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"I just can't say 'Fuck it, and walk away'"
Classing Labor in Neoliberal Academia

Maiyoua Vang
California State University, Long Beach

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Abstract

The emergence of critical university studies in recent years has provided cogent analysis on neoliberalism's reach into public higher education. While neoliberal encroachment into areas such as governance, funding/corporate partnerships, curriculum, and academic freedom are frequently discussed, less treatment is given as to how neoliberalism itself seduces and in turn is reified in the ways individual faculty perform and make sense of the work under the neoliberal gaze to hyper produce. Informed by Nishida's (2014, 2016) disability studies' (DS) critique of hyper productivity in the neoliberalizing academy and Russell's (2019) political economic analysis of disability oppression as a project of the capitalist state, this "twin" study, with respect to subjects' identical desires to be valued as scholars while socialized in different institutional environments, is a theoretical-empirical hybrid that blends two academic workers' interview data with DS critique to articulate avenues of occupying the neoliberal project by occupying the classing, ranking, and degradation of academic work itself.

"…in these austere times we will get ourselves 'back on our feet'–work will set us free."

Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole (2014)

Nobel Laureate Peter Higgs, who in 1964 revolutionized the field of physics when he identified what would later be known as "the God particle," shared that under the current ethos of hyper-productivity so pervasive in contemporary academia, he would have almost certainly perished (Aitkenhead, 2013). Critical disabilities justice activist and scholar Nishida (2016) argued that this hyper-productivity "is an expectation and desire within academia under neoliberalism" that fetishizes products or outcomes over processes, and is "often identified as a key factor or virtue for anyone seeking legitimization as a valuable citizen, worker, or individual" (p. 148). Indeed, Higgs disclosed that with fewer than ten publications following his groundbreaking research in 1964, his livelihood was always under constant threat and the surveillance of his "productivity" served as a continual source of "embarrassment to the department when they did research assessment exercises" (Aitkenhead, 2013, para. 6). Academic labor was not only *classed*, it was ranked, and the ability to "keep churning out papers" (Aitkenhead, 2013, para. 3) unmistakably signified what it meant to be "productive." As such, Nishida (2014, 2016) specifically interrogates the "publish or perish" ethos Higgs lamented and how the super valorization "of certain kinds of products and productivity" inevitably forces academics toward what, for many, is unsustainable hyper-productivity. Such a demand, Nishida cautioned, disciplines and shames when it functions as the sole indicator of (*naturalized)* merit or worth, and ultimately impinges on academics' very ability to achieve material survivance (Chou, 2014).

It is the ranking and differential valuation of classed academic labor, and by default de/meriting of the academic worker as embodiment of the neoliberally im/perfect subject that is the focus of this paper. Despite its role in reifying social class inequalities within the capitalist economy, this "everyday" neoliberalism is not spectacular and as such, often dismissed. Indeed, while critical university studies interrogate aspects of the neoliberalizing university and the ways in which it genuflects to the hyper financialized logic of markets (Barrow, 1990; Hall & Stahl, 2012; Newfield 2008; Pusser et al., 2006; Saunders, 2010; Williams, 2012), less treatment is given to the consensual features of an equally important and related project wherein the neoliberalizing academic worker co-conspires to meet hyper productivity in the face of institutional and other constraints (and ironically for many while articulating some of the most incisive macro critiques of Neoliberal encroachment in public sector society). Moreover, even less attention is given to the articulation of political counterprojects to address "working while neoliberal."

Arguing for a critical reconceptualization of this regime, some have called for a closer examination of the micro processes of "doing neoliberalism" while in the academy (Bullough, 2014; Nishida, 2014, 2016). In highlighting the neoliberal threat to higher education and the promise of resisting economic rationality from the public to professional to psychological and emotional spheres, Bullough (2014) pointedly argued that "the actions of those who live and work within the university are not inconsequential" (p. 14). Given the seeming pervasiveness and permanence of the neoliberal turn, the current micro exploration of two academic workers explores what Nishida (2016) describes as the micro processes and critical reflexivity of academic laboring during the neoliberal moment of hyper productivity. The overarching question asks, how do academics labor and make meaning of their intentional laboring within the

context of "publish or perish," and with special attention to that very *desire to be desirous* (Nishida, 2014), worthy, and meritorious under the gaze of Neoliberal Academia?

But First…Why a Critical Disabilities Justice Perspective Matters

> "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand."
>
> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1939

Abstracting from the ableist drive of individuals hyper producing in neoliberal academia (Nishida, 2014, 2016) to the political economy of disability oppression (Russell, 2019) makes possible a newer, more critical perspective that situates academics' fight against labor exploitation amidst the larger fight against exploitation in the larger political economy. That is, the academy's trafficking of internalized ableism and the concomitant rewards given to those neoliberally idealized bodies who meet its narrow norms are central to the reproduction of wage labor exploitation for both academics *and* all who are tasked (not least those administratively categorized as "disabled") with survivance under the current capitalist mode of production.

Indeed, to unmask and dislodge the neoliberalist tendencies underpinning notions of differential worth and rewards based on labor-*type* and productivity of academics, this exploratory study was informed by the lens of critical disability studies (CDS) (Goodley et al., 2014; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Nishida, 2014, 2016) with special attention to Russell's (2019) foundational work on the political economy of disability. As such, immediately following is a discussion on neoliberal academia and how the critique of academic neoliberalism can further be pushed and radicalized by a CDS critique of *ableism.* This critique then segues to a critical discussion on how the social construction of a standard, ideal worker (and dialectically speaking decommissioning of a nonstandard, nonideal worker) ultimately serves the machinations of capitalism by reinforcing existing class power and relations within the current capitalist mode of production. This is followed by the micro-reflections of two academic workers, purposefully selected as counter-subjects in that one is highly published tenured faculty at a research institution and the other unpublished tenure-track faculty at a comprehensive state university, to highlight how each processed "laboring" under the call to hyper perform ("publish or perish"). Finally, the conclusion discusses relational *justice* and the disciplining of "neoliberally-imperfect" subjects in the austere academy, and poses questions about the possibilities for collective care in academic labor(ing), a critical reward structure, and the formation of solidarity politics that connects academic workers' struggles with other oppressed publics within the larger political economy.

Toward Neoliberalism

Disabilities justice activist and scholar Nishida (2016) provocatively charged that "inasmuch as individuals are oppressed and victimized by the neoliberal academia, what does it mean for them to *also* [emphasis added] participate in and perpetuate such ideologies un/intentionally?" (p. 146). Extending Nishida's claim, how truly paradigm-shifting can academics' macro critiques on neoliberal penetration of the academy be when the very micro processes and micro politics of the "consensual" laboring that arguably reify it remain so

deferentially unexamined relative to the principle of economic rationality? There is something to the notion that "[b]y the very fact of their [academics] having done well in it, it has come to seem [so] natural…" (Damrosch, 1995, p. 142). Arguably, investment in this naturalized logic of bootstrapping individualism as collaborator in the hyper extraction and commodification of academic laboring both mirrors and legitimates the larger historic, political and economic project of neoliberalism.

Harvey (2005) explains neoliberalism as both theory and (shifting) project, underscoring several key principles around which it pivots:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices…Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (p. 2)

Accordingly, structural adjustments advance "[de]regulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision…" and most importantly, and in so doing, seek to completely reconfigure and subsume "all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2005, p.3).

Provocatively, Saunders (2010) notes that this political-economic turn has only reinforced neoliberalist tendencies *already* existing in U.S. higher education, arguing that insofar as the mission of public higher education is concerned, institutional objectives have always deferred to and aligned with the interests of the capitalist class. Thus, the more recent totalizing neoliberal transformation of higher education is but a logical (though hastened) progression of this political commitment. Moreover, such a commitment requires companion projects, and the micro assignment that necessarily (re)casts faculty as neoliberal subjects driven toward hyper productivity and "self-renewal" in the face of market disciplining demands closer examination.

Academic Neoliberalism

> The essence of academic life is the opportunity—indeed, the demand—for continual investment in oneself. It is a unique chance for a lifetime of building and renewing intellectual capital.
>
> Henry Rosovsky (1990), Former Dean of Faculty at Harvard

Capitalist settlement of the personal-social sphere has been a remarkably successful occupation (Cacho, 2012). That is, "[a]s much as neoliberalism shapes political and economic structures of our society, including social virtues, it also affects and forms our beliefs, desires, behaviors, and our bodyminds" (Nishida, 2016, p. 147). As discussed below, this neoliberal aesthetic as politics, arguably prefigured into academy life, has in recent years completely infiltrated personal-sphere values and desires so as to mediate the "rational" choice and behavior of academics. Indeed, Rosovsky's (1990) *The University: An Owner's Manual* specifically fetes this entrepreneurializing identity and assignment.

For tenure, promotion, and survivance (and colleagues' and institution's social "valuing" of their worth), academic workers are made keenly aware of the pecuniary-related consequences and rewards of hypo- and hyperproduction respectively. Regardless of institution type, reward structures privilege research over teaching (Aitkenhead, 2013; Elmes-Crahall, 1992; Fairweather, 1996). As noted earlier, Nishida (2016) makes clear

> … "publish or perish" is a common phrase used in academia and sums up a valuing of certain kinds of products and productivity. Within the current state of neoliberalism, academics are pressured to be not only productive but to be *hyper*-productive. (p. 148)

So completely captured by neoliberalism and in turn folding under that particular aesthetic, even the most critical of critical scholars rarely challenge, *let alone discern*, the contradictions inherent in contesting a neoliberalism found in the broader political-economic sphere while tending to internalized neoliberal performativity as they intimately labor for critical recognition. Indeed, Saunders (2010) warns that academics "must be cautious [not] to place the causes of these changes purely on the institution, as the faculty themselves must bear some of the burden through their acceptance of many of these entrepreneurial behaviors" (p. 60).

Given that, again, one's rate of hyper productivity is the metric for dispensing legitimation and worth (Aitkenhead, 2013; Nishida, 2014, 2016), this seduction is not in the least surprising. Consequently, under the logic of academic neoliberalism, where shared responsibility for failure or success is offloaded to the individual, certain failure is almost always private and the "fault" of the academic worker as institutional blame is a non sequitur in a system that ostensibly liberates "individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Indeed, as neoliberal academia continues to extract faculty labor while reducing faculty discretionary time and to pre-emptively cap the ceiling of compensation by inserting into the stream an ever increasing proportion of unprotected adjunct labor (Kezar & Gehrke, 2014; Nishida 2016; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006), Nishida's (2016) challenge to probe the very meaning of complicity in carrying out one's own oppression, when reframed under a critical disabilities justice perspective, *is anything but idle polemic*. With that in mind, Nishida's charge necessitates situating academic workers' neoliberal performativity within the context of Russell's (2019) material analysis of capitalism and disability.

Political Economy of Disability

While the academic field of disability studies came to prominence in the 1970s, first taking root in the West and Global North before quickly expanding elsewhere (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), the disability rights movement in the U.S. actually emerged a decade earlier, alongside other social justice movements of the 1960s (Russell & Malhotra, 2019). Given disabilities justice activist and scholar Nishida's (2014, 2016) call for a political conceptual turn that shifts the gaze in neoliberal academia from the academic worker to the neoliberal project itself, the work of the late disabilities justice activist Marta Russell (2019) is particularly salient here. Offering analysis rooted in political economy, Russell (2019) linked disability oppression to the current capitalist mode of production.

Drawing on Marx's (1867) labor theory of value, which posited that capitalist accumulation results from the extraction of surplus labor value, Russell's (2019) thesis argued

that capitalism constructs a disabled, nonstandard body to be leveraged, at all times, for maximal wealth accumulation within the capitalist social order. Such an administrative invention allows the capitalist class to regulate the composition of the workforce, creating and sieving out a particular class of disabled bodies to be tracked according to exploitability. Nonstandard workers, while being excluded from full labor force participation and protection, can be shunted into government-subsidized sheltered workshops and superexploited by businesses that pay them substandard wages for "nonstandard" labor output. Indeed, this systemic super exploitation has resulted in disabled workers being overrepresented at the low end of the wage distribution, with "the disparity in earnings represent[ing] tens of thousands of dollars lost to disabled workers (and pocked by business)" (Russell, 2019, p. 17).

On the other hand, nonstandard bodies that cannot be subsumed into a super exploitable labor force can still be leveraged for profit (Russell, 2019). Such bodies are re-routed from the work-based to the needs-based system of distribution, repurposed as commodities in the booming care industry and relegated to "nursing homes…so that the least productive can [still] be made of use to the economic order" (Russell, 2019, p. 18). Moreover, any concerns over market sustainability are quelled by data showing that, relative to trends for older nursing home residents, the rate of institutionalization for residents younger than age 65, and who are disproportionately placed in lower quality, for-profit nursing homes, has generally trended upward (Ne'eman et al., 2022). Whether as exploited labor or commodities in nursing homes, the oppression of disabled people is uninterpretable outside of the larger political economy.

Furthermore, Russell (2019) argued that elite class interests also use the construction of a nonconforming, disabled workforce to create what Marx (1867) termed capitalism's reserve army of labor, a standing population of unemployed ready to answer the market's requirement for cheap labor. For instance, to counter workers' bargaining power during tight labor markets, capitalism will enlargen the work pool to include more vulnerabilized disabled workers "as buffers against higher wages and lower profits" (Russell, 2019, p. 22). Indeed, Russell noted that former President Clinton's 1999 Poverty Tour calling for greater ranks of disabled workers to enter the labor pool was a prime example of market-based initiatives to clamp down on labor costs and curb rising inflation in order to "protect profits and investments on Wall Street" (Russell, 2019, p. 21). And state enlargement of the unprotected labor pool is particularly salient within the context of this paper as labor scholarship already points to universities' alarming overreliance on noncontingent faculty (the nonideal worker) as a cost-cutting measure (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009; Kezar & Gehrke, 2014). Taken together, it is no wonder that Russell unapologetically argued that the abolition of disability oppression is inextricably tied to the abolition of the capitalist state.

In summary, Russell (2019) argued that disablement is a political economic project of ruling elites used to shore up the dynamics of production and wealth accumulation under capitalism. In that disablement, as both project and political category, is rooted in the politics of ableism, the neoliberal academy, rife with the ableist ethos of competition and hyper productivity (Nishida, 2014, 2016; Wolbring, 2008) serves as a crucial site of study and struggle. Such a project begins with interrogating the neoliberal narrative that individualizes and personalizes "fault" when academic workers "fail" to meet the demands of hyper productivity (Nishida, 2016). Such a commitment also excavates the market's white-washing of interlocking oppressions by visibilizing how the capacity to meet the "demands for productivity are deeply intertwined with various types of social injustices and unequal distribution of resources"

(Nishida, 2016, p. 152). Racial, class, gender, and notions of ability, as well as other socially constructed categories mediate how different academic workers can and *do* respond to the neoliberal charge to hyper produce.

What is more, while the trajectory of those academic workers benefitting from intersecting privileges will necessarily diverge from the trajectory of those suffering from intersecting oppressions, what must not be lost is that there are no absolute "winners" here as the social relations of both to the means of production remain entrenched and unchanged under capitalism. Russell's (2019) material analysis detailing the linked fates of an idealized standard worker with a disabled, nonstandard worker is instructive here. That is, inasmuch as those who suffer, whether through surplus labor extraction and wage exploitation or through the exclusion from participation in economic and social life, are all, indeed and in fact, disciplined by capitalism, the emergence of a broad-based solidarity politics capable of countering the reproduction of class oppression is direly needed. Again, given the dearth of attention to (as a preliminary gesture toward this kind of project) academic workers' meaning making of doing neoliberalism, this exploratory paper, informed by a materialist disabilities justice perspective (Nishida, 2014, 2016; Russell, 2019) takes up the micro processes and critical reflexivity of two academic workers as they labor for legitimation and reward.

Researcher Positionality

Before proceeding, several tensions must be addressed. I am read as "able-bodied," "conforming" and thus "sane," and arguably in large part to placement in those political categories have found myself as tenured faculty at a doctoral granting comprehensive institution. As a woman of color from working class roots, my 15 years of academy life across both research and comprehensive institutions have reinforced my standing view of academia as, generally speaking, a rich and exclusionary place where poor people of color like me can go to "make good" by writing about how "more poor people of color like me can/should go to (rich) places like universities to make good." To wit, I once had a senior scholar call me a "dilettante" and another, more sympathetic colleague lament that my thinking and writing were too "telegraphed and uncouth." A simple "You write like a poor person" would have been more elegant, and frankly, a compliment.

While veiled classed discourse betrays the contested terrains of academia, what is of material significance to me is how elite class power and interests are served through the professionalization of ableism in the academy. I have found academic ableism to be particularly insidious because it advances neoliberal hyper productivity, and as edict, finds acolytes among all strata/categories of faculty, from rich to poor, Black to White, political left to political right, and so on, and because of this, curtails the possibility of building cross-coalitional politics rooted in anti-capitalist struggle. Recognizing neoliberal academia as an ableist cultural stronghold *and* crucial site of struggle, I chose a critical disabilities justice lens with a particular focus on material analysis, and I do so in full acknowledgement of what Nishida (2014) charged as the extractionist nature of an academy known to commodify the historical struggles of activists and marginalized communities.

As such, in deploying a critical disability justice studies perspective into my critique of hyper production within neoliberal academia, I acknowledge that I am implicated. That because I am informed by academic analyses from a discipline that arguably extracts from the struggles of

the disability justice movement, in order to radicalize this critique of neoliberal academia and make that much more knowable and profound the schedule of injustices wrought by academics' very own genuflection to neoliberalism's call to "measure up" and hyper produce, any claim on my part that this study is an *extraction-less* exercise is rightfully subject to suspicion and critique from disability activists and communities. To be clear, no innocence is claimed here, only deep respect and admiration for activists and communities who continually struggle against the structured oppression created by an ableist capitalist state. Failure to recognize this tension and to admit the contested nature of this and all projects with humility would be tantamount to the violent dismissal of the disabilities grassroots who struggle every day against exclusion and erasure under capitalist oppression. For that reason, this study employed the analysis of Nishida (2014, 2016) who, as both disabilities justice activist *and* scholar, insists on tackling complexities as well as the late disability justice activist Marta Russell's (2019) work on capitalism and disability.

Micro-Reflections: A Tale of Two Workers

Exploratory research designs for understudied lines of inquiry often include the use of interviews, focus groups, or cases. Given the exploratory nature and conceptual framework of this paper, a cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002) was used to explore the micro processes and self-reflexivity of academic laboring for two workers during this neoliberal moment of hyper production. Patton (2002) noted that such an approach gives attention to each individual's experiences while also searching "for patterns and themes that cut across individual experiences" (p. 57). As noted earlier, the two cases were purposefully selected as counter-subjects in that one subject is highly published faculty at a public research institution while the other is unpublished faculty at a comprehensive teaching institution. Regardless of current institutional environments, what is shared among both cases is the desire to be viewed as a productive scholar within the context of publish or perish. In light of this, the research question asked, "How do academics labor and make meaning of their intentional laboring within the context of publish or perish?" The micro-reflections were provided by two academic workers who were education professors at different public higher education institutions in one U.S. West coast state. Biographical sketches with pseudonyms follow.

Jan

At the time of this research, Jan served as an assistant professor of education at a four-year public teaching institution in a large West coast state. Jan had just completed her second year on the tenure track for a large teacher education program. Jan described having to carry a full "4/4" teaching load each academic year, and based on the semester system at her institution, this entailed teaching four full-time courses in the fall and in the spring. In addition to teaching, Jan was also responsible for academic advising, student supervision, service, and of course publishing. Jan mentioned receiving doctoral training from a large public research university (very high research activity) back East and how competitive the academic job market had proved to be for her, repeatedly invited to campus visits only to lose out on final offers because she lacked the publication record to secure the position. Jan shared that given the present opportunity, full teaching load aside, she looked forward to writing and becoming a published scholar.

Steve

At the time of this research, Steve was a tenured, full professor of education at a public, very high research activity, institution located three hours north of Jan's institution. With roughly 30 years of experience in higher education, Steve mentioned having ever only served at prestigious flagship universities. Prior to accepting a post at his current institution, Steve had taught at a top ranked education and policy school in the Midwest and before that at another highly ranked flagship, research university back East. When I interviewed Steve, he shared that he was in the midst of tackling 17 manuscripts. In addition to publishing and presenting scholarship, working with doctoral advisees, and service duties, Steve shared that he was expected to teach a "2/2" load, which meant teaching two courses in the fall and two courses in the spring semester. Like Jan, Steve received his doctoral training back East from a large public research university classified as very high research activity.

In depth in person semi-structured interviews were audio recorded in each participant's work office during the summer. Using such a protocol made possible discussion of "topics or subjects areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). As such, questioning was broad and open-ended, with the general line of inquiry centering Jan and Steve's critical reflexivity on the heightened demand to publish or perish in academia and how each negotiated that push and internalized drive to be productive within their respective work contexts. Interview data were transcribed, coded, recoded, and analyzed for themes using Saldana's (2013) two stages of coding process.

What emerged across both cases was the overarching discourse of "tiered"-*ness* and the expectation placed on the individual worker to respond or fall back with respect to laboring under the demand to hyperproduce ("publish or perish"). That is, the tiered-*ness* of labor(ing), tiered-*ness* with respect to remuneration, and tiered-*ness* with respect to survivance itself, as described by both participants, largely conveys a view of differentiated outcomes and tiered rewards as a function of individual striving and meritocracy while in this moment. This *naturalized* view of meritocratic work and rewards buoys what Nishida (2014, 2016) critiqued as a brand of ableism in the academy that "has both historically and contemporarily excluded disabled people while privileging those who can fit in the academic norm" (Nishida, 2016, p. 152). Though interviewed separately, Jan and Steve's micro reflections constitute a real dialogue about critical reflexivity as academic workers during this neoliberalizing moment. Following are excerpts of their surfaced discourses on Tiered Sweat Equity, Tiered Rewards, and Tiered Survivance as reviewed through the lens of a materialist disabilities justice critique.

"Tiered" Sweat Equity: Scholarly Work Means Thinking on a *Higher* Plane

Jan and Steve described how they understood and negotiated their laboring within the greater drive to be "productive" (i.e., highly published). Both taxonomized laboring into different categories/types, i.e., teaching aspects vs. research or service, with Jan noting the challenge of negotiating all three in pursuit of research productivity:

> With the teaching and the service and the publishing—the scholarly work, it does become more complicated because depending on where you are, in this case at a

> teaching institution, you have four classes each semester—it's 12 units each semester—and it's very difficult to write. It's very difficult to get studies going and the university is trying to put more emphasis on research, and so there's a conversation happening around about something's gotta give.

For Steve, the "give" has always been implied:

> The classroom setting, that's probably the least favorable part. You know, in any class that you teach, it's almost, kind of like a service activity…I would suspect at many of the Research I institutions that the teaching is probably second quality as to some of the others in the state.

Of particular note, their reflections about the diversification of labor tasks conveyed that both viewed research labor that produced publications as higher status work than teaching labor, regardless of ("official") institution-type and norms. As Jan explained, "doing studies, writing and getting publications, reading other people's work and having it help to inform the work you're doing as a teacher, as a service person…means thinking on a higher plane." In fact, for Steve, moving along this plane is "a burden" (but a well remunerated one as discussed in the next section):

> I define my work as the creation of new knowledge…Research is a real calling. It's a burden that we carry. And so that's the notion, the motivation that drives you. If you didn't have that, you would, it would just make you absolutely nuts. I mean you would go crazy with the pressure to publish.

At one level, the insights offered by Jan and Steve provide a glimpse into Nishida's (2016) and Bullough's (2014) critique of neoliberal capture in the academy, of how their respective institutions' hyper commodifying and valuing of a certain type of labor have arguably come to occupy and inform their own privileging of research publications as, in the words of Jan, "higher" work. At another level, and often overlooked, is a critical disabilities justice reading that disentangles the role of ranking in the reproduction of disability oppression, both in the academy and in the larger political economy. Nishida (2016) argued that the overvaluation and fetishization of certain intellectual products, here, specifically publications above all other types of labor, casts in stark relief the "ableist and saneist foundations and practices" (p. 146) of neoliberal academia. Indeed, rarely is the academy, nor academic workers alike, moved to interrogate how narrowed notions of intellectual drive and the valorization of publication counts as intellectual capital, systematically filter out and exclude from their ranks those deemed not "able-bodied" or without "sane-mind privilege" (Nishida, 2016). One can pick up the tell (again) in Steve's language, where personal motivation, not subscription to ableist, saneist exclusionary practices, accounts for individual success, "If you didn't have that [motivation], you would, it would just make you absolutely **nuts** [emphasis added]. I mean you would go **crazy** [emphasis added] with the pressure to publish."

What is more, failure to problematize how an ostensibly "value neutral" process/project such as labor diversification should then somehow translate into *a value-laden process where different types of laboring or work products* (research publications) *are deemed worthier than others* (e.g., teaching, service) harkens back to Russell's (2019) critique of disablement as a project of the larger political economy. Indeed, "labor" is the product of the laborer, so in ranking the kind of labor type produced, one is essentially ranking the "merit" or worth of the laborer as well, which ostensibly makes sense under a neoliberal frame but certainly gives pause when

reading ableism and saneism through a materialist disabilities justice perspective. As Russell (2019) explained, the capitalist imagination needs to view the nonstandard, disabled worker as incapable of producing the kind of work product that can be produced by an ideal, standard, nondisabled worker. As such, businesses have historically and continue to practice wage discrimination, undervaluing and paying substandard wages "based on the theory that disabled persons are not able to keep up with the average widget sorter" (Russell, 2019, p. 23). From this, I next turn to Jan and Steve's discourse of tiered rewards.

"Tiered" Rewards: It's a Ten Thousand Dollar Raise

As the question of pay inequality based on notions of meritocracy and worth persists in the academy (Berrett, 2011; Ferreira, 2013), a materialist disabilities justice perspective begs interrogation of the ableist and saneist commitments to a hierarchical view of labor that naturalizes market competition and wage labor inequality among workers (Nishida, 2016; Russell, 2019). For Steve and Jan, academic laboring during the neoliberal moment meant peer-reviewed publications were even more valued and, of salience, highly rewarded than service and teaching, regardless of institution type. Indeed, both keenly understood how publication productivity factored heavily into the current reward structure, for both merit raises and retention and promotion. Steve explained how his research institution rewarded him for meeting productivity targets:

> Well, when I come up for a merit review, it [publication productivity] gives me a raise for one thing. It gives me meaningful raises, you know. For instance, I could go up for a merit increase every three years…And if I get that, it's a ten thousand dollar raise.

And as Jan's institution began pushing for greater publication activity, she shared that this unofficial institutional (and personal) norm prompted her to hyper perform in order to "keep playing the game." Jan found herself trying to produce manuscripts at three times the rate of the "official" institutional norm, because as Steve remarked, "Nobody ever lost tenure because of service." Jan described the strain that hyperproduction placed on her, both personally and professionally:

> I had planned to get three out by the end of this summer and it's not happened. It's been very frustrating because I've been trying to do that. So how do you get it done? How do I do what I need to do for the classes and still do the writing that I need to get publications? Oh my God. Oh my God. And some professors are doing it on the weekends, summer, and overnight. If I get one out this semester and it gets published, I'm still ahead of the curve [for tenure], but…yeah, and again, you have that thing hanging over you. The publish and perish, which is the mantra of academe.

As disabilities justice activist and scholar Nishida (2016) pushes academics to think more radically about what Jan called "the mantra of academe," it is helpful to read both Jan and Steve's micro reflections of hyper productivity and reward through the lens of political economy and disability oppression.

Applying Marxian analysis to disentangle the relationship between labor power, hyper production, capitalist accumulation, and the exploitation of both disabled and nondisabled bodies, Russell returned (2019) to Marx's concept of surplus labor value:

> …because labor power has the capacity to produce more value than its own wages, the worker can be made to work longer than the labor-time equivalent of the wage received. The amount of labor time that the worker works to produce value equivalent to her wage, Marx calls necessary labor. The additional labor-time that the worker works beyond this, Marx calls surplus labor, and the value it produces, he calls surplus value. The capitalist appropriates the surplus value as a source of profits. (p. 16)

Despite how hard Jan and her faculty colleagues may labor to meet productivity norms, whether "on the weekends, summer, and overnight," or how many "merit" raises Steve calculates he may receive in exchange for his labor, all are, nonetheless wage laborers who work rather than own the means of production, and as such are subject to capitalist exploitation. Indeed, that the tiered-ness of rewards is described but not questioned by either Jan or Steve suggests an ideological tell here. Wage inequality is necessary for maximizing profit under the current capitalist mode of production, and insofar as both workers are incentivized to hyper produce for (unequal) rewards, any gestures toward abolishing capitalism's wage labor system, and by default, ending the capitalist oppression of both disabled and nondisabled workers is neutralized.

That is, and ever the dialectic, Russell's (2019) political economic analysis argued that capitalism uses disablement to preserve the status quo, whereby nondisabled workers invest their energies in competing against one other as exploitable labor in lieu of interrogating how their complicity helps to reproduce not only their labor exploitation but also disability oppression for bodies deemed "unfit" for exploitation and thus tracked for economic exclusion and poverty. Russell's (2019) analysis argues for a broader set of politics capable of discerning the shared precarity of both, as it is ultimately "the prevailing rate of exploitation [that] determines who is disabled and who is not." From this theoretical race to the (wage) bottom emerges the last discourse to be discussed, that of Tiered Survivance.

"Tiered" Survivance: It's by Its Own Conflicts That You're Wanting It

While Russell (2019) called for an outward facing, shared politics of resistance and liberation in response to capitalist forms of hyper exploitation, Jan and Steve's discourse of tiered survivance within the moment of hyper productivity gestures inward, arguably underscoring just how much "academics are disciplined by neoliberal expectations of success" (Nishida, 2016, p. 149). Evident in Jan and Steve's reflections were shared notions that institutional expectations were set, and that it was the individual's responsibility to hyper produce publications and "make the fit" or to move on, ostensibly to a lower tiered institution, or perhaps completely out of academia. As one of the respondents shared, "The onus is on you."

Steve explained the internalized drive to chase desire within his institution in order to "hit the big one":

> Research I professors, they always think that they're going to hit the big one, and so they're always working. It's like a prospector. Prospectors go out and look for

> gold, and you always feel like you're going to find it. It's a different way of thinking. You would go crazy with the pressure to publish if you didn't like this!

Of note, this internalized drive permeated institution-type. A career classroom teacher turned newly-minted academic, Jan expressed tensions reconciling this internalized desire amidst her institutional realities:

> In my Ph.D. program I found a love for research, so I really do enjoy doing the research. I enjoy writing the research. It's by its own conflicts that you're wanting it, but it's my—my desire to be writing...In the current situation, at a teaching institution, my research talents are not being realized, they're not being nourished, and so it's difficult to get that vine to grow because of all the things that I've shared earlier. That is a source of frustration. And so then, one of the biggest things is you always have to stay hirable, and in order to stay hirable, you have to be getting publications, because you never know when you'll go into another institution. Yeah, you just deal with it, become thick-skinned because that's—it's there.

Dealing with it, for both Jan and Steve, required the inversion to occur, that is faulting the individual instead of the institution (Nishida, 2014, 2016), and effectively offloading the institution's responsibility to change and transform onto the academic worker who must then adapt to survive, or leave. Indeed, as Steve shared:

> I've known lots of people in my career to not get tenure at a Research I institution solely because of research. You know they just didn't produce enough research and then they would go down to a comprehensive, doctoral granting institution where less emphasis was placed on research. I could not imagine anyone just doing most of this, publications, just to say they've done it to get tenure. You've gotta like this. Life is too short, you know?

Yet of note again, this logic of personal responsibilization to "fit" is shared for both respondents across institution type. Given Jan' current situation, particularly poignant is her naturalization of hyper productivity, tieredness, and how ultimately the individual must find the 'right' academic marketplace or (once again) leave:

> If I have a problem with it, it's not going to make a difference. If I want to be in academia, I have to deal with that, and if I don't want to be in academia, I don't have to. Or I could go back to the classroom, or I could go to a community college, or maybe a city college that doesn't have that requirement, and I could focus on the teaching but not have to worry about the research. So, there are ways that you can deal with it, and be attached to academia, but if you want to be in academia—university situation—you have to deal with the publish or perish. You have to.

Conversely, if we shift the gaze, as Nishida (2014, 2016) argued, from the individual to the society and its structures, and in this context the academic worker back to neoliberal academia, we will see that the tiered-ness in how laboring is perceived and rewarded, in how workers—indeed institutions—are seen as tiers themselves, is but a mechanism for disciplining, for ranking workers (all of whom struggle differentially under the many –isms camouflaged by a neoliberal logic) based on neoliberal performativity in the academic market place, and how ultimately that

drives workers to compete against one another to "stay hirable" as Jan put it, rather than to collectively organize in solidarity against neoliberalism (Nishida, 2016). Indeed, Bullough (2014) makes plain the implications of contracting assessment of academics' dignity (and worth) to the market place:

> Within markets, self-worth is strictly comparative, a matter of market share, and everyone and everything is rated and ranked, faculty, departments, universities. In situations of genuine or imagined scarcity, if someone "wins" someone else loses. Hence, your loss, for instance in academic standing, is likely experienced by someone else on faculty as their gain. This certainly is not the way to run a university or a department serious about learning. (p. 23)

Moreover, it is no way to structure a society that is sympathetic to human liberation as a whole. As Russell's (2019) political economic analysis of disability oppression argues, capitalism always seeks to regulate the number of exploitable bodies at any one time in order to maximize profit. As such, standard and nonstandard bodies must constantly compete, as Jan puts it, to "stay hirable," where the sliding scale of exploitability deems, at any one time, who is fit to be ready-made labor, who is fit to be partitioned off as reserve labor, and who is fit to be made an object lesson to others by way of complete exclusion from economic life. When academics Steve and Jan read what Nishida (2014, 2016) critiqued as academia's ableist commitment to hyper productivity through the lens of personal aptitude, interests, drive, and institutional-fit, they are less likely to discern (let alone contest), in all its seeming ordinariness, the reproduction of not only their class oppression but also the oppression of those made "disabled" by capitalism.

Closing Thoughts

A burden that we carry

(Stay hirable)

A different way of thinking

(Become thick-skinned)

Research is a real calling

(Oh my God. Oh my God.)

Creation of new knowledge

(The mantra of academe)

-Steve (Jan)

Jan did not "make tenure" at the comprehensive teaching university where she was appointed assistant professor of education and where I met and interviewed her about negotiating hyperproduction and survivance in neoliberal academia. As Nishida contends (2016), for certain, academic privilege is real and academics do have privilege. But *also* true is that academic workers comprise a varied labor force, from tenured Ivy League researchers to untenured assistant professors across varied institution types to contract lecturers and graduate teaching assistants, all differentially remunerated, all differentially protected, all differentially impacted by intersecting privileges and oppressions, and with certain workers accruing more privilege than

others. Moreover, this differentiated accumulation is arguably mediated by structural barriers masked under the neoliberal (and ableist and sanist) discourse of hard work, hyperrationality, individual freedoms and entrepreneurialism, while seducing as many units of labor from differentially vulnerabilized workers as possible. Given the discourses surfaced and pushed by the work of Nishida (2014, 2016) and Russell (2016), I close with three specific provocations that I hope further disturb the taken-for-grantedness of hyperproduction, classing, and differential rewarding of labor in neoliberal academia, and the implications for forwarding a different kind of human system for human needs.

I Can't Just Say, 'Fuck it' and Walk Away

Nishida (2014) argued that academics must face the contested micro level project of collective and orchestrated survivance in neoliberal academia, "tomorrow...and the day after tomorrow..." because, like many other academics, "I can't just say 'Fuck it' and walk away." That is, critical academic workers must collectively do the difficult work of visibilizing and politicizing the micro processes of neoliberal laboring, of confronting that DNA, the very neoliberal ableist logic that seduces and purchases its "winners" and quiets and shames its "losers." With this in mind, Nishida (2016) calls academics to challenge neoliberal academia's narrative of hyper individualism and economic rationality by practicing collective care and interdependency, social justice methodologies embedded in disabilities justice work:

> As academics (and others) are exploited by the academy, our mindbodies are exhausted, injured, and they retain a lot of trauma as well as stress. When we are busy and exhausted from our work as academics, not only does care for ourselves fall by the wayside, but so too does our capacity to care for others who are important to us. Community and collective care are ways for academics to keep ourselves sustainable physically and emotionally. In particular, community care is critical not only for our wellbeing, but also because it is a tangible way to resist the neoliberal academy's compulsion for individualization by nurturing our capacities for democracy. (p. 155)

As such, collective care is a political project, and so too is the practice of interdependence, both rarely entertained by academics who, long *enabled* (however differentially) by the ableist and exclusionary features of neoliberal academia, often fail to leverage shared precarity in service of collective struggle and liberation. And thusly, the tiered-*ness* of experiences, tiered-*ness* of self-worth, tiered-*ness* of rewards, and the classing and ranking of academic labor in endless pursuit of "hyper productivity"—all derivative fallout from invisibilized social *in*justices—as a matter of structure, become naturalized.

Occupy the Productivist Imaginary of Neoliberal Academia

Complementing Nishida's (2016) call for a politics of intentional collective care and interdependence, and much in the way that radical environmentalists and critical economists have globally countered the capitalist project of hypergrowth in both discourse and action by centering anti-development, we must as well wrestle with our yet to foment project of what critical economist Latouche (2009) termed "degrowth."

Latouche (2009) shares that "[d]egrowth is a political slogan with theoretical implications...designed to silence [the] chatter of those who are addicted to productivism" and which argues emphatically for the abandonment of reckless "exponential growth, as that goal is promoted by nothing other than a quest for profits on the part of the owners of capital and has disastrous implications for the environment…" (p. 8). Likewise, in the ways that economic hypergrowth extracts from and eventually destroys the biosphere (Latouche, 2009), so too does neoliberal academia's demand for hyper productivity on workers, regardless of institution type, in the process seducing academic workers to cannibalize themselves in pursuit of survivance.

We see the cost of this high stakes complicity in students being shortchanged of their professors' time and attention (Bullough, 2014), in professors becoming "paper pushers" (Chou, 2014), in scandals of peer review "publishing rings" (Barbash, 2015), and in the termination of faculty who issue refusals to be evaluated for "research productivity" as political protest (Wang, as cited in Chou, 2014). For certain, this is not an anti-publication treatise, just as Latouche (2009) clarifies that degrowth is not a hyperbolic call for the absence of all growth, which would be disastrous. What is proposed here is the mindful interrogation and rupturing of a neoliberal project that has so completely colonized academia and the academics who call it home. Of consequence, such a meditation would nudge academics to read their individual laboring and their own oppression relationally. Given that ableist notions of endless "productivity" and "wage labor" under a capitalist social order buttresses capitalism's oppression of exploitable and "non-exploitable" bodies alike, certain questions about how to collectively work towards economic transformation in the service of human actualization must be tackled. Indeed, as Russell (2019) uncomfortably posed, "How can the realm of work be reorganized to provide accommodations for all, and how can all members of society be embraced and rewarded whether they work or not?" (p. 19).

Occupy the Degradation of Academic Labor

Finally, I gesture toward more critical dialogue around notions of "worth." In recognizing how socially-disciplined academics' lives are (Nishida, 2014, 2016), including academic labor which is the "product" of "aptitude and talents" which are not so structurally-*uncomplicated*, I argue that the ranking which necessarily results in the exaltation of certain types of laboring to the degradation of others, is at best politically naïve, and at worst, profoundly and deceptively unjust.

As Nishida (2014) shared regarding the project of labor bartering that makes collective care possible in disabilities justice communities fighting capitalism, ableism, sanism, racism and every manner of social injustice structured by society, "We try not to privilege one labor with more value than another. Labor is labor" (1:03:22). And yet, in the academy as elsewhere, the question of pay inequality based on *naturalized* meritocracy and worth persists (Berrett, 2011; Ferreira, 2013). While political economic transformation of the type Russell (2019) proposed is a project still in waiting, conversations that move toward fashioning a human-first system that recognizes the dignity of all laboring and laborers within (and without) neoliberal academia is direly needed.

In closing, if we seek unthinkable self- and collective awareness, indeed if we seek *unimaginable* relational justice, we must press to understand how the drive for hyper production, anchored in the exclusionary logic of structured ableism masked as "meritocracy," makes all too

tenable not only the ranking and degrading of academic labor, but the capitalist relations of power responsible for the class oppression of all (non)laboring bodies. As a materialist disabilities justice perspective posed, in these austere times, we are more, and we must demand more for ourselves, than the productivity of fast work and slow death (Goodley et al., 2014).

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Author

Maiyoua Vang teaches in the educational leadership department at California State University, Long Beach. Correspondence may be sent to maiyoua.vang@csulb.edu.

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