

# Antipode

**Responses to the Participatory Geographies Research Group's 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security', September 2012**

## **Taking Stock in the Interim: The Stuck, the Tired, and the Exhausted**

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“The tired person has merely exhausted the realization, whereas the exhausted person exhausts the whole of the possible. The tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize...”

(Deleuze 1997: 152)

Like those geographers who penned the *Communifesto*, I, too, would like to see a university that provides access to students from diverse class backgrounds, values employees across employment categories, and fosters a supportive environment for multiple types of research and viewpoints. I appreciate the intellectual energy going into this project. I can only imagine the logistics and physicality of drafting, re-writing, and finalizing a manifesto that holds within it the passion each of the geographers of PyGyRG has for social justice. I certainly consider myself a kindred spirit.

Unlike those geographers who penned the *Communifesto*, I am not as optimistic. Perhaps it is burnout, for I am indeed discouraged. Or perhaps it is age, for I am no longer youthful in anything but my heart. Yet I am riddled with doubt that it is neither of these things. It seems to have more to do with not being able to draw on an effective resourcefulness, creativity, and innovation needed to transverse what is going on across campuses and ravelled within university processes and practices. Likewise, it is not so much for me a matter of being insecure or irrelevant for my political confidence is as strong as it

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ever was. For me, I think it is more the case that I am stuck. I am tired. And I think I might be exhausted. And when I read the *Communifesto*, I become more stuck, more tired, knowing that I have tried many of these tactics, with varying success. I want to become unstuck. I want to move. I want the university to transform.

So, in the spirit of developing fuller geographies—Duncan, I remember—I offer the following comments as way to ravel the threads of university politics in yet another way. One strategy toward *a* fuller geography at the university might be to make use of an ontological politics, one that entails a discursive-material embodiment of academic labourers themselves (after Mol 1999; see also Mol 2010). Bringing specific, fleshed, affective bodies—including their limits—into workplace politics could produce more space for those committed to transformative political change.

Over the past eight years, I have worked with faculty members, sessional lecturers, and librarians with disabilities, including disabling illness, across campus. I was co-founder of the Disability Caucus, one of the few groups in the Canadian academy. During this time, the struggles over recognition and tolerance of disabled and ill academic labourers, not only by students and staff, but also by colleagues, through open dialogue have transformed into litigious battles over definitions of what constitutes disability and illness. These labour-intensive and emotionally draining processes take place outside the relationship between the university member and university administrator pitting individuals against an assemblage of professionals—human resource specialists, insurance-sponsored physicians, university lawyers, and actuaries, who exist outside the university environment and on whose expertise the university relies on to make decisions. The group of professionals need not be coordinated because the point at which this information gets translated into university practice—enacted into a reality—is through the actions of the university administrator. With having to do very little, the administrator is able to tightly manage both the language with which disability and illness get talked about as well as the practice of the labyrinthine policies in place to govern academic labour.

The damaged bodies, psyches, and souls (after Foucault 1990; 2001) of those engaged in this process live the effects of my and my colleagues' (see Teghtsoonian and Moss 2008) humble and well-intentioned political encounters as well as the legal, my-hands-are-tied

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decisions the university administrator command. It is troubling, to say the least, to witness time and time again the hounding tactics of human resources directed at disabled and ill colleagues attempting to do their job, recover from illness, or return to work. Although I had no hand in setting these systems up, my political activism around issues of chronic, invisible illness including but not restricted to stress-related illness and mental illness, have contributed to clamping down on so-called malingerers, slackers, and even deadwood.

I am one of the academic labourers with a chronic disabling illness, ironically enough brought on and attenuated by the academy as an institution. Years ago, I appealed to the university administration to be transferred out of a geography department where I was bullied daily (at that time, it was personal harassment) because of my feminist and Marxist intellectual orientation. I moved to a professional faculty that focused on applied learning. I became involved in a graduate program organized around the intersection of policy and practice and oriented toward social justice. Earlier this year, the program was stripped from me and my colleagues and placed in a public health and social policy school in order to revamp it to make it more marketable. I am in a negotiations with the university administration to decide my permanent location—my *third* permanent location in a career spanning 20 years, only one of which I signed up for. The first struggle exacted its toll on my body across my immune, endocrine, and central nervous systems, the effects of which I still live with daily. The struggle I am engaged in now has wreaked havoc with my circulatory system, the effects of which I am trying to ward off through an intense naturopathic health regime targeted at rejuvenating energy at the cellular level.

My question here is really one of how to produce a space where the bodies of academic labourers—not just ill ones, but non-ill ones, too—are part and parcel to the construction of a *communiversity*. In this sense, I am not calling for an upswelling of support to help get me out of my strategic doldrums and reignite my political enthusiasm. Rather, my embodied learning from these two institutional experiences tells me that the durability of volatile chronicity in ill bodies is far more dependable than the spectre of institutional permanency. They also tell me that the multiple realities of university practices generate ephemeral spaces that need more guerilla-like tactics given the temporal dissonance between an act of institutional violence and a considered response from an academic activist.

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To reach the goal of a *communiversity*, perhaps engaging an affirmative ethics would generate notions upon which to build relationships around freedom, autonomy, and social justice from our collective awareness of our multiple limitations and would move us toward a sustainable path of transformative change (after Braidotti 2002: 145-146; 2006: 232). The transformation of the university needs the tired, for much can be gleaned from their experiences. As the *Communist Manifesto*, states: “Do not allow our struggles within the university to be constrained by the very ethos we seek to resist and change.” In other words, do not leave broken down bodies in the political wake of transformation. Exhausted bodies cannot possibilize. As I get myself unstuck by re-reading the *Communist Manifesto* again, I think maybe we need strategies and tactics to pull academic labourers away from the abyss of exhaustion, toward a temporalized and spatialized space where tired ones can act, too.

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