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Measured vulnerability: teaching for social justice in unsettling times

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the implications of new managerialist policies entwined with right-wing ideological challenges for social justice teaching in higher education. We engage with reflexive memos of our experiences as social justice teacher educators and scholars, placing them in institutional and political context, to frame an analysis of how increased calls for faculty accountability to legislators, administrators, and the public, coupled with an increase in surveillance of faculty practice, threaten to undermine social justice work in higher education. By weaving personal narratives into our analysis, we aim to hold together the broader sociopolitical context and the complexities of our individual everyday lives as faculty members, interrogating the nuances of growing inequalities in ways that can contribute to their undoing. We raise questions about the implications of these processes for our own work, for our students, and for the children they will one day teach.

“Freedom of expression” – field note, August 2017

On a sunny August morning, still hanging on to the last vestiges of summer, we attended our college’s semester kickoff event. This gathering typically brings together all of the education faculty for program updates, administrative announcements, and short workshops or meetings. The agenda that day was full of presentations about strategic plans, programmatic changes, and collective goals. Embedded in the middle of the morning agenda was a brief, twenty-minute presentation by university administrators entitled “Freedom of Expression.” We sat with our departmental colleagues at round, tightly packed tables, sipping coffee and crooking our necks to view a PowerPoint presentation at the front of the room. The presenters projected new language from the state legislature about the “non-political” nature of our work as faculty. They emphasized the imperative of achieving “balance” in our teaching and course materials, which they described as the need to respect all forms of student speech, to make students feel comfortable expressing their views, and our responsibility to show “all sides” of any issue discussed in class. The presentation also included information about accountability and compliance with this policy. Students who felt that we were not teaching “in a balanced manner” could file a grievance and submit documentation from our courses, including our syllabus, to the administration. If the course was deemed unbalanced, faculty may experience professional consequences. As the presentation unfolded, we were both shocked by, and profoundly uncomfortable with, the way these policies proposed to police our teaching.

After the presentation, as the group transitioned to the next announcements, those of us who teach courses centrally concerned with identity, inequality, and social and educational change gave each other concerned looks. We wondered aloud: How would this “balance” be measured? How would we know if our syllabus is considered balanced? What would that look like for our courses in particular?
This meeting occurred just weeks after the massive white supremacist rally and counter protests in Charlottesville, Virginia that resulted in the tragic killing of a young woman. In a statement afterward, President Trump failed to denounce the white nationalist groups at the rally, remarking, “I think there is blame on both sides.” He continued, “You had some very bad people in that group. But you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides” (Nelson & Swanson, 2017). These remarks highlighted the dangers of false equivalencies that lent state sanctioned legitimacy to white supremacy. That morning we felt the President’s comments reverberate in the call to consider “all sides,” raising questions about what “balance” means when teaching about racism, oppression, and inequality. What “other sides” were we being mandated to include in our classes? What kinds of student speech were we being asked to legitimize?

We offer this moment as an illustration of the complex vulnerability we experience as women junior faculty “navigat[ing] social justice in the current political climate.” This everyday moment seemed to crystallize the tensions that we experience as we attempt to reconcile our goals as social justice teacher educators with our positioning within an institutional and state context increasingly shaped by new managerialist policies entwined with right-wing challenges to the legitimacy of higher education and academic freedom. Many systemic strands interweave to create the complex landscape that we navigate in our daily work as scholars and teacher educators in this historical moment.

In this reflexive essay, we draw on the spirit of Weis and Fine’s (2012) “critical bifocality”: a call for educational researchers to methodologically resist neoliberal logics by placing our personal, everyday narratives in conversation with broader economic, historical, and ideological forces, “nesting lives within structures and histories” to “understand the ways in which lived-out strategies refract back on social structure” and ultimately to humanize our explorations of the formation of social structures in contentious times (Weis & Fine, 2012, p.196). We take up this idea of bifocality to explore how our own understandings as teacher educators and our students’ learning experiences are formed in and through the political and economic structures and institutional conditions of which we are a part, and to ask questions about how our practices contribute to or resist their undoing. This work has grown from causal conversations, concerned glances across crowded hallways, texts sent as we complete end of term grading. As we began to work on this project more formally, we engaged in duoethnographic (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) methods, exchanging reflexive memos on our experiences as faculty in and out of the classroom and beginning a process of writing back and forth, raising questions, adding interpretations, and identifying commonalities.

To build our bifocal analysis here, we weave back and forth between our experiences and our analytic framework. We set the stage by examining how neoliberal and new managerialist forces have influenced higher education in the U.S. and describe how these forces have intertwined with state politics and a right-wing policy agenda to influence public higher education in Wisconsin. Then, we shift to consider the impact of these forces within our specific role as teacher educators committed to social justice, thinking about the particular implications of neoliberal policies, faculty surveillance, and university audit culture for social justice work. After providing an explanation of how we interpret the aims of social justice practice in our own work, we share two reflexive memos related to our teaching in the semester that followed the policy demand for “balance.” We consider the political, cognitive, and emotional nature of social justice teaching in this moment and conclude by looking back through our confusions and disappointments, raising questions about how the struggles we have experienced in our practice are responding to and legitimizing the structural and social logics at work in our everyday professional lives and what the implications are for teaching social justice in these complicated political times.

Higher education in shifting political currents

Working at a public university in Wisconsin provides us with a unique and prescient perspective on trends in higher education nationally. The past several decades have seen a shift in
understandings of the purpose and functions of higher education, and the role of academic faculty in the U.S., under the era of neoliberalism—a political, economic, and social movement characterized by the dominance of economic rationality and market-based logics, changing roles of the state, and shifting responsibilities of individuals (Apple, 2006; Canaan, 2008; Harvey, 2005). In the last few decades, state support for public institutions (such as public higher education) has declined, as citizens are positioned as self-enterprising consumers focused on enhancing their human capital, individually responsible for promoting their own life outcomes (Harvey, 2005; McRobbie, 2007; Shahjahan & Hill, in press; Shumar, 2004b). In this neoliberal context, understandings of higher education have shifted from a civic good to a focus on building human capital responsive to market needs (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Universities have grown increasingly commodified and marketized through the introduction of corporate technologies of new managerialism, with an emphasis on administration, efficiency, and competition (Shore, 2008; Shumar, 2004a). Higher education policymaking and administrative decision-making are often grounded in means-ends rationality, centered on cost-savings and on the academic worker’s entrepreneurial production of specific, measurable outcomes (Canaan, 2008; Shumar, 2004a, 2004b). In this “audit culture,” faculty must justify their employment through the production of documentation and deliverables and engagement with technologies designed to measure academic output and quality (Canaan, 2008; Shore, 2008; Shumar, 2004a). These accountability technologies are self-perpetuating, driving the need to constantly expand and improve one’s academic output, shifting faculty’s everyday subjectivities and constraining knowledge production and academic freedom (Canaan, 2008; Shahjahan & Hill, in press).

These trends have been accelerated and complicated in the Wisconsin context, where, for almost a decade, the state has been a testing ground for right-wing policies aimed at undermining public institutions, including public education. In 2011, Republicans swept into the Governor’s office and legislature, quickly passing divisive legislation that limited the collective bargaining rights of public employees, including teachers across the state (Harris, 2018). Conservatives reduced financial support for the public higher education system, cutting state funding by $250 million in 2015, an 11% reduction, and capping student tuition, inducing a fiscal crisis (Buff, 2018). These moves have been accompanied by growing anti-intellectualism in many parts of the state and a deepening wariness of higher education, its goals, role in society, and legitimacy (Cramer, 2016). Along with the budget cuts in 2015, the governor’s office simultaneously proposed (but failed to pass) a shift in the University System mission from “the search for truth,” “public service,” and call to “improve the human condition,” to a stronger focus on “meet[ing] the state’s workforce needs,” taking up the neoliberal utilitarian framing of higher education as focused on career preparation within a capitalist system (Rivard, 2015; Shumar, 2004a).

Wisconsin has been on the forefront of right-wing legislative moves to curtail academic freedom, dismantle the tenure system, and weaken faculty governance, as the state embraces new managerialist ideas and policies for higher education (Davies, 2003; Harvey, 2005). These moves have manifested in, among other things, calls for tighter accountability of professors and increased surveillance of faculty, their courses, and university programs. Simultaneously, Republican legislators have vocally expressed concern over the ideological perspectives espoused on university campuses, raising high profile critiques of the state university system, complaining of a lack of “ideological diversity,” and identifying course offerings and even specific readings on social justice issues as biased and “offensive” (Savidge, 2017). They have called for “balance,” with proposals to link funding to measures of ideological diversity on campus (Brookins, 2016). State legislators have also undermined faculty tenure protections, removing tenure and shared governance from state statute (Buff, 2018) and re-establishing tenure administratively utilizing new managerialist logics, with emphasis on protecting administrative “flexibility” (Buff, 2018; Canaan, 2008). These legislative moves, policy changes, and critiques of lack of ideological diversity from the Right, along with broader trends in questioning the cost and ultimate value of
higher education across the political spectrum, have entwined with the rising tide of new manageralist reforms to create increased scrutiny and distrust, both at the institutional and individual levels, in our daily work as academics and teachers. Arguably, the tools of audit culture have been politically wielded by those ideologically opposed to the core tenants of the intellectual project of the academy, to foster the death of public higher education by a thousand cuts.

Returning to the fieldnote that began this essay, we see how state initiated ideological surveillance of faculty is manifested in everyday institutional practice. Through interactions like the unveiling of the “balance” policy, faculty are positioned as objects of surveillance, scrutinized by administrators, legislators, and even, potentially, our students (who were situated as potentially disgruntled consumers) as arbiters of the fairness and adequacy of the academic content we teach. We often catch ourselves floating in a river of professional anxiety, feeling distrusted, undermined, and individually accountable for each pedagogical move we make, carefully watching ourselves as we imagine we are being watched. During the meeting, faculty were given a characteristic lack of clarity about the terms and consequences of the “balance” policy. Sometimes this opacity can provide administrative protection, a fuzziness that resists enforcement. Yet, at the same time, the onus of responsibility to respond to these demands was clearly left on the shoulders of individual faculty. Moreover, in this moment the language of this policy echoed with the false equivalencies promoted on a national level that threaten to undermine efforts to name and resist forces like institutional racism and sexism that are often protected by such vague appeals. This moment made the tangled knot of systemic forces in our professional lives visible, as we attempt to continue teaching and working for social justice while responding to the “ontological reshaping of academic selves” in this political moment (Canaan, 2008, p. 259), exemplifying how mundane moments in our academic lives can coalesce into critical challenges to our ethical practice as teacher educators and scholars. In what follows, we focus on our teaching practice, considering how these structural factors interact with our commitments to social justice in the everyday work of teaching future teachers.

Conceptualizing social justice in education

Scholars, policymakers, and educators who take up social justice approaches show considerable variation and some disagreement about how to define the approach and its key features (North, 2006; Chubbuck, 2010; Hackman, 2005; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). As Lee and Walsh (2015) describe, “The philosophical and political differences among ‘social justice’ educators reflect the larger debates among social theorists who write about the nature of (in)justice” (p.46). Some scholars emphasize the necessity of recognizing and revaluing groups that have historically been marginalized, emphasizing the relationship between identity and power (Honneth, 2003; Young, 1990). For example, work in multicultural education draws attention to the importance of racial, gender, and sexual identities and the role these identities play in shaping students’ experiences, teachers’ work, and the dynamics of power and privilege in schools. Other scholars place emphasis on promoting justice by addressing continued material inequality through pursuit of redistribution of resources (Fraser, 1997). For example, work in critical theory and critical pedagogy has focused on social class inequality and the role education can play in a politics of redistribution (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1995; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Educational scholars take up and blend these commitments in a variety of ways to interrogate a range of educational phenomenon, from curriculum content, to classroom practice, to school-community interactions, to local and national education policy (e.g. Abu el Haj, 2006; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2005; Sleeter, 2005; Turner, 2020). Variations persist, including in how scholars connect social justice and activism (Kumashiro, 2004; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). However, to varying degrees, most reflect commitments to understanding how identity, and what Fraser (2009) calls “misrepresentation”, impacts education, as well as how the unequal distribution of material
resources, including educational resources, structures inequality and the role schools play in reproducing or challenging these systems.

In bringing these perspectives to our own teaching, we aim to promote the learning and opportunities of marginalized students, to interrogate systems of privilege and power that produce and support inequality, and to empower students to be change agents in response to societal injustice (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Hackman, 2005). Social justice teacher education has the dual task of educating preservice teachers in social justice practices and understandings, while keeping their future work as teachers and influence on their future students at the center of our learning together. This work aims to be both “profoundly practical in that it is located in the dailiness of classroom decisions and actions,” and also “deeply intellectual” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 82) by supporting teachers to “creat[e] empowering, democratic, critical educational environments” (Hackman, 2005, p.103) and to act as agents of social change (Lee & Walsh, 2015; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009).

Our academic home

We both identify as white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender women working as junior faculty in tenure track positions at a regional public university in Wisconsin. The program in which we teach prepares the largest number of teachers in the state. In 2018 in the university as a whole, 18% are students of color and 82% of students are white. According to university enrollment data, the majority come from middle and working-class families, 40% are first generation college students, and 84% are state residents, most from suburban areas or small towns in rural parts of the state. Given student demographics in our program and residential segregation in our state, most of our students attended segregated K-12 schools that were predominantly white and students frequently report encountering very little content that focused on diversity or inequality in their K-12 curriculum.

In our program, we teach what students refer to as “the diversity course,” a required course that aims to introduce students to the histories of public schools in the U.S., as well as the varied contemporary experiences of diverse students. It includes instruction about culturally relevant teaching practices, current education policy initiatives, and how these connect with broader cultural and social issues. Students must pass this class to be admitted to the teacher education program and it is the only course required of all teacher candidates that centers issues of identity and educational equity. Within our college there are numerous faculty, across departments, who teach and conduct research from a social justice perspective, but social justice is not part of the explicit mission of the teacher education program. Still, faculty are committed to educating students to serve diverse pre-K-12 students well and to be reflective, responsive educators. As is true across the field of education, our faculty colleagues hold varied conceptualizations of the role of schools in society and different ideas about the role of teachers in promoting equity through their practice.

Our course content is connected to analysis, application, and pedagogical skills that are necessary for effective social justice teaching (Hackman, 2005). However, mastery of this content is not sufficient for effective teaching and our course also centers dispositional and affective goals. Goals such as the ability to adopt another’s point of view; to cultivate and practice empathy; to communicate and respond across areas of difference; and to critically reflect on one’s identities, privileges, and experiences and integrate these perspectives into teaching practice (Carter Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer, & Floden, 2018). We use a variety of strategies to promote these connections, often starting by building a sense of trust and mutual responsibility in our classroom community through, for example, reflection exercises, opportunities to share experiences, and establishing class expectations. We aim to help our students develop the skills and tools to analyze and connect with a variety of ideas and perspectives.
To this end, we strive to create a classroom environment where students feel they can be vulnerable, ask questions, discuss different perspectives, and grapple with the emotional and intellectual demands of this work. The ability to engage in this kind of learning is an important skill for effective teachers and creating this kind of classroom environment is a key goal for our own social justice teaching.

These dispositional goals are central to the work of teaching (Carter Andrews et al., 2018), but they can be challenging for students and many are difficult to measure. Here, we experience tension between fulfilling our goals as social justice educators and the requirements of the university and state audit culture, which demand that we document quality teaching, specifically as measured by student course evaluations (Canaan, 2008; Shumar, 2004a). Our tenure standards require that we achieve scores on these evaluations of at least 4/5 on a Likert scale, regardless of course context. Despite some questions about their validity (Hobson & Talbot, 2001), these evaluations fulfill the new managerialist demand for tools that measure and quantify employees’ value and are used as a primary measure of our success in teaching, which, in turn, is a primary factor in promotion decisions. Our awareness of their significance for our employment shapes our teaching, as we contort within these structural conditions, a process made more poignant and anxious with our students’ positioning as judges of not only teaching quality, but also ideological “balance.”

### Reading others’ hearts—Liz’s reflexive memo

One of the strongest messages I received in the fall of 2017, my first semester as a tenure track faculty member, was the importance of teaching, not only to my institution, but also for my individual career and promotion. I believe that all students, both preservice teachers and the K-12 students they will go on to teach, deserve great teaching. That fall I was repeatedly reminded that a primary measure of good teaching was my students’ responses on my course evaluations. Swimming in audit culture, my students would evaluate my teaching twice—as I needed early evidence that my teaching was high quality to qualify for a system-wide pay raise, with these evaluations serving as primary evidence of my professorial merit. With the need to please my students often problematically floating in the back of my mind as I was teaching, I was constantly considering who was unhappy, who defensively reacted if their peers challenged their views, who tuned out and started texting when we talked about privilege or justice, who refused my assignments, who resisted the central ideas in our course.

The political environment in the state and nation was so charged that semester, my shoulders ached with tension, tears often hovering in the corners of my eyes after only listening to the morning news on my trips into work. I was careful. The words I spoke in class that semester first rolled around like marbles inside my mouth, as I considered if it was safe to let them out. I could see the skittish recoil, the confused glances, the clenched anger in students when they tried to talk about race. Some students seemed more confident in asserting their beliefs about race and immigration, empowered to share views that may not be considered politically correct. Often other students pushed back against these statements, sometimes in full voice, sometimes under their breaths. I was, at times, shocked by the overt ways that students explicitly recorded their racial bias in assignments for the course—Where did my shock come from? my own naiveté?

Was this really a change, or was the change only in how closely I was observing? As I think back now on that semester, one student’s words continue to haunt my understanding of my teaching. In a concluding reflection, she wrote:

> Teachers see only the bad in African Americans and it is very sad to me. I learned in my [field placement] that African Americans have a good side to them too. They might cause more issues or people might think they cause more issues, but in the end, they are still students and they have a heart just like white students.

I was truly shocked when I saw these words. This student seemed to suggest that the big idea she had learned across that semester was that African Americans were fully human. Resisting dehumanization is an important goal of our work as social justice educators. But somehow, perniciously, I took it for granted that seeing all children as fully human was the starting, not the ending point for our work. Having a preservice teacher show that she had landed at this point on her learning journey was enough for her to move forward, left me with a bitter taste, a sense of shame and complicity, and a disgusting hope that she would give me 4/5 on her evaluation of my course.
Navigating the tensions in teaching for social justice

Social justice teaching in this political moment is intellectual, political, and emotional, work. We engage in it highly aware of our imperfections and vulnerabilities as teachers. As Liz’s reflection illustrates, our teaching involves a process of “emotional navigation” (Reddy, 2001), as we experience and manage a range of our own and our students’ emotions in our classrooms. Scholarship on the affective dimension of teaching encourages us to notice and take seriously emotional signals and responses in our classrooms (Albrecht-Crane & Slack, 2003; Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Zembylas, 2005). For example, Zembylas (2005) asserts that emotions, far from being frivolous, influence teachers’ work lives in important ways and are rich sites of inquiry into the experience of teaching and the complex social, cultural, and political contexts of classrooms. This view is particularly salient for analyzing the experience of teaching for social justice, because of the emotions invoked for teachers and students engaging lessons on oppression, privilege, and inequality (Hackman, 2005). Emotional complexity and vulnerability can be magnified by the constant sense of surveillance induced by audit culture.

As Liz’s memo demonstrates, for many of our students, our course raises unfamiliar and sometimes challenging topics. Schools in Wisconsin are some of the nation’s most racially segregated (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). Many of our students have very little experience interacting with people from different backgrounds and, as a result, often rely on stereotypes and portrayals from popular culture to inform their opinions about groups outside of their own. Almost every semester we have students who share with us that they had never encountered a person of color before coming to college. Given segregation in housing and schools and institutionalized silence about race and racism, it is no wonder our students arrive in our class with little knowledge about, and few skills for, discussing topics related to difference and inequality. While some students are open to examining society and their own experiences through a new, critical lens, coming to class eager to share new ideas and commenting on evaluations that they learn and grow from the different perspectives offered in class, many also say that they feel we are “not open to other points of view” or that they “didn’t feel they could share their ideas in class,” increasing sentiments in the current political era. In class, many students encounter feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, and defensiveness. These feelings are normal, developmentally appropriate, and perhaps even necessary parts of learning about social inequality, particularly for white students who are learning about racial identity and privilege for the first time (Drago-Stevenson & Blum-DeStefano, 2017; Hackman, 2005; Tatum, 1992). We aim to create classroom cultures that welcome emotional, as well as intellectual, engagement.

Our work can become particularly challenging when students experience or express powerful ideas or emotions. For example, when they express ideas rooted in racism or unexamined social privilege like those Liz describes. Or when they demonstrate resistance to content that challenges the way they are used to seeing themselves or the world around them, as the following reflection illustrates. Such resistance influences the classroom community and can elicit our own deep anxieties, discomfort, and vulnerability as teachers, as moment to moment tensions can unpredictably bubble over. We feel a persistent sense of responsibility to sustain and sometimes defend our social justice practice, which has been targeted as one-sided and biased, while also supporting our students’ growth and navigating the demands of an increasingly distrustful institutional and state context. We weigh responsibilities to challenge our students’ thinking along with the need to build the trust and rapport required to make such challenges fruitful. Notably, while we feel the risk in our students’ resistance, we also acknowledge that in our classrooms we hold a place of relative power. Furthermore, as white, middle-class, cisgender women in tenure track positions, we are also able to negotiate from a place of relative privilege and security compared to colleagues who are marginalized because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, their sexualities or gender identities, or their positions as contingent faculty.
Trying to be okay – Kathleen’s reflexive memo

My awareness of students’ reactions was already heightened that day, as it always is when we begin more explicitly discussing contemporary manifestations of racism. This is a topic that many of my students are uncomfortable discussing and I am watchful for the varied emotional responses they have to this content, admittedly intangible, yet also consistent – the downcast eyes hoping I don’t make them speak; the shy nods signaling quiet interest; the distant stare of boredom or disengagement; the rolled eyes; the tight lips and scowls signifying anger. I notice all of these and more, aware that I must keep my students happy, or at least manage their discomfort, in the hope that doing so will enable them to engage at some level with the ideas I am presenting. I wish I could say that is my only goal, but the truth is that, always, at the back of my mind, are the all-important course evaluations and, more disappointingly, the related fact that I want my students to like me. In fact, I try hard to remain “likeable” – nice, funny, understanding, “laidback” – even, and perhaps, especially, when teaching about topics students find difficult. It is a persona that feels half authentic and half fabricated to keep students from rejecting me along with my course content.

This day, standing in front of my class, my mind is split – half focused on my lecture and facilitating discussion, half tracking my own emotions and those I see communicated around me. I ask a general question, “What did you learn from the reading that was new or surprising?” I am looking to my side, but hear the comment from straight ahead of me and my heart sinks as I recognize the voice of one of a pair of students I have experienced as resistant all semester. “Nothing,” he whispers to his friend sitting next to him. “This is all such bullshit.” It was a stage whisper and I heard it clearly at the front of the room. I look at the student, a tall and broad, white young man who looks directly back at me. “What’s that?” I ask, my heart racing. “Nothing,” he responds, not breaking eye contact. His unwavering gaze, the set of his jaw, his dismissive, flat tone all feel like a challenge and I want to let him know I heard him, but don’t know what to do. Hoping I don’t appear as ruffled as I feel, I hold his gaze. He raises one eyebrow at me as we continue to stare at each other. His face flushes, but remains impassive and I finally look away, turning to call on another student with a too-bright smile, hoping to return to the discussion smoothly, willing my breath to come more slowly and for my anxieties to calm. I feel disappointed in myself for not saying something, for not challenging him explicitly. I hope the rest of the class doesn’t read my lack of action as an undermining of my authority or, worse, as my tacit approval of what he said. I try to be okay with the fact that he probably doesn’t like me and I hate that I care.

Living the questions

Weaving three moments of reflexive writing through our systemic understandings and reflections on our local context, we have aimed to answer the call to use personal narratives of everyday experiences to illuminate how these experiences are produced by and “refract back on social structure” (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 196). We conclude by asking how our positioning as junior faculty, white women teaching for social justice is informed by this particular institutional context and political moment and by exploring the implications of these enmeshed systemic forces for our everyday practice and our interactions with students. As state political battles have entwined with broader shifts toward new managerialist approaches across higher education, we have felt both an undermining of our expertise as scholars and the constant surveillance of our work and measuring of its value. The tangled forces of right-wing challenges to the legitimacy of the academy, along with neoliberal shifts toward the corporatization of the university system, have mobilized audit culture in ways that press us to “mak[e] and remak[e] [our]selves as legitimate and appropriate(d) members of the… particular new managerialist systems that [we] are caught up in” (Davies, 2003, p. 93; Canaan, 2008). As white women, we have been trained to please, to conform to others’ ideal projections, to act as ideal neoliberal subjects, always making ourselves anew (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Blair, 2017). As Kathleen’s memo demonstrates, we often experience these systemic forces and their manifestations in our classrooms as deeply gendered, as they mirror images and discourses of white masculine resistance and entitlement circulating nationally. Teaching for social justice in this landscape feels both risky and empowering.

As junior faculty, moments like those we describe reverberate with vulnerability, as one’s knowledge as a scholar and commitments to equity and justice are called into question through the
rubric of individual accountability to state regulation. This vulnerability is further heightened for scholars on the margins. Bronwyn Davies (2003) argues that under new managerialist systems:

The individual’s sense of agency and freedom through which professional energy, dedication and power were formerly generated are overlaid and in tension with an almost subliminal anxiety and fear of surveillance. That fear may, of course, be defined as the individual’s fear, and therefore pathological, even though the surveillance is generally linked to the pervasive new discourse that constitutes all workers as replaceable. (p. 93)

As Davies describes and Kathleen’s memo illustrates, our constant perception of risk manifests as latent, yet powerful, anxiety about our work that can implicitly destabilize the foundations of our commitment to justice. Increased surveillance by the state, the university, our students, and the public and increased calls to verify our professional legitimacy and utility, create deep distrust between faculty and administrators and between faculty and students, as well as internal discord. We internalize the anxiety wrought by this system as we attempt to prove ourselves professionally as junior faculty, contorting ourselves to appear legitimate within the constructed metrics of our academic system, while also fulfilling our commitments to justice and equity and our responsibilities to our students and to the children they will one day teach.

As the dynamics of new managerial approaches have combined with conservative ideologies and the emboldening of white supremacist views, teaching in ways that help students think deeply and critically has come to feel risky. The narratives we provide here illustrate how these broader shifts entwine and play out in the classroom, with implications for our professional practice, our students’ learning, and our own well-being. Policies limiting faculty speech and making students “consumers” and arbitrators of teaching quality can make social justice teaching, and the potentially disruptive process of inviting students to see themselves and society in new ways, feel dangerous. We experience this risk in our ethical conflicts over how to assess student work that expresses racist views. We feel it as we are challenged by a student’s domineering gaze and casual dismissal of social justice ideals, internally reeling in anxious uncertainty. These narratives are personal in that they lay bare our vulnerabilities, confusions, imperfections, and anxieties; but, more than that, they cast light on how these personal moments and emotions are products of particular structural conditions. As we navigate these moments, part of the intellectual work of teaching includes acknowledging, interrogating, and learning from our own conflicts and emotions. The stakes on this learning seem raised, as we now may ask if a student’s discontent with our teaching could begin the process of delegitimating our position as scholars within this system, a question only possible in this political and institutional climate. Teaching from a place of fear hurts us and it hurts our students. When we resist bringing our whole selves to the classroom, we deny students access to ideas, skills, and authentic relational connections that are essential for their future professional practice, for the children they will one day teach, and for building the equitable and just society we imagined when we began this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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