

The ones who walk away from the university

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I want to thank the FNEEQ and the organizers of this event, and my friend Stefana Lamasanu, for organizing this important gathering and inviting me to take part in it. According to my CV, I have given over 125 talks since receiving my PhD in 1999, but I can say with certainty that I have never given one for which I have felt as much anxiety as I have for this one. I think it is because I am unaccustomed to standing before a group of my peers and speaking from a position of complicity and shame. As a tenured professor and research chair at an elite university, my relationship to precarious academic labour is primarily that of a beneficiary.

Because I am a professor, and a critical theorist at that, I feel I have to start in the way that is most familiar to me, by invoking an artful device to try to illuminate and make sense of a darkened reality that seems to make no sense at all.

There is a story that has seized me of late. It is a short story written in 1973 by feminist science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin. The story is called “*The ones who walk away from Omelas.*” It tells the tale of a small city by the sea as it celebrates its annual summer festival. As she describes it, the city is prosperous but not opulent. The people of Omelas are happy, but not simple-minded, naïve or infantile. As she describes them, “**There was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians...as they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet, I repeat, these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us.**”

It is a fine place, Omelas, full of fine people. But there is more. In the basement of one of the buildings in Omelas there is a room with a locked door, about the size of a closet, with a dirt floor and no windows. Inside the closet there is a child, confined, deprived, malnourished, sickly, afraid, uncared for. Why it is this particular child is not clear. It appears arbitrary.

As if that were not shocking enough, Le Guin adds the following: “**They all know it is there, the people of Omelas.**” The child’s misery and confinement is not concealed. *It is known.* The people of Omelas are not naïve. They are not duped. They *know* what is going on, and they proceed with their lives not as if they did not know of this child’s misery, but despite the fact that they do. Many of the people periodically go to look at the child, and young people are taken to see the child as a matter of course. None of these people are specifically responsible for the child’s confinement. As Le Guin’s narrator confirms: “**One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt.**” As Elizabeth Povinelli suggests in her reading of the story, the child’s suffering is ordinary and uneventful – as she puts it: “**there is nothing spectacular to report.**” There is a child confined in the closet. Life goes on.

And yet there is more. It is not just that the people of Omelas know the child is there. As Le Guin describes, **“They all know it *has to be there*.”** She explains: **“Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, *depend wholly on this child's abominable misery*.”**

This changes things considerably. For it means that the tale of the child in the closet is not just a story of *exclusion*, as if the child could just be let out of the closet to join the festival and everything would be fine. It is rather a story of *exploitation*, whereby the misery of the child is what produces the comfort and security of the city. The child's confinement is a *necessary*, not contingent element of the whole (thus, the child is already *included*, not excluded). The child's deprivation is not incidental, it is *structural*.

And this is why even those who are inclined to sympathize with the child are typically left feeling as if there is nothing they can or should do to help her. As Le Guin explains:

“They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement, to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed. The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.”

In this way, the people of Omelas come to believe that they, like the child, are helpless and confined, despite all their enlightened humanity. And this consoles them greatly.

This story was written 40 years ago but it is a story of the university today, and we all know who the people of Omelas are and who is the child in the closet. The only difference is that the child is not one but many, many more than those whose relative prosperity is structurally dependent on the individual and collective exploitation of this majority. They are not as helpless as the child in Omelas (indeed, they must be incredibly strong, resourceful and skilled to endure the conditions they do, and they might yet demonstrate their considerable latent power) but they are constrained by circumstances that systematically weaken them.

Like the city of Omelas, the university is generally a fine place, populated by **“mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives are not wretched.”** But in the university's basements and closets there are people who have so many names they have no name – the adjuncts, the sessionals, the part-timers, the contract faculty – people who work under conditions of confinement and deprivation that have nothing to do with what they themselves have done or failed to do, and for which no one can provide a defensible, rational justification. And, like the child in the basement in Omelas, *everyone knows they are there*. Those outside the university,

and the young people who study there, might not be fully aware of the situation, but everyone who works at the university and has a hand in running it knows about the adjuncts in the basement. No one is to blame. It is just the way it is, uneventful.

It would be wrong to think of their situation as one of mere exclusion, as if it could be solved by leaving the university as it is but releasing a few adjuncts from the basement and allowing them to join the rest of us. Contract faculty are not excluded, they are exploited, which means that the proliferation of contract professors working under precarious conditions is not incidental to the university's survival as it presently organized but rather *structural*. We misname them when we call them "adjuncts" – by definition, an adjunct is an optional, structurally dispensable part of a sentence. While this might be true of any individual contract professor, there is no sense in which contract faculty are structurally dispensable on a collective level. The university cannot be what it is without the exploitation of contract faculty, and if that exploitation ended not just for this or that *individual* but on a collective, structural level, the university as it is today would be unsustainable. It would have to become something else.

This, too, everyone knows. We know not just that the exploited contract faculty are there. We also know that *they have to be there*. The permanent professoriate knows that what we have rests on the foundation of what *they* do not have. We know that the university is an example of what Povinelli calls "**an economy of abandonment.**" Some of us are outraged by the situation, but we find consolation in convincing ourselves that we would change things if only we could, but there is nothing we can do about it. While we might not be exploited, we are victims of the same systemic constraints that confine contract faculty to their exploitation, and in that sense we are truly with them, not against them. Thus do we keep guilt from entering the gates of campus.

That, of course, is a lie. There are many things we, the permanent faculty, could do:

- We could use the formal mechanisms of collegial governance at our institutions to take measures that would prevent or diminish the structural exploitation of contract faculty. This would mean challenging executive prerogative as it is currently exercised at the university, and bearing the personal and collective costs of doing so.
- We could support, not just symbolically but materially, efforts by contract faculty to organize, unionize and bargain collectively with their universities. And we could exert organized and formal pressure on university administrators to bargain with them generously and in good faith.
- We could put pressure on our own faculty unions and associations to accommodate, affiliate, amalgamate or federate with contract faculty unions, on their terms, where they are interested in doing so, in order to strengthen their position in negotiations, grievances and job actions at the university and across the sector.
- We could use our control over graduate programs to choke-off the supply that generates the reserve army of labour that sustains the exploitation of contract faculty. We could be honest with prospective graduate students (and ourselves) about the most likely futures they face in the absence of measures such as these.

These are just a few of the things we can do. It is unlikely that many of us will do them – more likely we will do things like I am doing now, speaking up critically in what we hope are thoughtful ways. This is easy for us. It involves no sacrifice. It is what we get paid to do. And it makes us feel better.

The reasons that most of us do not do more are many and complex. It would be easy to say that the permanent professoriate is motivated simply by the desire to protect its privilege, but I think it is more complicated than that. Like the people of Omelas, the permanent professoriate are not bad people. We do not lack imagination or a sense of justice. I believe we lack courage – and by this I do not mean to pass moral judgment on my colleagues. In my view, courage is a property of circumstances, not individual persons. Just as contract academic workers are structurally exploited, the permanent professoriate is structurally discouraged. By this I mean that our circumstances do not encourage us to be open to action that could initiate a future whose shape we cannot control or predict, and which we cannot guarantee will be as good for us as our present situation. Because it is structural, ending the exploitation of contract academic labour would change the university. The security of tenure, a middle-class salary, and time for study are not a privilege; they are working conditions. They are supposed to liberate academics to act their consciences; instead they have become something academics fear losing. This is understandable. It is what it means to be discouraged.

But something else is possible. Here is how the story of Omelas ends:

“At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”

From the point of view of contract academic workers themselves, ending their structural exploitation will require a campaign of organized and sustained refusal. For the permanent professoriate to support or join this refusal will require something different. It will require an exodus. We will have to, in a sense, *walk away from the university*, at least as it is currently constituted. Unlike the ones who walk away from Omelas, we will have to walk together, not alone. We will have to walk through the beautiful gates and keep going, to another university, even if we are not certain it is possible or that it will be better for them than the one we already have. We can only hope it will not be built on the labour of children in the basement. And we will need encouragement, the ones who walk away from the university.