Fifty shades of academic resilience

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Abstract

Resilience is a requirement for a modern-day academic citizen. This essay discusses the sources of academic resilience and its costs through personal reflection. The text positions academic citizenship among intersecting lifeworlds and ends up with a recognition of posthumanist ethic as a source of resilience. The vision for the academic citizen is neither utopian nor dystopian but thrutopian. Academic resilience is persistence to muddle through hardships, drawing power from the anxiety of neoliberal academia in a multicrisis world. The keyboard is our tool for crafting better futures, and the love for writing must be salvaged repeatedly from the paralyzing anxiety that has little in common with academic procrastination memes.

Keywords: belonging; class; interdisciplinarity; neoliberal university; writing

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after hardship, to maintain life. It is a quality of individuals, societies, and ecosystems, as well as a necessity in the highly competitive modern-day academic world. Resilience draws from different sources within academia and in relation to broader society, but members of academia are differently equipped with resilience. In this essay, I reflect on my academic citizenship as a Finnish female environmental social scientist and a first-generation academic, asking what binds me to academia despite various hardships. I have identified some sources of insecurity and anxiety, as well as resilience. The account is not comprehensive, but perhaps it resonates with other academics' experience and offers consolation. Thinking about academic citizenship makes me ask who are my people—what is the *demos* that I am a citizen of? The answer turns out to be relational, situated, and layered. I turn to Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, and their collective of female academics (2014), among others, for peer support.

Interdisciplinarity

My field is environmental social science, or more precisely, environmental policy. That does not narrow it down much. Environmental policy is an interdisciplinary field, and depending on their specific research interests, scholars may draw from sociology, environmental history, political science, administrative studies, feminist scholarship, science and technology studies, anthropology, the broad domain of humanities including education, philosophy, ecocriticism, and so forth. Some of us draw from all of those and more. The environmental urgency brings pressure for finding solutions and doing policy-relevant research in environmental sciences—academic citizenship is entangled with expectations of wider societal citizenship. Anthropogenic climate change running out of control, biodiversity crisis, overconsumption, and environmental injustices are ever-present. I must constantly convince myself of the importance of environmental social sciences and humanities in understanding how to live in this world. Environmental anxiety does not concern only the youth. I have often entertained the idea that I would have chosen, for instance, the field of astrophysics instead, imagining it would be easier to keep a distance to work and be free from social and political complexities. (The pressures of academic work would likely remain the same though.)

Interdisciplinarity, of course, has been the catchword for some time now in addressing complex social-ecological issues. Being literate in different fields of scholarship provides obvious advantages. It is an exhilarating privilege to read into different fields of research. In the project-based academic world, being able to work on several themes and approaches increases one's employability. That is how I have managed to stay afloat ten years after finishing my PhD. At least potentially, someone with such a background can take a mediator role in multi- and transdisciplinary research endeavors, translating between disciplinary epistemologies and methodologies. However, in filling research positions and funding decisions, it is a strength to be able to demonstrate a clear focus in one's research, a defined theoretical-methodological discourse one wishes to contribute to. As an interdisciplinary scholar, my expertise is broad but thin. As 'a jack of all trades but master of none', it feels challenging to claim full citizenship among any of the mentioned academic peoples. It is a nice feeling to have written more than one paper on a topic and be able to claim expertise among peers, feeling these are my people. Belonging.

Interdisciplinarity poses many practical problems to a scholar. Each field one identifies with and wishes to keep up with requires time and space. Reading into a new theoretical debate or thematic area takes time. This may show as slow

science in the publication record, but without the emancipatory feeling of slow science as a choice, as resistance (Stengers, 2018). I feel a constant need to catch up, being always behind with publications; as we know, publications are now almost the only measure of academic citizenship. There is the question of where to publish—what journal takes in interdisciplinary work? What are the scientific societies I want to belong to (with the money that goes into membership fees and the membership journals that pile up and demand reading)? In which conferences would it make sense to participate? These are different ways of asking who my people are and where I belong. With whom do I wish to be in conversation?

Class

Beyond the question of academic disciplines, there is the question of who generally belongs to academia (Stengers et al., 2014). In a welfare state like Finland, where we have free education, people like to think everyone has equal opportunities to participate in higher education and pursue a research career. Experiences of academic citizenship are nevertheless diverse. I have had a nagging feeling of not quite belonging since my degree studies. Of course, as a properly socialized neoliberal academic citizen, I blame myself: I am not good enough, I am not smart enough, I have not tried hard enough. Then came the realization that perhaps interdisciplinarity had to do with the feeling of not mastering it 'all'—although realizing the absurdity of the demand did not take away the feeling. Only later did I understand that the feeling of not fitting in also involved the intersecting issues of class and gender.

In Finland, class does not exist in the common narratives, least of all in academia. When I hesitantly raised the issue that perhaps my insecurity in exhibiting full academic citizenship had to do with a working-class background, I was quickly told (by senior male academics) that most people in Finnish academia have working-class backgrounds. Back to self-flagellation. It took me time to reformulate the effect of class on my academic citizenship. Class is not a simple thing; it is one of the fundamental sociological concepts with multiple definitions. Classes are changing but important in organizing social reality. Today, social classes cannot be defined based on profession or wealth alone; there are distinctions within classes. Savage (2015) draws from Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social, and cultural capital in explaining class differences in the 21st century. I came to understand the effect of class in relation to the interaction culture I was raised in. A working-class background may well support academic citizenship if one is used to being listened to, expressing their thoughts, and having their opinions valued. Taking up space and using one's voice are also intertwined with gender—it is more

often female scholars with working-class backgrounds who struggle to claim academic citizenship. Over half of Finnish students in higher education are female, but not all of them manage to climb the narrow academic ladder: less than a third of professors are women (Jousilahti et al., 2022).

I have climbed from working class to the upper middle class; I was the first high school graduate in my family. From there on, I was on my own. Professions such as researcher were never on my radar in my youth. After high school, I had more romantic than academic interests and ended up in academia the long way around. While doing my master's studies in environmental policy, I was older than most classmates and in a different place in life. I became only loosely attached to the student community, growing together into academic citizenship. I did not quite learn to count on the support of others. Coming to academia from a working-class background causes double mourning: it is difficult to communicate about my research—and my life—with family and friends from youth, but at the same time, I feel out of place with the academics. Family and friends understand that environmental professions are a thing of the future, but when I start to explain how I study, for instance, the role of citizen science in biodiversity knowledge production and conflicts therein, I can almost see the question marks forming in the air. The working-class background also keeps me at arm's length from my research. I have internalized the (imagined) working-class skepticism towards academic work: are they really paying me for this? Am I seriously studying this? Does this make any sense? It is draining not to be able to full-heartedly stand behind one's work, being proud of my achievements without a cynical, sarcastic undertone.

The presence of gender and class bias in academia is subtle and hard to pinpoint. It is affective and corporeal. The feeling of not belonging manifests itself in the body: tense shoulders, shallow breathing. Regardless of academic performance, I fear the body will give me up and reveal that I do not have the right to academic citizenship. It is the feeling of taking up too much space and, at the same time, too little—laughing too much at the wrong things, and having difficulty valuing one's views as worth expressing to others. There are too many kilos on the waistline, gossiping of lack of self-control. And I wear a too large and colorful garment, flagging a lack of sophisticated middle-class style, yet it is not large enough to hide my sins. Failure to care for oneself raises the feeling of failure to the second order. The wrong kind of body is in the way of full academic citizenship. But in academia, bodies do not exist beyond feminist scholarship.

Class is also present in words. For the longest time, I felt big words such as methodology, theory, and epistemology did not belong to me. I was afraid of them, afraid of misunderstanding. It was a significant personal milestone, well into my postdoc career, to write a paper with 'ontology' in the title—a joy dimmed by the fact that the journal is now considered predatory. Another personal milestone was

when I dared to engage with the work of Aristotle. With ten years of postdoctoral experience I have managed to gather enough academic self-esteem to use fluently concepts like interdisciplinarity or neoliberalism and to feel allowed to engage with the Big Names. Claiming academic language is hard work and twice so, when you have to do it in language other than you mother tongue—English being now the *lingua franca* also in the Finnish academia.

(*Interlude*. This is all very embarrassing. I am a white woman of the wealthy North, a citizen of a country ranked as the happiest in the world for the sixth time. Upon writing this, I learned that Iranian women were denied access to university. Talk about academic citizenship! I have it easy. I should just get over myself, focus on the problems out there, stop the navel-gazing. It is easier said than done, though, when I wake up in the middle of the night with a cold hand squeezing my heart, thinking about all the unfinished papers that seek to overwhelm me.)

Neoliberalism

The pressing feeling that interrupts my sleep is easy to interpret again as my inadequacy in fulfilling the requirements for academic citizenship. It is the fear of being exposed—that 'they' will realize that I do not belong (a severe case of impostor syndrome). I try to talk sense to the heart, knowing the anxiety not to be a personal issue but a product of the current neoliberal academia, its measurementality, and new public management practices that set demands on performance but have little to say about quality, content, impact, community, wellbeing, and value.

There is little to say about the neoliberal university that you would not already be deeply familiar with: how it streamlines the academic production line by getting rid of excess administrative personnel, appointing their professional tasks to the academics; how the university is managed by people external to academia without an understanding of such things as academic citizenship; how it posits friends and colleagues as fierce rivals for the same positions; how it renders the academic as an entrepreneur (or a prostitute, or a mercenary, for another word), trying to convince the funder of the strategic importance and impact of their work, even though the importance of the work would be elsewhere than 'strategic relevance.'

It is hard not to let neoliberalism under one's skin, and yet, there is resistance everywhere, people writing manifests for slow and different science, gathering to share the painful effects of current academia and resisting in practices such as collaborative writing (Stengers et al., 2014). How can one be in the right place at

the right time to become a member of such a collective as a thinly omnipresent interdisciplinary scholar? How do I trust the sisters in resistance enough to commit as an insecure working-class scholar? How does someone overcome one's introverted character, how to draw its boundaries to understand when being part of a community empowers instead of draining all energy? How can I define my value as a person—not only through academic achievements—to be able to think about something other than avoiding talking about my work at the lunch table with colleagues? It is in the interest of the neoliberal university to divide and conquer, to get the academic citizens to manage and punish themselves, and to run faster on the treadmill just to stay in place. Neoliberal academia thrives on loneliness. It is a consuming way of life, asking oneself daily whether this is a life worth living, a life I still want for myself and those close to me who bear the consequences of my insecurity, anxiety, depression, and sleeplessness.

Pandemic

Neoliberal university did a good job already in constructing academic citizen as a lone rider. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic which seized all academic and non-academic physical social contact. The pandemic reorganized academic work, reconfigured us as initials on the screen, in the best case a face and a smile. The neoliberal university management cheered: this is our chance to push digitalization further, increase 'efficiency' and student numbers, as they do not require physical space. Not long after came the first results of the isolation's effects on academics' well-being and students being lonely and depressed, having trouble getting through their studies. I was mainly working remotely already before the pandemic. First the change did not seem dramatic but even welcomed. It seemed like I was more focused, getting more done at the kitchen table. But the novelty wore off and was replaced by a feeling of social deprivation (a method used in criminal punishment and torture). I should say the pandemic brought opportunities as well. Due to the normalization of remote work, it was possible to take up a research position at a faraway university. After half a year in a new working environment, I am grateful for the monthly salary but have no work community. I do not know the people; they are not my *demos*. How could I trust them?

The pandemic made Judith Butler (2022) ask, *What world is this*? Butler discusses how the pandemic highlighted the intertwining of all life, of the pandemic, of climate change, of people everywhere, and the social and economic inequalities in how people were affected. They argue for acknowledging the losses caused by the pandemic and suggest politics that do not differentiate how grievable people are. There should also be mourning and equal grief in academia—what and whom

have we lost in the pandemic? For whom has the pandemic made it even harder to grow into academic citizenship?

Resilience

When there is all that burden, I consider it a remarkable achievement that I am still in academia. The academic citizenship I strive for connects with notions of belonging, acknowledgment, freedom, responsibility, and emancipation—against the current neoliberal university. To build resilience, I need to remind myself what draws me into academia, what makes me stay. The answer is multifaceted. For one, this is what I have been trained for over so many years: it is not easy to let go. There is also the inherited Lutheran work ethic. Partly, yes, I am addicted to the neoliberal system, hungry for recognition, accustomed to a certain income level and lifestyle. I would not dare to waste society's resources by 'wasting' my training in changing into an entirely different work. (Should I have become a professional handcrafter? Is it the working class in me that would need to see the results of my work more concretely?)

Even if as a mobile project researcher, I sometimes compare myself to a mercenary, research is not just work. It is who I am, and I guess who I want to be. I get excited when reading others' empirical and theoretical papers and lively writing. I feel connected—those are my people. However abstract, that is the *demos* of academia: other scholars near and far, crazy as I am, devoted to this torment, making us easy prey for the neoliberal university. I know I have enough of 'the good stuff' (Stengers, 2018) to keep going and enough merits to be considered for positions and projects. I do not really want to have the 'good stuff' of neoliberal academia, though, with its competitiveness and continuous metrics. My good stuff is different; it stems from the anxiety of an unsuitable kind of past, 'wrong' and diverse choices. My good stuff may emerge from the margins. I am tired of letting the anxiety consume me. I am tired of seeing anxiety as something that disqualifies me as an academic—it does not. It makes me a perceptive, critical, and candid researcher. Academia needs diversity. The diversity is lost if I try to force myself into an imagined mold of 'academic normal.' I do not need to be 'cured' to claim full academic citizenship—I can work despite the anxiety, staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016).

Writing is at the heart of academic citizenship. It is often reduced into technical production to gain the merits required by the neoliberal university. But scholarly writing is about expressing love, about caring for the world and oneself (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018). Writing is how we belong, where we resist. Writing is a way to find one's people, and as such, it may become equally anxiety-inducing as

writing oriented towards publication metrics. It is often difficult to imagine to whom I am writing besides the editor and a couple of journal reviewers. The real-world impact of most academic texts is, at best, very indirect. But it is not about quantity rather than quality. Maybe in my writing I can touch someone, spark a thought, like others have done for me.

I am resilient because I owe it to the people who have shared their time and thoughts with me in interviews. I resist because I admire their resilience. Like those two extraordinary individuals who have been restoring a bird lake for twenty years by hand, meter by meter, fighting with the authorities, making it the most diverse bird lake in the country. It has nearly cost their health but is eventually becoming acknowledged. How could I not do my small part with the means at hand, writing about them, sharing the lessons of their story so that things could go smoother elsewhere? I do not dare call them my people, but I would be happy to be their people.

Sounds awfully grandiose and romantic, but in the end, my *demos* is life in all its forms. My allegiance is to a small patch of *Sphagnum* moss in the nearby forest that I go greet sometimes, and it brings a smile to recognize them. They are still there, often unnoticed, but once you learn their name and start paying attention, they become important (Kimmerer, 2003). The personal encounter with a patch of moss helps me think of the importance of peatlands for climate change mitigation, their cultural meanings, and different ways of empowering people to engage politically with peatlands. Everything important is personal—making it personal creates space for sharing, learning, and connecting. In this world, *demos* must extend beyond humanity.

Read (2017) has coined the concept of 'thrutopianism' for generating necessary responses to climate change. Neither utopias nor dystopias are getting the work done. In thrutopian thought, hopes for a better world are not postponed to a distant unattainable future, but lived here and now, figuring out ways to get from here to there. Academic resilience also builds on thrutopian thought on individual and collective levels. We must perform the desired academic citizenship the best we can, striving for inclusive and diverse academia, imagining the transformative force it will be.

Author biography

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