisfaction as you had to be rehired on a consultancy basis. Managers rarely know what to do with engineers. My god, 30 years later and you still work part-time! You have done well.

Do you remember the poem I wrote when I got my Master's? I am still writing poems. Sometimes I write to my students and nowadays also to myself.

Love

Justin

### **My father, my degree**

I went to university because my father couldn't and with every lecture brushed more of the coaldust of Lancashire off my self.

Today the depth of my inheritance is on a sheet of paper in a blue plastic tube and I stand with my father on Jameson steps.

I pass it to him gently and tenderly and this stocky, white-haired, un-degreed engineer grasps it, with me, in his stubby fingers.

It is December, and we screw up our eyes against the sun. We are in the new country. The coaldust between us is thinning. His father could not read very well.

Perhaps it is this that saves us from hell  
- that by the grace of our fathers  
we have such stories to tell;  
stories that tell us who and what we are,  
but that don't get told in the seminar.

**My student, your degree**

Welcome to the university.  
Terms and conditions apply.  
You are a customer?  
Slip your coin into the slot,  
And let the Archimedes screw  
Deliver what you've got.

You have a bought a service.  
The lectures, the convenient access,  
the grading, the final tick;  
but oh, you should lament  
and worry less about what percent.

Mistaking fate for good or bad luck  
is the downfall of the stupid shmuck;  
you seek a bargain, the value-add  
but forget who does the arithmetic.  
It's you, not me or Dad.

Leave the two dollar shop.  
There is something more profound.  
Here at the fountain of knowledge  
there's always room. C'mon round.

**Academic reflection**

The tranquillity or terror  
of reflection shatters  
under weight and din  
of evidence gathered  
for self-surveillance.

We are all one-armed bandits  
in fluorescent pits  
filing form after form,  
byte after byte.

There is no need  
to cease utterings,  
nor lend an ear;  
neither needs the other  
for what is happening here.



1  
2  
3 I confess  
4 - in Powerpoint of course -  
5 to many imagined bullets.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 **Rangi**

11  
12 **Abridged text from an email (actual email insert removed for anonymity):**

13  
14  
15 *We have been falling already, not individually, but collectively, as academics, as scholars, as*  
16 *managers, as students, as society ...*  
17

### 18 19 **Benedict**

20  
21  
22 **Abridged text from an email (actual email insert removed for anonymity):**

23  
24 *It ain't gonna happen Justin. I'm ill. This is all I have: Emancipation comes through lack of*  
25 *signifiers.*  
26  
27

28  
29  
30  
31 "The business of literature is not to answer questions, but to state them fairly."  
32

33 Thornton Wilder  
34

35  
36 THE END  
37

38 Well, it wasn't the end.  
39

40  
41 We agreed that we had to 'jump', and finally submit. That is, get this piece published. So we  
42 agreed that we would each write our final piece independently of each other and Justin  
43 would collate them, and we then would have a meeting to finally wind things up, which  
44 hopefully would include talking about how things would not be finally wound up, but that  
45 maybe this piece could be a catalyst to further work.  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

51 Justin starts off again ...  
52  
53  
54

55  
56  
57 **Get out of the couch!**  
58

1  
2  
3 I accept that there may be no end to this exchange. The challenge is to find a point at  
4  
5 which it may be useful to present this to colleagues. (That is code for 'getting it published'.)  
6

7  
8 I am grateful to 'G' and 'A' for their responses. I think we are fortunate to have such  
9  
10 colleagues and my response is a tribute to their insight.  
11

12  
13 'G's' response at first made me ask "why must there always be a couching of the  
14  
15 contribution?" in relation to the existing literature. Does one ask of a poem or a painter  
16  
17 "does this say something that has never been said before?", and then start trawling through  
18  
19 archives to find a similar set of words or colours. It seems that, like American comedians, we  
20  
21 have to tell 'em what we're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what we've told 'em.  
22  
23 Why, if 'G' finds it a 'highly interesting and personal read' and connects with several of the  
24  
25 experiences and feelings, and 'likes the multiple voices' that are not always harmonious  
26  
27 which is "perhaps the most important/interesting aspect of the paper", and finds *The Bridge*  
28  
29 *of San Luis Rey* – and the role of the Friar – a fascinating conceit for the set-up of the paper,  
30  
31 does he feel that he still wants to know "what, exactly, will your distinctive contribution be  
32  
33 to that corpus of writing [on contemporary academic labour/the neoliberal university in the  
34  
35 West/performativity and research evaluation schemes]?"  
36  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 I am not rejecting 'G's' enquiry but suggesting that it is not for us to answer. The  
42  
43 question, from our point of view, is more properly rephrased and directed to the academic  
44  
45 community as follows: is our condition, and the ways in which we write about our condition  
46  
47 connected? To put the question in another way, are the forms and substance of our (the  
48  
49 royal academic 'we' here) inquiries distinct? To paraphrase Yeats, can we know the dancer  
50  
51 from the dance? I would elaborate; how trustworthy are our current forms of writing?  
52  
53 Isadore Duncan replied to the question "what does your dance mean?" with the answer "If I  
54  
55 could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it."  
56  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 Yes, we have presented a piece that is methodologically problematic. Presumably  
4 this is what motivates 'G' to suggest that we "might also consider a (methodological) section  
5 on the writing process and approach". My response is – we have, in the way we have  
6 written it. Our 'methodological section' starts on page one and runs right through the paper.  
7  
8 As does our 'core research question', which is not Wilder's: "Is there direction and meaning  
9 in lives beyond the individual's own will?" Our core research question, which is not limited  
10 to the context of academic labour in one New Zealand university, has no ultimate answer. I  
11 am asking what does it mean to be an academic? And I wanted to ask that question in a way  
12 that breaks our current chains of thought. And I think those chains of thought are wrought  
13 by our writing. 'A' rightly points out there are counterpoints between neo-liberal regimes  
14 and micro-practices/ aggression. Well, when reviewers (that's us!) demand of writers  
15 (that's us!) specific kinds of engagement in the politics of writing it's time for us to tell us to  
16 fuck off! We must stop ourselves from perpetrating micro-practices of aggression. The  
17 collective is not a fantasy. We are it. It R us!

18  
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32  
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34  
35  
36  
37  
38 Then Rangi weighs in ...

### 39 40 41 **The lost voices...**

42  
43  
44  
45 When you are disciplined by 'the university', you need to know 'for whom you write',  
46 'how you engage with the previous discussion' and 'how to contribute to the ongoing  
47 dialogue'. This is how the academy works, right? Yet, when you want to do something  
48 different, it is not an easy task. You need to overcome the usual barriers related to the  
49 nature of the academic work. There is not much space to write alternatively/differently and  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 make your voice heard. You have to structure your artisan work with the knowledge of the  
4  
5 academy.  
6

7  
8 It is an interesting point how we came to this moment again. We were complaining,  
9  
10 whining and possibly resisting futilely about the audit regimes upon us. Nothing is black or  
11  
12 white obviously, yet it is hardly likely a large transformation will sweep all these issues  
13  
14 before us. It is a matter of concern for us how to subvert this system while still being  
15  
16 engaged with it. Searching for proper (but limited) outlets to share our (critical) work, but  
17  
18 always kept accountable by these outlets ranking At some point it is not important what you  
19  
20 write but where you write, and of course, to write as much as possible. Is this real  
21  
22 scholarship? Perhaps there is nothing like 'real scholarship', but at least we know the basics  
23  
24 in terms of academic work: reading, writing and discussing. It is the one-way, arbitrary,  
25  
26 homogenised and ranked way of doing academic work which we contest. Haven't we all  
27  
28 fallen from the bridge because of these measures?  
29  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 How do we go from complaining about such audit regimes to the discussion of the  
35  
36 disciplinary measures of academic writing? While our concern is to provoke a discussion  
37  
38 about how we are structured by institutional regimes, another layer is added with the  
39  
40 requirements related to academic writing. Cite these and those, give a structure to your  
41  
42 text, act in the norms, and tell us what your point is. Otherwise, there is no place for your  
43  
44 voice in the journal outlets. Is this a fair struggle? Is there a point to this fight? Is there a  
45  
46 chance that our voice will be heard?  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 I am afraid this piece will end up being published in a blog post where there is more  
52  
53 freedom but less recognition. With limited access to our colleagues and without initiating a  
54  
55 provocation, I am not sure to what extent we will be all satisfied with the argument put in  
56  
57 here. Artistic free style writing confronts academic writing. I guess the artist does not have  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 much chance here and our voices will be lost in one of the derelict webpages, as our cries  
4  
5 have been lost while we have been falling from the bridge. Can we go anywhere from here?  
6  
7

8  
9  
10 Then Benedict ...  
11

12  
13  
14 I'm currently thinking about at least eight scholarly papers that I'm supposedly  
15  
16 'working on'. Because I try to avoid trudging about in the empirical muck (despite this piece  
17  
18 generating empirical muck) usually I write with theory. So I'm writing about neo-vitalism,  
19  
20 radical psychoanalysis, post-Lacanian feminisms, Hegelian dialectics, and even a little bit on  
21  
22 Nietzsche and permissiveness. What a complete privilege this is, to be reading and writing  
23  
24 broadly in the space that I want to be. It is a most enjoyable life, even if it takes up much  
25  
26 more time than I'm officially paid for.  
27  
28

29  
30  
31 Alongside this enjoyable working life we are struggling financially – despite me  
32  
33 earning more than twice the average income for a New Zealander, my family unit is  
34  
35 relatively poor by averages. We earn about \$500 a week less than the average family in New  
36  
37 Zealand and the price of everything continues to rise. We also have a child with special  
38  
39 needs – and a government that would prefer we didn't.  
40  
41

42  
43 What this means is that I'm living a problem, a relatively simply problem of not  
44  
45 enough income to sustain our costs of living. So, I have to do other work – precarious work  
46  
47 really – well paid, but fleeting and tenuous. Thus in my 'real' job I have learnt (and I am  
48  
49 learning) to be as efficient as possible, read bits of books, abstracts, understand complex  
50  
51 theory as fast as possible and hope the reviewers are doing the same. Seems like a bit of a  
52  
53 sham really, but it seems to be working – after all we just got an A\*, didn't we, Rangi (and  
54  
55 Ralph – I wish you were here)?  
56  
57  
58  
59

Poor Justin faced me in the lunchroom two days ago, pained, as I was the last off the rank to write this remaining piece. I explained my (our) workload predicament, he said just read what 'A' and 'G' wrote (and their feedback was lovely) and blurt out something in response. So I did just that, I skimmed their thoughtful responses thinking "Jesus, where did they find the time to write that" and blurted out this. Now I'm going to stop writing, go and pick up my child with special needs and go home to do the 'Other' work, so I can pay the vet bill. In this instance it seems that the big Other does exist.

And finally Natalie ...

***Why do we speak thus?***

We have received feedback on our story thus far from colleagues whom we respect and admire. It resonates for them. They recognise the landscape, the feelings, the demands, the pressure. We four are not alone on this bridge. And as writers we have communicated something which those readers could understand and relate to, something which gave them cause to reflect on their own experiences. Our words had some impact.

Our colleagues encourage, also, theorizing of our experiences, discussion of our methodological approach and greater clarity as to the distinctiveness of our contribution. I am so tempted by this. I love theory and theorizing. It helps me make sense of things. I love methodological conversations where the concern is to reflexively, philosophically, explore the production and presentation of knowledge, not simply offer an account of issues of technique. I love being able to propose to my reader 'here is how my ideas shift the focus or dimensions of the existing conversation, bringing something new to the table'. I am also sufficiently well trained in the ways of the academy to recognise the legitimacy of the advice

1  
2  
3 we've been given, how following it would serve to render our work credible according to the  
4  
5 established norms of academic knowledge production.  
6

7  
8 But I am also inclined to say, let that wait. First, let this strange combination of  
9  
10 ramblings and wonderings and thrashings about be shared as it is, to see what the  
11  
12 community makes of it. Can we treat it as a piece of performance art which (self-  
13  
14 )consciously refuses to explain itself, which demands the viewer to make of it what *they*  
15  
16 will? Might we not focus on its effects on its readers and then theorize that. Can this, as it  
17  
18 stands, provoke change or insight? Is it worth anything, to anyone, as a means of making  
19  
20 sense of their experience? Does it make a difference to you, my unknown reader, if I say  
21  
22 writing this, in this way, helps me? It makes me feel freer, stronger, calmer, less alone,  
23  
24 better able to place the audit regime in perspective, to reduce it, in my mind at least, to an  
25  
26 administrative irritant, rather than the insatiable and harsh judge of my work. Perhaps you  
27  
28 also could gain such benefits from this practice, this experiment. Might we understand all  
29  
30 this as an exercise in critically performative practice, not only in respect of what it says but  
31  
32 in how it insists on saying it? (And, oh, am I simultaneously theorizing our methodology and  
33  
34 pointing to the nature of our contribution in saying this?)  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 In our demand to speak *as* we have about *what* we have, we have rejected both the  
42  
43 safety and the strictures of normal academic writing. The necessity to speak thus points to  
44  
45 the epistemic limits of The Academy, of its inability or refusal, through its normalized  
46  
47 routines and rituals of knowledge production, to *give an account of* the tension-filled way of  
48  
49 being that appears here as the academic subject who is disciplined by audit regimes in ways  
50  
51 that such beings recognise viscerally, not just intellectually. I have stretched myself out,  
52  
53 here, looking for ways to say that which cannot normally be said, to say that which cannot  
54  
55 be said otherwise without losing its own truthfulness. As with my yoga practice, I am made  
56  
57  
58  
59

1  
2  
3 stronger and freer by this experience. I have this moment. I can come back at any moment  
4  
5 to revisit this moment. The audit regime cannot ever take this from me. Standing on the  
6  
7 bridge with my colleagues I am made free, not to fall, but to fly.  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 -x-  
13  
14  
15

16  
17 As we were collating our final contributions, School members received an email from  
18  
19 – Mmmm ... now there's a good question; it was from a senior academic in the School  
20  
21 responsible for leading research activity, it was from the powers that be, it was from the  
22  
23 State, it was from the neo-liberal axis of whatever, it came from a place deep in our psyches,  
24  
25 it was from ... - well, wherever it was from, it exhorted us to "submit, submit, submit".  
26  
27 We submit.  
28  
29  
30

31 -x-  
32  
33

34 And so we did. We submitted the piece to a highly regarded journal, and we received  
35  
36 a thoughtful, respectful and constructive response. Our collective decision was for each of  
37  
38 us to offer our final word and then submit it to the special issue of *Culture and Organization*  
39  
40 on anxiety and writing differently.  
41  
42

43 So, from Justin:  
44

45 I have mixed feelings now. I accept that editorship is a role, and we are testing that  
46  
47 role. We have received a thoughtful, respectful and constructive response which I  
48  
49 appreciate. Various issues are raised. The following paragraph is especially challenging:  
50  
51

52 *The lack of direct connection to the critical literature on research assessment and*  
53 *its confessional method raises serious questions about the role the 'journal' or*  
54  
55 *the readers are expected to play. The paper does not seem to address readers*  
56  
57  
58  
59



1  
2  
3 *and remains silent about the journal as well. What message do you want to*  
4  
5 *convey to readers with this 'different writing'? Is the journal expected to be a*  
6  
7 *kind silent 'big ear', or an arbiter of taste or a political patron or some other*  
8  
9 *purpose?*

10  
11  
12 I appreciate the analysis and accept that the editor has raised valuable questions.  
13  
14 Indeed, what is the role of a journal? Why is it essential to directly connect with "the"  
15  
16 literature? Is this article only about research assessment? How should authors address  
17  
18 readers? What if the whole point is to challenge the rules of engagement? And so on ...  
19  
20

21  
22 We seem now to be on a treadmill and a rather small one at that. The editor/author  
23  
24 of the above quote is echoing critical friends and on we go. We wait for a different voice.  
25  
26 We hope, but perhaps we are doomed to hear only the wails of editorial anxiety echoing our  
27  
28 own anxiety.  
29  
30

31  
32 I do not want to rewrite something different into something the same. And I insist  
33  
34 that until we (the royal 'we' of academia) are prepared to write and read about  
35  
36 organizational life differently, our efforts to create different kinds of organizations will be  
37  
38 hamstrung. Is the point here to get something published in a good journal so that it counts  
39  
40 towards an audit, or is it to have a conversation to which we do not yet see the end but over  
41  
42 which we will not compromise? If it is the former, count me out. And with this plethora of  
43  
44 metaphors about narcissistic hamsters in an echo chamber I silently descend into the ravine.  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54

55 From Rangj  
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3 While the entire process has been liberating, in the end, it feels like there is no space  
4  
5 to escape from the anxiety of the 'community of practice' in the academy. Another  
6  
7 'interesting but theoretically under-developed' paper for the journals, a fun and engaging  
8  
9 but different academic exercise for us!  
10  
11

12  
13  
14  
15 From Benedict

16  
17 As if to emphasise the futility and violence of the contemporary academic workplace  
18  
19 I bumped into a very worried colleague from another department a week ago. She and I are  
20  
21 writing a manuscript for an A-ranked journal and she is waiting on my contribution so we  
22  
23 can submit, finally. Her worry was that her performance appraisal is scheduled for the 26th  
24  
25 of September at 11am (two weeks almost exactly from the time I am writing this) and she  
26  
27 has been told to expect a "a difficult conversation" regarding her performance (basically her  
28  
29 managers want her to publish more). She thinks it won't be so bad if we at least submit the  
30  
31 ms. I feel her anxiety as if it is my own, because of course, it is my own. Hence, I need to go  
32  
33 and work on that ms now, rather than this one.  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 From Natalie

42  
43 Justin wants our 'final words'. I hope these are not them, but with my mortality in  
44  
45 mind its worth reflecting on what is the nature and value of this effort? I feel concern for  
46  
47 you, dear reader, that, if you have made it this far, you are by now disappointed, frustrated  
48  
49 and confused. We provided something akin to an abstract to get things underway, as you  
50  
51 would have expected, but since then convention has been ripped asunder. Where was the  
52  
53 literature review leading to the 'gap' into which this piece seeks to insert itself, along with  
54  
55 its accompanying research question? We have simply assumed that you already know  
56  
57  
58  
59  
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1  
2  
3 contemporary academic life is being ruined by a neoliberal, managerialist 'logic' and that  
4  
5 more needs to be said and done to understand (and resist) this.  
6  
7

8  
9 Perhaps you can forgive that (wilful, determined) omission, but where, then, was the  
10  
11 discussion of method? Indeed, what method of inquiry and analysis is this, this strange mix  
12  
13 of personal musings interspersed with musings about the others' musings, poetry and email,  
14  
15 both real and make-believe? I suppose we could have carefully referenced a post-modern  
16  
17 ethos which seeks to twist and bend conventional form and genre out of shape, testing the  
18  
19 limits of what is knowable and sayable; we could have spoken, too, of auto-ethnography  
20  
21 and collective ethnography and reflexivity and so forth. But again, it seems likely you are  
22  
23 already familiar with such notions, so was it really necessary to belabour them here?  
24  
25  
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27

28  
29 I suspect, then, that our greatest offense lies in the refusal to 'theorize' from the  
30  
31 'empirical' of our experiences so as generate findings and implications that form a clearly  
32  
33 articulated contribution to knowledge. But we do refuse, here, to abstract, conceptualise  
34  
35 and thematise in any way that takes you, dear reader, away from directly confronting the  
36  
37 painful, confusing and occasionally joyful experiences we share here about what it is like for  
38  
39 us to live and work under the current regime of audits and 'excellence'. Simply, the stories  
40  
41 matter and deserve to be heard. I have spoken to enough colleagues from other parts of the  
42  
43 world to know their stories are similar. Adding such stories to the archive helps build an  
44  
45 understanding of the extent and nature of the harm that is being done, as well as  
46  
47 constituting a form of praxis that is helpful in coping with the pressures and impossible  
48  
49 demands that are placed upon us.  
50  
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54  
55 These are but 'first world problems,' but nonetheless the pain is real, as are the  
56  
57 moments of joy. This piece is, for me, an account of our struggle to live and work, where we  
58  
59

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2  
3 aim to do that which constitutes our best, most thoughtful and rigorous effort to say  
4  
5 something that carries a truth within it, but carried out within a harsh context that will  
6  
7 never, ever be satisfied with what we have done. On the bridge, then, as we carry out our  
8  
9 work, we face on a daily basis the risk of falling to our death and the opportunity to fly.  
10  
11 Strive as we might, the regime has an insatiable hunger for more and demands that some  
12  
13 must fall. Would you kindly pray for us sinners now?  
14  
15

16  
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20 -x-

21 THE END

22 Honestly! Promise!

23 (We mean the end of this submission ... )  
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## The Bridge at IROR: Speaking out and Talking Back

### ABSTRACT

We are a group of academics at the same university who were recently asked to produce portfolios for an Institutional Review of Research (IROR). At a presentation supporting the development and production of this institutional review at which all four of us were present, we raised questions and afterwards reflected:

Natalie: "I wanted to cry."

Rangi: "How do I resist?"

Benedict: "I am unattached and entertained."

Justin: "I am frightened and furious."

One of us set in motion the following discussion, adopting the conceit of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, by Thornton Wilder to ask ourselves why we do what we do. We find ourselves at a point – is it a crisis point, a point of self-revelation, a point of decision? Or is this all too grand a posture? We offer our stories of how we are crossing the Bridge at IROR.

-x-

#### Natalie

So the first thing I hear is around November/December that the university has decreed we are to do a mock research assessment exercise due for completion by the end of the following June. I am in the midst of the summer school madness and am briefly irritated by the whole thing but have no time to engage. I roll out the back end of summer school by completing my marking in the Xmas break so that I will have time to write 2 conference papers by mid January - after which I start the frantic effort to get ready for semester 1 teaching. The weekly 'research update', or whatever it's called, starts the nagging but I just hit 'delete' every time without reading it. By March I accept this exercise is not going away so periodically start adding 'items' to my list of 'research outputs' (things I wrote that got beyond my computer), 'peer esteem' (who bothered to read my work and comment positively on it and who of 'higher rank' I have connections with) and my

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2  
3 'contribution to the research environment' (how I've tried to support others to do good  
4  
5 work). I am resentful of the extra work on top on my teaching, which is all consuming with  
6  
7 500 plus 1<sup>st</sup> years. Can't 'they' just google scholar me to see most of this information  
8  
9 anyway? And 'they' know who I'm supervising so why do I have to waste my time telling  
10  
11 'them' this?  
12  
13

14  
15 As the semester progresses and the screeching from the top of the institution  
16  
17 intensifies, workshops are convened to 'help' us understand the process. I decide I had  
18  
19 better find out exactly how onerous this all is. The session I attend is 'led' in a masterfully  
20  
21 commanding, emphatic manner by a very senior academic of the university. Their discourse  
22  
23 initially seems intended to bring us into a state of acceptance: 'we academics' are to  
24  
25 understand the assessment system 'definitely isn't perfect'. There are 'valid criticisms' that  
26  
27 can be made of it. Just not here and now it seems. However, 'despite its flaws' it is a  
28  
29 'legitimate and reasonable expectation by government to find out how its money is spent':  
30  
31 rhetorically we are set up, then, to accept that there is no alternative to all this.  
32  
33 Simultaneously, however, the audit regime is also presented to us as an 'opportunity' to tell  
34  
35 others 'how fantastic you are and your research is' - even though it is also portrayed as 'a  
36  
37 game – a game about how to get as much money and pedigree as possible'. That's the 'big  
38  
39 picture, strategic view' of it all, then: the audit regime is simultaneously definitely flawed,  
40  
41 unavoidable, legitimate, reasonable, an opportunity, a game – but none of that are we here  
42  
43 to talk about, instead we are just here to understand the rules of this perverse game,  
44  
45 namely shameless self-promotion.  
46  
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52  
53 As we get to the tactics of how to actually prepare one's portfolio, the tenor of  
54  
55 commentary also becomes more demanding: expectations of the standards we are to meet  
56  
57 are now more clearly articulated and it's clear that inadequate performance relative to  
58  
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1  
2  
3 these standards simply isn't good enough. We are now clearly those who must be  
4  
5 instructed, commanded and managed in order that we enhance our performance. Thus, our  
6  
7 portfolio is expected to 'show progression of intellectual growth, breadth and authority'.  
8  
9 We should account for not just what we publish but where: journal rankings rule here, ok.  
10  
11 We should be able to 'explain the questions we are exploring to test the boundaries of my  
12  
13 discipline'. There is no scope for a wandering mind simply moved by curiosity here.  
14  
15

16  
17 Alarmingly, if we publish with others we should 'claim everything if the other  
18  
19 authors are overseas' (yes, that was said) and make sure that our narratives highlight 'what I  
20  
21 contributed, how am I contributing, what I did', with the emphasis clearly on the "I" not the  
22  
23 "we". When it's clear the audience is starting to squirm uncomfortably in response to such  
24  
25 comments we are told 'that is unfortunately the way you have to play it' and, in direct  
26  
27 contradiction to what was said just moments earlier, that 'the code of research conduct sits  
28  
29 above all this' and we must 'be a community of good conduct – be honest and generous  
30  
31 about the contribution of others'. The blatant contradictions in the advice given are not  
32  
33 acknowledged.  
34  
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38  
39 There is no substantive debate about any of this: people know that to challenge this  
40  
41 particular office holder is a career limiting move for this small town university. The  
42  
43 discourse used seeks to legitimate this exercise and its various crude and manipulative  
44  
45 tactics for 'success'. Me? I feel disgust. I feel disgust that an institution which I (naively?  
46  
47 idealistically?) believe should advance community values and encourage integrity in  
48  
49 research, is now expecting us to engage in this morally bereft piece of game playing. I also  
50  
51 feel powerless, as it's clear whatever concerns I and others have about this nothing will be  
52  
53 discussed publically and the expectation to comply will be achieved.  
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3 As the deadline moves ever closer the weekly nagging continues, now from multiple  
4  
5 sources throughout the university hierarchy. I attend another workshop designed to 'help'  
6  
7 us construct our 'portfolio narrative', the soul destroying script of 2348 characters through  
8  
9 which we are to account for how 'excellent' we are. Attempts to question the effects of this  
10  
11 regime on academic values are abruptly silenced, dismissed as off topic. We may enquire  
12  
13 here into issues of technique, of method, but not of the wider purpose or effects of this  
14  
15 practice. Our role now is reduced to one of script following, as 'exemplars' are paraded  
16  
17 before us as to what constitutes a 'good portfolio'. Again it is made explicit how we are to  
18  
19 self-promote, to downplay the contribution of others. This deception, this destruction of  
20  
21 community, is expected. The person running this workshop is not an academic but an  
22  
23 administrator, symbolizing the power this managerial regime has over how academics are to  
24  
25 narrate their research. I want to cry. This is not what I came back to university life for. This is  
26  
27 not a world I feel I can survive in. At least in the corporate world, self-assessments of  
28  
29 performance usually involve consideration of areas for improvement as well as of strengths,  
30  
31 a process that now feels dramatically more authentic than this. Here we have to polish up  
32  
33 this glowing statement of our excellence – in order that it can then be denigrated by  
34  
35 unseen, unknown others who conduct the audit and assign us with grades.  
36  
37  
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43 I complete my portfolio with a grim sense of my own lack of power. I tell them what  
44  
45 they want to hear. I write of prizes and journal rankings and esteemed professors with  
46  
47 whom I have worked. What have been sources of pleasure and pride becomes matters I can  
48  
49 now call on to keep the institution at bay. I feel disgusted in myself and the university for  
50  
51 what I have written. But I really want my conference funding and I fear losing it if I refuse to  
52  
53 comply. I go for a long run to try to sweat away this sense of disgust, but it lingers on. We  
54  
55 academics comprise the most highly educated amongst the population. If we know so much,  
56  
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3 how come we have let ourselves become such slaves to this regime? I might howl with  
4  
5 frustration at all this, but I know no-one who can change it is listening.  
6  
7  
8

9  
10 **Rangi**

11  
12 Reminder e-mails keep coming: have you submitted your draft portfolio? Closer to  
13  
14 the deadline for submission, IROR specialists call for attendance to workshops or drop-in  
15  
16 sessions: please join us so that we can teach you how to present yourself in terms of  
17  
18 excellence. We are expected to learn how to choose our research elements wisely and how  
19  
20 to write 'excellent' narratives telling how our research is outstanding. In our performance  
21  
22 reviews, we are asked how our research proceeds along with the requirements of PBRF or  
23  
24 the ABDC list, so that we become good organisational citizens who would bring further state  
25  
26 funding to our college and department. We are asked by our managers to submit to A\*  
27  
28 ranked journals rather than B ranked journals while it is stated it is our discretion in the end.  
29  
30 While we know that there is no written rule or penalty regarding not to obey these  
31  
32 demands, we mostly comply with them.  
33  
34  
35  
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38  
39 We all know that rankings are not good for genuine research, that the expectations  
40  
41 of managers are different than ours, that the success of research should not be tied to such  
42  
43 mechanisms. Yet, what I observe is that we do not resist enough to challenge this system to  
44  
45 which we are subjected .  
46  
47

48  
49 We complain and whine about the stupidity of ranking structures at staff meetings  
50  
51 or in our coffee chats. We want to open up new discussion avenues, we write about all of  
52  
53 these in our journal articles (possibly at A\* journals), but still we cannot intervene into these  
54  
55 institutional mechanisms and managers following the orders from the top. Some aim to take  
56  
57 part in decision-making mechanisms to challenge the system from inside, yet, the overall  
58  
59  
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1  
2  
3 system wins – play the game, publish in high ranking journals, get higher grades in PBRF,  
4  
5 follow the rules of which we can never be part . Some enjoy playing the game, some  
6  
7 question the rules of the game, and some do not want to accept the overall idea of the  
8  
9 game. Yet, we still play it either intentionally or unintentionally. Some suggestions to by-  
10  
11 pass the system alienate the academic further from the idea of scholarship (e.g. first give  
12  
13 what system needs, play the game and then do whatever you want).  
14  
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16  
17 The questions follow: what are you complaining about? Why do you not resist?  
18  
19 What do you want?  
20  
21

22 The problem is that the technology of scholarship has changed significantly and the  
23  
24 reason of our existence is defined by some others, which is imposed upon us via different  
25  
26 ranking and grading regimes. It is expected that we publish continuously in high ranked  
27  
28 journals, but such journals have limited epistemologies and ontologies. Two issues arise  
29  
30 here: it is not possible to publish continuously, since as academics we need to read, discuss,  
31  
32 digest and write and re-write what we have been dealing with. Simply we need time.  
33  
34 Secondly, high ranking journals mean orthodoxy and mainstream, hence if you have an  
35  
36 alternative research agenda (such as critical work with alternative methodologies), it may  
37  
38 take years to get into such outlets. How can you survive then in an institution asking what  
39  
40 have you published this year in high ranking journals and aiming to keep you accountable  
41  
42 with such ranking and grading mechanisms?  
43  
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48 Some may believe that they resist such mechanisms by giving voice at meetings,  
49  
50 discussing these issues in journals, constructing alternative subjectivities, or taking part in  
51  
52 decision-making organs. Perhaps these are the only actions we can take; however, we are  
53  
54 still so far away from changing this system. My point is that as long as we are part of this  
55  
56 mechanism and system we can only mess around with the idea of resistance or creating  
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3 some fractures in the system. However, overall, we are squeezed, stuck and do not know  
4  
5 how to resist. Playing on subjectivities, constructing alternative positions seem like the best  
6  
7 option to make us feel that we do our bit to resist, yet the mechanisms are still there, and as  
8  
9 responsible scholars we are supposed to obey and comply with the expectations. Is there a  
10  
11 way not to be assessed by PBRF? What is our alternative? While our survival is tied to such  
12  
13 disciplinary mechanisms, I do not see a transformative resistance potential. We do not have  
14  
15 an alternative. In fact, unless you quit the system by resigning, you are already part of this  
16  
17 system.  
18  
19

20  
21  
22 Then, can we imagine an alternative university? What do we really want? Beginning  
23  
24 from the latter question, we want to do research how we wish to do it by being  
25  
26 accountable to our own scholarly community. Rather than ranking journals, we should  
27  
28 accept them as communities we talk to. Then, the best option seems to keep doing what we  
29  
30 do at its best: do critical work, criticise the system and let others know how it works, how it  
31  
32 disciplines us. Create your own outlet, your own scholarly community (creating fractures  
33  
34 still?). Fight for legitimacy every time you publish in such outlets no matter how exhausting  
35  
36 this is. Believing small steps can bring broader change options (fantasy?), do your best. Most  
37  
38 likely we will be alone, marginalised and disappointed, and probably there is no alternative  
39  
40 and ideal university. Yet, our genuine work is the only thing we have and we can at least  
41  
42 resist for its integrity and change potential.  
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48

### 49 **Benedict**

50  
51  
52 For almost all of my education and working life people have told me that I am  
53  
54 bordering on excellence. That all I need to do is work a little harder/smarter/differently and  
55  
56 I'll have made it! Yet for almost all of this time I've giggled at the ridiculousness that the signifier  
57  
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3 'excellence' is with regard to work. Before I met with Lacanian theory I found the  
4  
5 'excellence' game part and parcel of the desperation that seemed to accompany the  
6  
7 uncritical belief in the requirement for success. That we needed to be successful in order to  
8  
9 be moral. This never really troubled me in terms of work, perhaps because I found it difficult  
10  
11 to conceptualise of a moral/ideological framework that made sense to me: Religion – no.  
12  
13 Capitalism – no. Nationalism – no.  
14  
15

16  
17 Where 'excellence' does infiltrate my life is with regard to my embodiment – here I  
18  
19 excelled at equating my body with an ideal and hating/berating/backdating it. Here I made  
20  
21 every attempt to demonstrate my 'excellence' and completely failed. The Other judged me  
22  
23 by their exacting (but constantly shifting) standards so I never knew where I was – and I still  
24  
25 don't. This is how I can understand the suffering of my colleagues under the incessant gaze  
26  
27 of the 'excellence' framework – for me it is a humourous fiction – a ridiculistic game of  
28  
29 clones – populated by peculiarities and a logic that no-one understands, particularly those  
30  
31 who constantly reinforce it, precisely because it is structurally un-understandable.  
32  
33  
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36 Following Jones and Spicer (2005) it must be clear to Lacanians that 'excellence' in  
37  
38 academic systems of quality is an empty signifier, *par excellence* (please excuse the pun). A  
39  
40 perfect example of a signifier without substance, something that needs a lacking subject to  
41  
42 gain any clarity – a speaking being willing to populate it with their field of signifiers in order  
43  
44 to build an 'excellence' narrative to plop into the PBRF portfolio. Without the subject there  
45  
46 is no 'excellence', just a hole. In this way I personally take great pleasure in looking into the  
47  
48 abyss and, as Neitschze would probably appreciate, 'getting off' by seeing what looks back  
49  
50 at me. In practical terms I really enjoyed arguing with the hierarchy over the 'quality' rating  
51  
52 of the journal *Critical Public Health*. So I tossed ISI ratings, citation levels and the like into  
53  
54 the abyss and giggled uproariously at the tripe that bounced back, as well as being slightly  
55  
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3 perturbed by their apparent belief in their own judgement systems! The beast in the abyss  
4  
5 was uglier than I first imagined, but no less impotent.  
6

7  
8 The question that then emerges for me is what if anything is the point of resistance?  
9  
10 Here I must turn back to body weight. I resist the continued threat of 'excellence' here by  
11  
12 never being weighed. Through this tiny act of resistance I deny the empty signifier just one  
13  
14 piece of data, thus demonstrating its inconsistency, and forcing it to deal with its own  
15  
16 anxiety. Most of the time this is very simple, because I don't own scales and it is easy to  
17  
18 avoid it – but what happens when medicine needs to know my weight for a size dependent  
19  
20 drug dose? And of course there are many more data points available with which to clobber  
21  
22 myself over the head – pants size, comments from people I know, running performance to  
23  
24 name a few.  
25  
26  
27

28  
29 We can already see a certain resistance within our own collegial climate with regard  
30  
31 to the so-called IROR. Half the College of Sciences ignored the requirement. A great many  
32  
33 people fudged the results or purposefully missed important information. These acts of  
34  
35 resistance do not equate to a rejection of the empty signifier 'excellence', in fact most are  
36  
37 simply resisting the bureaucracy of 'excellence' but probably accept that they need to be  
38  
39 judged. Our challenge is to point the empty signifier back at itself. Lacan would call this  
40  
41 hystericizing the signifier, we need to resist by saying – that's not it! That's not excellence!  
42  
43 and crucially by ignoring the hierarchy's reaction, which is to say: "Well tell us then,  
44  
45 academy, what is it?" If we answer that query, we are fucked.  
46  
47  
48  
49

50  
51  
52  
53 **Justin**  
54

55 First there is the frustration. I can't cope with the software and the constant struggle  
56  
57 to track details and act like an anal bureaucrat. I see the value of being organized, but this is  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 not getting organized, this is feeding the machine. And the machine has a badly designed  
4  
5 mouth that wastes my time.  
6

7  
8 I am sick of myself. I repeatedly invent something called Justin for various  
9  
10 consumers; a promotion committee, a performance review, a prospective employer.  
11  
12 Inventing opportunities. Putting myself up for sale. The plastic consultant. I do this to  
13  
14 myself. So on what grounds do I ask those 4x4 A\* professors, “when did you become an  
15  
16 intellectual whore?” Or is there a difference here? One presents the facts of a life, at a slant,  
17  
18 for a particular purpose. We do it when we are courting a partner or an employer. We have  
19  
20 personas and CVs. What is the problem?  
21  
22

23  
24 The problem is the value base and choice I can make about what to present. I come  
25  
26 to some sense of what I value, and that provides the criteria by which I judge the value of  
27  
28 my actions. In the face of performance review linked to rubbish criteria, I have no basis on  
29  
30 which to present my work.  
31  
32

33  
34 Or is all this just self-justification for not being good enough? Would I be writing this  
35  
36 now if I had just received a few successful submissions to an A\* journal? And don't the  
37  
38 rejections just prove that I cannot write good enough stuff? And so we go round and round,  
39  
40 because I know it is not about whether I can write good enough stuff. It must be partly so,  
41  
42 but it is also true that I just cannot bring myself to write the tedious nit-picking trivia that  
43  
44 does get published. At the same time, I have sometimes – only sometimes though – read  
45  
46 good stuff in ‘top’ journals. Where is the way through?  
47  
48

49  
50 There is maelstrom of fear, anxiety and inadequacy that is being stoked by the  
51  
52 confrontation with IROR. It does things to me. It feels toxic and harmful. It raises my anxiety  
53  
54 levels.  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 But all of that is distinct from the rage, although they may be linked. I can see that  
4  
5 we are, with the IROR, moving towards the destruction of much that I hold dear. It doesn't  
6  
7 just feel toxic. It is so, and the evidence is plentiful. It is part of a larger picture, and I think  
8  
9 that it is the sight of intelligent colleagues conniving in their own destruction and playing  
10  
11 into a larger game of destruction that appals me. I do not see the IROR as an isolated event.  
12  
13 It is part of the same process that has University Councils reduced to clones of wealthy  
14  
15 white male commercial lawyers. It is part of the de-democratisation of societies. It plays into  
16  
17 the concentration of wealth, power and privilege that is being advanced globally. In a way,  
18  
19 my question "what about those of us who aspire to be normal?" could be altered to "what  
20  
21 about equity, transparency and justice?" And from that, "what about a healthy diversity of  
22  
23 thought?" I have in mind that great tradition of contestation and insight exemplified by  
24  
25 George Orwell, Martha Nussbaum, Henry Giroux, David Orr, Eli Wiesel, Paolo Freire and  
26  
27 so many others. When I start writing from this point of view, fear, anxiety and feelings of  
28  
29 inadequacy evaporate. But this point of view does not get published in A\* journals.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 This point of view *cannot* routinely get published in A\* journals. A\* journals by  
37  
38 definition/ranking engage in an endless cycle of self-serving banality. This is also well-  
39  
40 documented. Thus, by feeding the machine we are not just playing a game; we are active  
41  
42 construction workers, doing our bit to undermine and exclude marginal discourse. That is to  
43  
44 say, we connive in creating that which we detest.  
45  
46  
47

48 Where does that leave me? Do I now on principle not submit work to A\* journals?  
49  
50 How self-defeating would that be? Do I actively and explicitly contest at every public event,  
51  
52 such as IROR workshops? Any in any case, to what extent is what I am experiencing only  
53  
54 true of CMS scholars and those informed by the humanities? Do physicists, chemists, civil  
55  
56 engineers, accountants and others have the same issues? Well, apparently not, and in any  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 case, the humanities have been undermined for decades. I mean, who needs art? Just look  
4  
5 at Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* or listen to Orff's *Carmina Burana* and obviously all one need  
6  
7 ask is "does this contribute to economic growth? Will listening to this improve my  
8  
9 employability?"  
10

11  
12 Can we draw some productive contrasts with art and artists, social workers? I am an  
13  
14 educator, and education is research. That is what makes me a researcher, not processing  
15  
16 customers. In the long run, according to Keynes, we are all dead. Long before then, we are  
17  
18 all losers. All of us; academics, students, institutions and society at large.  
19  
20

21  
22 And now I must complete my IROR portfolio. I have just received a curt email from  
23  
24 my HoS: "Can you please ensure you have completed your EP and submitted it by 5pm  
25  
26 today." And I will, because I can see what is coming. All future conference/funding  
27  
28 applications will be granted or refused on the basis of one's IROR portfolio. And I want to go  
29  
30 to conferences this year and next year. So I comply. It's called enlightened self-interest. Or  
31  
32 prostituting myself. Is that too harsh? Let's call it a trade-off.  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

### 38 Coda

39  
40 Justin reads all the stories and offers the following (with the implicit question of why  
41  
42 'us' and 'them').  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

<u>Us</u>	<u>Them</u>
<p>49 So we write of irritation, lack of time, 50 being nagged, feeling resentful, frustration 51 at being asked to do needless work, and 52 eventually, even, disgust. And this proceeds 53 to disappointment, powerlessness and a 54 sense of enslavement. The reminders keep 55 coming and we do not resist. This is puzzling. 56 We don't have the time to do what we need</p>	<p>57 They decree. They require. They use 58 discourse to acknowledge their lack of 59 perfection, then the subtle shift to legitimate 60 their demand. Then the game is an opportunity, it's just a strategy. Then the game has its demands. The opportunity is to be called to account. Ethics get dodgy, questions are quelled. Our unease is taken</p>



<p>to do, to do what we are employed to do. How can our ethos survive? What are our alternatives? Is acting merely fantasy? Is action a defence? Is theorising a defence? Dismiss the game? Let us tease them, and not let ourselves get emotionally or conceptually entailed in the project. Is becoming fearful, anxious, and succumbing to feelings of inadequacy a failure or a sign of health? Rage seems a healthy option.</p>	<p>for lack. We are offered help: the master's helping hand is proffered but we must not bite it. The script demands deception, but remember it's only a game. The premise is false, we know it. But the rules are implacable. They are vast, they are Gorgon-like. They are the matrix.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Do you agree? Do you choose?</p>
--	--

Justin ponders further on our collective discussion. He thinks we should explore the value of us looking at each other, for more critique embedded in collegial trust. Perhaps developing high levels of trust amongst ourselves may lead to greater trust in ourselves and thereby greater authority and authenticity. This is an end in itself, but it is also the grounds for resistance. Well, at least that is the idea. First we must pursue the claims we have made about how we cope with a situation we detest. And why we cope with it.

He suggests to the others that we each write up individual reflections on us, our personal responses to each of other and how **we** are. "This," he writes, "will push along the narrative. We are now all on the bridge together. What are the individual stories that led us to this place? That is another possible way of expanding our contribution – our individual stories to date. What do you think?"

And he writes the final sentence: "Also, note that submissions close in 20 days".

### **A view from the bridge**

So we each now write on us, separately.

### **Justin on us**

1  
2  
3           In *How to be an intellectual* Jeffrey Williams recounts the degeneration/ decline/  
4 deterioration of the status/ image/ reputation of academics. It's a sad story, but one that is  
5 perhaps more piquant to Justin rather than Natalie, Rangi or Benedict. Justin is older than  
6 the others and has been an academic for 25 years. This is not irrelevant. Justin feels that  
7 Benedict and Rangi do not know what they have missed: a golden age of University. Justin  
8 fears/feels that Natalie knows better/more than him. After all, Justin has not had a great  
9 corporate career like her, and he always feels he is yearning after it – oh how he would love  
10 to claim an illustrious list of corporate clients! But alas, he is merely an academic and not  
11 one of those wonderful hybrids who traverse the academic, corporate and media worlds. At  
12 one of our meetings, Justin hears Natalie say that she could earn three times as much back  
13 in the corporate world, and he heard Benedict say that he was offered \$200k a year but  
14 turned it down. That's about twice Justin's salary as a senior lecturer, and more than the top  
15 scale of a professor, and Benedict is a junior lecturer. Justin feels shame. He should have  
16 done better. He is, if he were to subscribe to such frames of reference, in the twilight his  
17 career, but he refuses to engage with this perspective. He wonders if Benedict is  
18 exaggerating and then feels ashamed that he questions this. Why would Benedict do so?  
19 Justin notes what seems to him Rangi's discomfort at these disclosures. Justin feels an  
20 irritation with Benedict at Benedict's apparent sang froid, his confidence in self-  
21 proclamation. He distrusts it and appreciates it at the same time. Justin feels an affinity for  
22 Rangi, who seems to be anguished by his position as an academic, a father, a family man  
23 with responsibilities who has loyalties to both a profession and a love of family and maybe,  
24 Justin hesitates to claim, a keen sense of exile and alienation, and therefore, vulnerability.  
25 He suspects that this is something neither Benedict nor Natalie would easily understand.  
26 Also, Justin is the product of a political struggle in South Africa, where he learnt early that

1  
2  
3 education was a potent political weapon. He thinks that Rangi has some sense of this  
4  
5 political urgency, and again, is not sure that Benedict and Natalie have it, certainly not to  
6  
7 the same extent.  
8

9  
10 What are the implications?  
11

### 12 13 14 **Natalie on us** 15

16  
17 What I see in our stories is the varying ways in which the audit and 'excellence'  
18  
19 regime works upon us. It makes us angry, fearful, resentful, anxious or bemused by its  
20  
21 arcane and bizarre nature, at the same time as we cannot ignore its capacity to discipline  
22  
23 our behaviour, to measure ourselves against its standards of perfection and find ourselves  
24  
25 wanting. It preys upon us by finding specific points of vulnerability, generating the sense  
26  
27 that our reaction to this is a reflection on ourselves, not a consequence of its intended  
28  
29 effects. It seeks out and finds the Justin who worries far more than he should about  
30  
31 whether his work is good enough, who is harsh toward himself, and it stirs that Justin up. It  
32  
33 finds the Rangi who doesn't simply want to study resistance but to incite it, to practice it,  
34  
35 and it is unrelenting in demanding compliance, submission, seeking to shame this Rangi into  
36  
37 a being that is to be ashamed of itself. It discovers the guilty, anxious Natalie, the one whose  
38  
39 partner now works long hours because of her rejection of a corporate career, and it keeps  
40  
41 asking of her 'what makes your work good enough, that your partner should suffer for you  
42  
43 to do it?' It finds the Benedict who wants to provide better for his family, to feel less  
44  
45 trapped by the bills that must be paid, and demands a down-payment on a future  
46  
47 promotion.  
48  
49

50  
51 It finds, too, particular points of exchange it will have us enter into. Justin and  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57 Natalie both crave conference attendance, will put up with this nonsense to ensure our  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 chances of getting on a plane to somewhere, anywhere but here, where the opportunity  
4  
5 arises to be present with those we normally only read, where we can listen and speak and  
6  
7 be heard. All of us, despite the nonsense of the journal ranking systems, want our ideas read  
8  
9 by others and know more people will read us if we publish in high ranked journals. Perhaps  
10  
11 we all hope that maybe our work *is* good enough that we will get such publications,  
12  
13 promotions will follow and at some point we will no longer be anxious about our work,  
14  
15 about ourselves. To which the portfolio says 'yes, rehearse your case with me, try it out for  
16  
17 size here, see how impressive you can make yourself sound' - in the 2348 characters  
18  
19 allowed.  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 Yes, there is suffering being induced by all this. But I can also sense the shame we  
25  
26 have in speaking of this suffering: first world problems, these. I don't want to be this person  
27  
28 who complains in this fashion, who gripes and moans in this manner. I imagine adopting a  
29  
30 cool, professional detachment from all this. I try to conceive of it as merely an  
31  
32 administrative task. Can we deride it as a feeble mechanism of control relative to the many  
33  
34 hours of freedom we do have? Perhaps these are strategies for coping. But they are not  
35  
36 strategies for achieving change.  
37  
38  
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Justin thinks that the email exchanges are telling. He has pushed the group to produce and a kind of – kindly – teasing develops.

**Natalie to Justin**

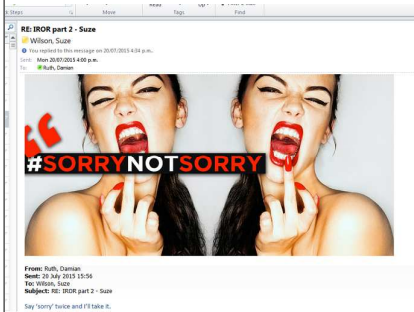
master, master, you said 500 words. Here they are. I hope they please you master. Actually its really only 498 words. Will that do master?

**Justin to Natalie**

Say 'sorry' twice and I'll take it.

**Natalie to Justin**

Like this you mean:



Humour helps....

### Rangi on us

I cannot help thinking how pathetic all these reflections seem. Privileged and well educated academics complaining about the accountability regimes imposed upon us. Should we have been expecting something different? Have we assumed academia is a rose garden? Where does autonomy end and accountability begin? Are we supposed to be the free minds who are supposed to teach and do research? For whom are we here? For whom do we teach and research? What is our function here? Do we believe a fantasy that we created together about business schools, management departments and scholarship?

1  
2  
3 We are broken, we are alone and we are marginalised and who is to blame other  
4 than us? Where is the enemy here? How to fight? I cannot find answers, only whining and  
5 complaints.. Complying with the discipline for the sake of attending conferences, for the  
6 sake of promotions, for the sake of reputation. Is this the way of defending our dignity, is  
7 this the way of protecting the integrity of our work? We have already become the cogs of  
8 the bureaucratic-managerial evil sitting in the ivory tower, to what extent are we close to  
9 the real problems? To what extent can we change the grim realities of the world – poverty,  
10 inequality, environmental destruction? Shall we talk about them or whine about ourselves?  
11 To what extent do we do real critical work? We have already sold our bodies and souls for a  
12 career, for a conference, for a reputation, for an A\* publication. How can we speak about  
13 Marx and the possibilities of changing the world while we are so much engaged with the  
14 system and have failed to confront what is given to us? I wonder whether Foucault would  
15 submit his IROR portfolio today. Would Lacan still be part of a university? We are kings and  
16 queens of self-deception in the kingdom of selfishness. Why do we bother to write about  
17 ourselves anyway? It is a war already lost; we either suck this up, play our game of self-  
18 deception that we are doing something good or we should find another job.  
19  
20  
21  
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41  
42

43 **Justin thinks it is important that we include Rangi's email to which the above was attached:**

44 *Kia ora les miserables!*

45 *As attached is how I feel after reading our reflections, I am definitely part of it and, yes, I also hate*

46 *myself now!*

47 *See you tomorrow!*

48 *Rangi ]*

### Benedict on us

In 1980 Lacan disbanded his own school (which he suggested had become like a university). His concern rested on what he calls the discourse of the university – the social bond that positions knowledge in such a way as to produce, faithfully, citizens that reproduce its own knowledge. Reading our ‘scholarship’, for me there is no doubt that we are firmly in the university, we are compliant citizens of this institution, producing the same CMS speak that has oozed from the margins of the business school for more than 20 years. Why do we do this? I think that anxiety is complicit.

In psychoanalysis, anxiety grows as the gap between desire and jouissance narrows, it grows as we become perilously close to the unsymbolizable Real. Perhaps then it is the IROR – with its flattening of subjectivities to facades of ‘excellence’ – that works as one mechanism to expose the fragility of our Real existence as subjects in the university. The institution simply does not care for our scholarly integrity: it does not care for our ‘space’; we are EFTs on the spreadsheet of the finances. Usually we are able to insert a spacer into this vacuum, to place the community of scholars between us and the Real-ity of the ridiculistic game of clones that is today’s neoliberal university. Indeed this exercise we are undertaking right now is rebuilding our scholarly subjectivities and thus undermining the anxiety that the IROR system exposes. It resists the Real.

Justin thinks Benedict’s email is important as well:

Mine is added to Rangi’s... Together we have only 580 words – Natalie is more compliant ;-)

**CODA**

And now, suggests Justin, we can write freeform, the bridge is falling, this is the chance to say your last words. No need to be modest. How about:

"Is there a direction and meaning in lives beyond the individual's own will?"

# ROAR!

The ropes have broken. We are falling. We grasp the last opportunity to write.

**Natalie****A new Socratic dialogue for discovering the truth about the modern university***Imagined Memo #1*

To: The masters of the university

From: Natalie, the junior academic

Re: IROR

Dear Sirs

Please be advised my colleagues and I are suffering anxiety, fear, frustration and anger at your requirement that we document our excellence. We are quite undone by all this. We are revolted by your methods and their reliance on 'quality' 'standards' that are actually profoundly unreliable indicators of 'quality', whatever that is. These requirements distract from our focus on teaching and research. What can you do to make things better?

Yours etc.

*Imagined Memo #2*



1  
2  
3 To: Natalie, the junior academic  
4

5 From: The masters of the university  
6

7 Re: your un-dated memo re IROR  
8

9  
10 The purpose of the IROR exercise is to enable staff to reflect on their research  
11 achievements, articulate their contribution to knowledge and identify the plans by which  
12 you intend to enhance that contribution. We agree that you are indeed quite revolting, with  
13 your complaining attitude simply an annoying distraction for us in advancing our careers as  
14 strategic leaders of the university. What we want, to make things better, is to have you all  
15 stop this whinging and get on and publish in some more A\* journals. We really don't care  
16 what you publish, so long as it gets in high ranked journals: that is the degree of freedom  
17 you have and you should be grateful for it. And by the way, we don't care about your  
18 feelings: we have an Employee Assistance Provider to deal with those.  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

31 Yours etc  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 *Imagined Memo #3*  
39

40 To: The masters of the university  
41

42 From: Natalie, the junior academic  
43

44 Re: your un-dated memo regarding my un-dated memo re IROR  
45

46  
47 So, if I've got this right, the nature of the Faustian pact you offer is that we can write  
48 whatever we like, including work that derides the thinking that guides your every action, so  
49 long at that work gets published in high ranked journals? You simply don't care about what  
50 we actually produce, so long as it appears in 'excellent' publications. Your concern is form,  
51 not substance. Would you have us apply the same thinking to our teaching?  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Yours etc  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8

9  
10 *Imagined Memo #4*

11 To: Natalie, the junior academic

12  
13 From: The masters of the university

14  
15 Re: your un-dated memo regarding our un-dated memo regarding your un-dated memo  
16 re IROR  
17

18  
19 Why must we go to such lengths to spell things out for you? What we expect from  
20 you is excellent research and excellent teaching. The more the better! We will measure your  
21 efforts using standards and methods that are fundamentally arbitrary and not to be trusted.  
22 You will shut up about this, because without adherence to such practices we won't get the  
23 funding that pays your salary. Now do you understand?  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

31  
32 Yours etc  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38  
39 *Imagined Memo #5*

40 To: The masters of the university

41  
42 From: Natalie, the junior academic

43  
44 Re: your un-dated memo regarding my un-dated memo regarding your un-dated memo  
45 regarding my un-dated memo re IROR  
46  
47

48 Crystal clear, masters. But given the great vacuity that is your intended universe-ity,  
49 if it all just gets too much for those who still think their work should mean something is  
50 there a hemlock allowance in our collective agreement?  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 **Justin**  
4

5 **A letter with attachments**  
6

7 Dear Dad  
8

9  
10 Times are turbulent. I might be sliding towards the end of a career. I had hoped for  
11  
12 better. I am now at the age, maybe a bit older, that you were when you were made  
13  
14 redundant. I remember the shock and anxiety (I had already left home so it's a bit hazy)  
15  
16 followed by the smug satisfaction as you had to be rehired on a consultancy basis. Managers  
17  
18 rarely know what to do with engineers. My god, 30 years later and you still work part-time!  
19  
20 You have done well.  
21  
22

23  
24 Do you remember the poem I wrote when I got my Master's? I am still writing  
25  
26 poems. Sometimes I write to my students and nowadays also to myself.  
27  
28

29 Love  
30

31 Justin  
32  
33  
34

35 **My father, my degree**  
36

37 I went to university because my father couldn't  
38  
39 and with every lecture brushed more of the  
40  
41 coaldust of Lancashire off my self.

42 Today the depth of my inheritance  
43  
44 is on a sheet of paper in a blue plastic tube  
45  
46 and I stand with my father on Jameson steps.

47 I pass it to him gently and tenderly  
48  
49 and this stocky, white-haired, un-degreed engineer  
50  
51 grasps it, with me, in his stubby fingers.

52 It is December, and we screw up our eyes against the sun.  
53  
54 We are in the new country. The coaldust between us is thinning.  
55  
56 His father could not read very well.

57 Perhaps it is this that saves us from hell  
58  
59 - that by the grace of our fathers  
60

1  
2  
3 we have such stories to tell;  
4 stories that tell us who and what we are,  
5 but that don't get told in the seminar.  
6  
7

### 8 9 **My student, your degree**

10  
11 Welcome to the university.  
12 Terms and conditions apply.  
13 You are a customer?  
14 Slip your coin into the slot,  
15 And let the Archimedes screw  
16 Deliver what you've got.  
17  
18

19  
20 You have a bought a service.  
21 The lectures, the convenient access,  
22 the grading, the final tick;  
23 but oh, you should lament  
24 and worry less about what percent.  
25

26  
27 Mistaking fate for good or bad luck  
28 is the downfall of the stupid shmuck;  
29 you seek a bargain, the value-add  
30 but forget who does the arithmetic.  
31 It's you, not me or Dad.  
32

33  
34 Leave the two dollar shop.  
35 There is something more profound.  
36 Here at the fountain of knowledge  
37 there's always room. C'mon round.  
38  
39

### 40 41 **Academic reflection**

42  
43 The tranquillity or terror  
44 of reflection shatters  
45 under weight and din  
46 of evidence gathered  
47 for self-surveillance.  
48  
49

50  
51 We are all one-armed bandits  
52 in fluorescent pits  
53 filing form after form,  
54 byte after byte.  
55

56  
57 There is no need  
58 to cease utterings,  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 nor lend an ear;  
4 neither needs the other  
5 for what is happening here.  
6

7  
8 I confess  
9 - in Powerpoint of course -  
10 to many imagined bullets.  
11

12  
13  
14 **Rangi**

15  
16 [Brief email exchange deleted for anonymising]  
17

18 **Benedict**

19  
20 [Brief email exchange deleted for anonymising]  
21  
22  
23  
24

25 -x-  
26

27 "The business of literature is not to answer questions, but to state them fairly."  
28

29 Thornton Wilder  
30

31  
32 THE END  
33

34 Well, it wasn't the end.  
35

36  
37 We agreed that we had to 'jump', and finally submit. That is, get this piece published. So we  
38 agreed that we would each write our final piece independently of each other and Justin  
39 would collate them, and we then would have a final meeting to finally wind things up, which  
40 hopefully would include talking about how things would not be finally wound up, but that  
41 maybe this piece could be a catalyst to further work.  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52

53 Justin starts off again ...  
54  
55

56  
57 **Get out of the couch!**  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 I accept that there may be no end to this exchange. The challenge is to find a point at  
4  
5 which it may be useful to present this to colleagues. (That is code for getting it published.)  
6

7  
8 I am grateful to G and A for their responses. I think we are fortunate to have such  
9  
10 colleagues and my response is a tribute to their insight.  
11

12  
13 G's response at first made me ask "why must there always be a couching of the  
14  
15 contribution?" in relation to the existing literature. Does one ask of a poem or a painter  
16  
17 "does this say something that has never been said before?", and then start trawling through  
18  
19 archives to find a similar set of words or colours. It seems that, like American comedians, we  
20  
21 have to tell 'em what we're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what we've told 'em.  
22  
23 Why, if G finds it a 'highly interesting and personal read' and connects with several of the  
24  
25 experiences and feelings, and 'likes the multiple voices' that are not always harmonious  
26  
27 which is "perhaps the most important/interesting aspect of the paper", and finds *The Bridge*  
28  
29 *of San Luis Rey* – and the role of the Friar – a fascinating conceit for the set-up of the paper,  
30  
31 does he feel that he still wants to know "what, exactly, will your distinctive contribution be  
32  
33 to that corpus of writing [on contemporary academic labour/the neoliberal university in the  
34  
35 West/performativity and research evaluation schemes]?"  
36  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 I am not rejecting G's enquiry but suggesting that it is not for us to answer. The  
42  
43 question, from our point of view, is more properly rephrased and directed to the academic  
44  
45 community as follows: is our condition, and the ways in which we write about our condition  
46  
47 connected? To put the question in another way, are the forms and substance of our (the  
48  
49 royal academic 'we' here) inquiries distinct? To paraphrase Yeats, can we know the dancer  
50  
51 from the dance? I would elaborate; how trustworthy are our current forms of writing?  
52  
53 Isadore Duncan replied to the question "what does your dance mean?" with the answer "If I  
54  
55 could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it."  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Yes, we have presented a piece that is methodologically problematic. Presumably  
4  
5 this is what motivates G to suggest that we “might also consider a (methodological) section  
6  
7 on the writing process and approach”. My response is – we have, in the way we have  
8  
9 written it. Our ‘methodological section’ starts on page one and runs right through the paper.  
10  
11 As does our ‘core research question’, which is not Wilder’s: “Is there direction and meaning  
12  
13 in lives beyond the individual’s own will?” Our core research question, which is not limited  
14  
15 to the context of academic labour in one New Zealand university, has no ultimate answer. I  
16  
17 am asking what does it mean to be an academic? And I wanted to ask that question in a way  
18  
19 that breaks our current chains of thought. And I think those chains of thought are wrought  
20  
21 by our writing. A rightly points out there are counterpoints between neo-liberal regimes and  
22  
23 micro-practices/ aggression. Well, when reviewers (that’s us!) demand of writers (that’s  
24  
25 us!) specific kinds of engagement in the politics of writing it’s time for us to tell us to fuck  
26  
27 off! We must stop ourselves from perpetrating micro-practices of aggression. The collective  
28  
29 is not a fantasy. We are it. It R us!  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41

42 Then Rangī weighs in ...

### 43 The lost voices...

44  
45  
46  
47  
48 When you are disciplined with the university, you need to know ‘for whom you  
49  
50 write’, ‘how you engage with the previous discussion’ and ‘how to contribute to the ongoing  
51  
52 dialogue’. This is how the academy works, right? Yet, when you want to do something  
53  
54 different, it is not an easy task. You need to overcome the usual barriers related to the  
55  
56 nature of the academic work. There is not much space to write alternatively/differently and  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 make your voice heard. You have to structure your artisan work with the knowledge of the  
4  
5 academy.  
6

7  
8 It is an interesting point how we came to this moment again. We were complaining,  
9  
10 whining and possibly resisting futilely about the audit regimes upon us. Nothing is black or  
11  
12 white obviously, yet it is hardly likely a larger transformation will sweep all these issues  
13  
14 before us. It is a matter of concern for us how to subvert this system while still being  
15  
16 engaged with it. Searching for proper (but limited) outlets to share our (critical) work, but  
17  
18 always kept accountable to what extent these outlets are ranked. At some point it is not  
19  
20 important what you write but where you write, and of course, to write as much as possible.  
21  
22 Is this real scholarship? Perhaps there is nothing like 'real scholarship', but at least we know  
23  
24 the basics in terms of academic work: reading, writing and discussing. It is the one-way,  
25  
26 arbitrary, homogenised and ranked way of doing academic work which we contest. Haven't  
27  
28 we all fallen down from the bridge because of these measures?  
29  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 How do we go from complaining about such audit regimes to the discussion of the  
35  
36 disciplinary measures of academic writing?. While our concern is to provoke a discussion  
37  
38 about how we are structured by institutional regimes, another layer is added with the  
39  
40 requirements related to academic writing. Cite these and those, give a structure to your  
41  
42 text, act in the norms, and tell us what your point is. Otherwise, there is no place for your  
43  
44 voice in the journal outlets. Is this a fair struggle? Is there a point to this fight? Is there a  
45  
46 chance that our voice will be heard?  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 I am afraid this piece will end up being published in a blog post where there is more  
52  
53 freedom but less recognition. With limited access to our colleagues and without initiating a  
54  
55 provocation, I am not sure to what extent we will be all satisfied with the argument put in  
56  
57 here. Artistic free style writing confronts academic writing. I guess the artist does not have  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 much chance here and our voices will be lost in one of the derelict webpages as our cries  
4  
5 have been lost while we have been falling from the bridge. Can we go anywhere from here?  
6  
7  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 Then Benedict ...  
13

14  
15  
16  
17 I'm currently thinking about at least eight scholarly papers that I'm supposedly  
18  
19 'working on'. Because I try to avoid trudging about in the empirical muck (despite this piece  
20  
21 generating empirical muck) usually I write with theory. So I'm writing about neo-vitalism,  
22  
23 radical psychoanalysis, post-Lacanian feminisms, Hegelian dialectics, and even a little bit on  
24  
25 Nietzsche and permissiveness. What a complete privilege this is, to be reading and writing  
26  
27 broadly in the space that I want to be. It is a most enjoyable life, even if it takes up much  
28  
29 more time than I'm officially paid for.  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 Alongside this enjoyable working life we are struggling financially – despite me  
35  
36 earning more than twice the average income for a New Zealander, my family unit is  
37  
38 relatively poor by averages. We earn about \$500 a week less than the average family in New  
39  
40 Zealand and the price of everything continues to rise. We also have a child with special  
41  
42 needs – and a government that would prefer we didn't.  
43  
44

45  
46 What this means is that I'm living a problem, a relatively simply problem of not  
47  
48 enough income to sustain our costs of living. So, I have to do other work – precarious work  
49  
50 really – well paid, but fleeting and tenuous. Thus in my 'real' job I have learnt (and I am  
51  
52 learning) to be as efficient as possible, read bits of books, abstracts, understand complex  
53  
54 theory as fast as possible and hope the reviewers are doing the same. Seems like a bit of a  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 sham really, but it seems to be working – after all we just got an A\*, didn't we, Rangi (and  
4  
5 Ralph – I wish you were here)?  
6

7  
8 Poor Justin faced me in the lunchroom two days ago, pained, as I was the last off the  
9  
10 rank to write this remaining piece. I explained my (our) workload predicament, he said just  
11  
12 read what A and G wrote (and their feedback was lovely) and blurt out something in  
13  
14 response. So I did just that, I skimmed their thoughtful responses thinking "Jesus, where did  
15  
16 they find the time to write that" and blurted out this. Now I'm going to stop writing, go and  
17  
18 pick up my child with special needs and go home to do the 'Other' work, so I can pay the vet  
19  
20 bill. In this instance it seems that the big Other does exist.  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26  
27 And finally Natalie ...  
28  
29  
30

31  
32 ***Why do we speak thus?***  
33  
34  
35

36 We have received feedback on our story thus far from colleagues whom we respect  
37  
38 and admire. It resonates for them. They recognise the landscape, the feelings, the demands,  
39  
40 the pressure. We four are not alone on this bridge. And as writers we have communicated  
41  
42 something which those readers could understand and relate to, something which gave them  
43  
44 cause to reflect on their own experiences. Our words had some impact.  
45  
46  
47

48 Our colleagues encourage, also, theorizing of our experiences, discussion of our  
49  
50 methodological approach and greater clarity as to the distinctiveness of our contribution. I  
51  
52 am so tempted by this. I love theory and theorizing. It helps me make sense of things. I love  
53  
54 methodological conversations where the concern is to reflexively, philosophically, explore  
55  
56 the production and presentation of knowledge, not simply offer an account of issues of  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 technique. I love being able to propose to my reader 'here is how my ideas shift the focus or  
4  
5 dimensions of the existing conversation, bringing something new to the table'. I am also  
6  
7 sufficiently well trained in the ways of the academy to recognise the legitimacy of the advice  
8  
9 we've been given, how following it would serve to render our work credible according to the  
10  
11 established norms of academic knowledge production.  
12  
13

14  
15 But I am also inclined to say, let that wait. First, let this strange combination of  
16  
17 ramblings and wonderings and thrashings about be shared as it is, to see what the  
18  
19 community makes of it. Can we treat it as a piece of performance art which (self-  
20  
21 )consciously refuses to explain itself, which demands the viewer to make of it what *they*  
22  
23 will? Might we not focus on its effects on its readers and then theorize that. Can this, as it  
24  
25 stands, provoke change or insight? Is it worth anything, to anyone, as a means of making  
26  
27 sense of their experience? Does it make a difference to you, my unknown reader, if I say  
28  
29 writing this, in this way, helps me? It makes me feel freer, stronger, calmer, less alone,  
30  
31 better able to place the audit regime in perspective, to reduce it, in my mind at least, to an  
32  
33 administrative irritant, rather than the insatiable and harsh judge of my work. Perhaps you  
34  
35 also could gain such benefits from this practice, this experiment. Might we understand all  
36  
37 this as an exercise in critically performative practice, not only in respect of what it says but  
38  
39 in how it insists on saying it? (And, oh, am I simultaneously theorizing our methodology and  
40  
41 pointing to the nature of our contribution in saying this?)  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 In our demand to speak *as* we have about *what* we have, we have rejected both the  
50  
51 safety and the strictures of normal academic writing. The necessity to speak thus points to  
52  
53 the epistemic limits of The Academy, of its inability or refusal, through its normalized  
54  
55 routines and rituals of knowledge production, to *give an account of* the tension-filled way of  
56  
57 being that appears here as the academic subject who is disciplined by audit regimes in ways  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 that such beings recognise viscerally, not just intellectually. I have stretched myself out,  
4  
5 here, looking for ways to say that which cannot normally be said, to say that which cannot  
6  
7 be said otherwise without losing its own truthness. As with my yoga practice, I am made  
8  
9 stronger and freer by this experience. I have this moment. I can come back at any moment  
10  
11 to revisit this moment. The audit regime cannot ever take this from me. Standing on the  
12  
13 bridge with my colleagues I am made free, not to fall, but to fly.  
14  
15

16  
17  
18  
19  
20 -x-  
21  
22  
23

24 As we were collating our final contributions, School members received an email from  
25  
26 – Mmmm ... now there's a good question; it was from a senior academic in the School  
27  
28 responsible for leading research activity, it was from the powers that be, it was from the  
29  
30 State, it was from the neo-liberal axis of whatever, it came from a place deep in our psyches,  
31  
32 it was from ... - well, wherever it was from, it exhorted us to "submit, submit, submit".  
33  
34  
35

36  
37  
38 We submit.  
39  
40

41 -x-  
42  
43  
44  
45

46 And so we did. We submitted the piece to a highly regarded journal, and we received  
47  
48 a thoughtful, respectful and constructive response. Our collective decision was to for each  
49  
50 of us to offer our final word and then submit it to the special issue of *Culture and*  
51  
52 *Organization* on anxiety and writing differently.  
53  
54

55  
56  
57 So, from Justin:  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3  
4  
5 I have mixed feelings now. I accept that editorship is a role, and we are testing that  
6  
7  
8 role. We have received a thoughtful, respectful and constructive response which I  
9  
10 appreciate.

11  
12 Various issues are raised. The following paragraph is especially challenging:

13  
14 *The lack of direct connection to the critical literature on research assessment and*  
15  
16 *its confessional method raises serious questions about the role the 'journal' or*  
17  
18 *the readers are expected to play. The paper does not seem to address readers*  
19  
20 *and remains silent about the journal as well. What message do you want to*  
21  
22 *convey to readers with this 'different writing'? Is the journal expected to be a*  
23  
24 *kind silent 'big ear', or an arbiter of taste or a political patron or some other*  
25  
26 *purpose?*  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 I appreciate the analysis and accept that the editor has raised valuable questions.  
35  
36 Indeed, what is the role of a journal? Why is it essential to directly connect with "the"  
37  
38 literature? Is this article only about research assessment? How should authors address  
39  
40 readers? What if the whole point is to challenge the rules of engagement? And so on ...  
41  
42

43  
44 We seem now to be on a treadmill and a rather small one at that. The editor of the  
45  
46 above quote echoes critical friends and on we go. We wait for a different voice. We hope,  
47  
48 but perhaps we are doomed to hear only the wails of editorial anxiety echoing our own  
49  
50 anxiety.  
51  
52

53  
54  
55 I do not want to rewrite something different into something the same. And I insist  
56  
57 that until we (the royal 'we' of academia) are prepared to write and read about  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 organizational life differently, our efforts to create different kinds of organizations will be  
4  
5 hamstrung. Is the point here to get something published in a good journal so that it counts  
6  
7 towards an audit, or is it to have a conversation to which we do not yet see the end but over  
8  
9 which we will not compromise? If it is the former, count me out. And with this plethora of  
10  
11 metaphors about narcissistic hamsters in an echo chamber I silently descend into the ravine.  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 From Rangi

25  
26  
27  
28  
29 While the entire process has been liberating, in the end, it feels like there is no space  
30  
31 to escape from the anxiety of the 'community of practice' in the academy. Another  
32  
33 interesting but theoretically less developed paper for the journals, a fun and engaging but  
34  
35 different academic exercise for us!  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 From Benedict

41  
42  
43  
44  
45 As if to emphasise the futility and violence of the contemporary academic workplace  
46  
47 I bumped into a very worried colleague from another department a week ago. She and I are  
48  
49 writing a manuscript for an A-ranked journal and she is waiting on my contribution so we  
50  
51 can submit, finally. Her worry was that her performance appraisal is scheduled for the 26th  
52  
53 of September at 11am (two weeks almost exactly from the time I am writing this) and she  
54  
55 has been told to expect a "a difficult conversation" regarding her performance (basically her  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 managers want her to publish more). She thinks it won't be so bad if we at least submit the  
4  
5 ms. I feel her anxiety as if it is my own, because of course, it is my own. Hence I need to go  
6  
7 and work on that ms now, rather than this one.  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 From Natalie

13  
14 Justin wants our 'final words'. I hope these are not them, but with my mortality in  
15  
16 mind its worth reflecting on what is the nature and value of this effort? I feel concern for  
17  
18 you, dear reader, that, if you have made it this far, you are by now disappointed, frustrated  
19  
20 and confused. We provided something akin to an abstract to get things underway, as you  
21  
22 would have expected, but since then convention has been ripped asunder. Where was the  
23  
24 literature review leading to the 'gap' into which this piece seeks to insert itself, along with  
25  
26 its accompanying research question? We have simply assumed that you already know  
27  
28 contemporary academic life is being ruined by a neoliberal, managerialist 'logic' and that  
29  
30 more needs to be said and done to understand (and resist) this.  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36  
37 Perhaps you can forgive that (wilful, determined) omission, but where, then, was the  
38  
39 discussion of method? Indeed, what method of inquiry and analysis is this, this strange mix  
40  
41 of personal musings interspersed with musings about the others' musings, poetry and  
42  
43 email? I suppose we could have carefully referenced a post-modern ethos which seeks to  
44  
45 twist and bend conventional form and genre out of shape, testing the limits of what is  
46  
47 knowable and sayable; we could have spoken, too, of auto-ethnography and collective  
48  
49 ethnography and reflexivity and so forth. But again, it seems likely you are already familiar  
50  
51 with such notions, so was it really necessary to belabour them here?  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
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1  
2  
3 I suspect, then, that our greatest offense lies in the refusal to 'theorize' from the  
4  
5 'empirical' of our experiences so as generate findings and implications that form a clearly  
6  
7 articulated contribution to knowledge. But we do refuse, here, to abstract, conceptualise  
8  
9 and thematise in any way that takes you, dear reader, away from directly confronting the  
10  
11 painful, confusing and occasionally joyful experiences we share here about what it is like for  
12  
13 us to live and work under the current regime of audits and 'excellence'. Simply, the stories  
14  
15 matter and deserve to be heard. I have spoken to enough colleagues from other parts of the  
16  
17 world to know their stories are similar. Adding such stories to the archive helps build an  
18  
19 understanding of the extent and nature of the harm that is being done, as well as  
20  
21 constituting a form of praxis that is helpful in coping with the pressures and impossible  
22  
23 demands that are placed upon us.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

29  
30 These are but 'first world problems,' but nonetheless the pain is real, as are the  
31  
32 moments of joy. This piece is, for me, an account of our struggle to live and work, where we  
33  
34 aim to do that which constitutes our best, most thoughtful and rigorous effort to say  
35  
36 something that carries a truth within it, but carried out within a harsh context that will  
37  
38 never, ever be satisfied with what we have done. On the bridge, then, as we carry out our  
39  
40 work, we face on a daily basis the risk of falling to our death and the opportunity to fly.  
41  
42 Strive as we might, the regime has an insatiable hunger for more and demands that some  
43  
44 must fall. Would you kindly pray for us sinners now?  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

51  
52 -x-

53 THE END

54 Honestly! Promise!

55 (We mean the end of this submission ... )  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60