To be a hero and traitor: A reflection on truth-telling and fear

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abstract

This note reflects on my personal experiences with 'truth-telling' as a critical scholar. Drawing on two moments early in my career, I recount how my writings challenging sexism and racism have been varyingly received. To explore the affective dimensions of truth-telling, I focus in particular on fear. I trace the way this force has destabilised me when I was rewarded and disciplined for my scholarship and how it lingers with me even now.

Preamble on fear

> When we speak we are afraid, our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive. (Lorde, 1978: 31-32)

This is a note about a companion of mine. It is the sharp pain seizing in my chest, the strangling of my throat and the vertigo of being swept under waves of hopeless despair. It is when my stomach mangles in a knot so that I can no longer keep food down, when my breath comes in short rasps and my shuddering heart threatens to crumble. The oppressive shadow of it lies in wait for me until my eyes flit open at quarter past three in the morning and I find it there in the stillness of the dark, leaning across the side of my bed. In moments of lightness and laughter, I forget it for a blissful moment. Then its hands clench around my shoulders again and all the suffocating sensations of my thundering heart, twisting stomach, rasping lungs, desperate broken hopelessness rush back.

When I am most small, most alone, most fragile, it murmurs, 'You will fail'. 'You will lose everything'. 'You are worthless'.

Academic truth-telling

After graduating from my PhD, I accepted a two-year research fellowship at a research centre in Australia. The centre had only been established a few months when I applied for the role. An alumnus of the university had pledged $1 million to drive the centre's mission to restore ethics in leadership across both private and public sectors. It was emphasised that the central objective of my role at the centre was to build its research profile through publications. I joined a modest team with only the executive director and his assistant to welcome me and the promise of another research fellow to start two months later. Eager to convert my contract to something more long-term and cement my career as an academic, I anxiously applied myself to the instrumental publishing objective from my first week and was relieved when within my first few months at the centre, an article from my doctoral research was accepted. The piece spoke out against sexism in organisations and society.

When the director ran into me in the hallway after hearing the news, he clasped my hands so hard in his that it hurt. His voice shook with jubilance as he said, 'As a feminist, I am *so* happy that you're working here'. He passed the article onto the head of alumni relations who helped me to turn my arguments into a project proposal that his team began pitching to female philanthropists. My reputation as the 'gender researcher' glowed brighter at the university. Another senior leader recommended me for feature in a short documentary promoting my research. The vice chancellor called me personally to invite me to supervise the doctoral research of a female executive at one of the country's largest corporations.

In my second year at the centre, I added another article to a growing publications list. This piece spoke out against racism in organisations and society. When I reported the acceptance at the next staff meeting, the director physically recoiled at the mention of 'whiteness' in the article title when I said it aloud. The atmosphere between us remained tense for a few weeks until he exploded over a phone call. 'Maybe the centre doesn't want to be associated with your work anymore!', he shouted down the line before hanging up.

The director avoided direct communication with me after his outburst. I found out through his assistant that I was assigned to host events and write newsletters for the remainder of the year. In an email trail I was later accidentally copied

into, it was revealed that $66,000 of my research funds were redistributed to the other research fellow's project. When I queried why I had been taken off research duties, the director explained, 'You're publishing enough already'. As it became apparent that my contract would unlikely be renewed at the end of the year, I started applying for other roles.

The academy might seem like an odd place to be talking about truth-telling. Perhaps like me you took for granted that universities are bastions of academic freedom unencumbered by the intrusions of church or state and that we have the 'unimpeded freedom to teach, to study, and to research without any external control' (Davies, 2015: 988). The fundamental principles of our institutions appear to enable and empower us to speak truth to power. However, this parrhesiastic ideal appears to be far from the realities of academic work. The transformation of higher education under neoliberalism has seen knowledge production (along with education, engagement and administration) restructured towards marketisation, competition and managerial control (Busch, 2017). Concerned scholars have pointed to the steady erosion of academic freedom within the neoliberal academy (Hoepner, 2019; Nelson, 2010) with numerous and varied threats from technology (Davies, 2015), new media (Minerva, 2016), nationalism (Ganguly, 2017), foreign governments (Peterson, 2017), social mechanisms within and beyond academia (Gottfredson, 2010), and impact factors (Timothy, 2015).

The critical ethos of scholarship has been replaced with encroaching ideologies of 'excellence' measured through various assessment tools and ranking exercises (De Vita and Case, 2016). Even within the more 'radical' fields, such as my own of critical management studies (CMS), scholars have warned one another not to lose sight of our role 'as critic and conscience of society' (Bridgman and Stephens, 2008: 261). In CMS specifically, this requires that we cast a 'caustic eye' on management and speak out on the ways it exerts violence within and beyond the workplace (Pullen et al., 2017: 3). It means taking a stand against the prevailing systems of oppression in society – neoliberal capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy – embracing the risks and costs of fearless speech (Fournier and Smith, 2012).

Following anti-racist feminist traditions with my work, I write about the innumerable ways patriarchy and white supremacy ravage our lives (Liu, forthcoming). Yet the prevailing belief in my culture is that sexism and racism are artefacts of a regrettable history that our generation has left behind. Although some concede that lingering inequality in the forms such as unintentional 'unconscious biases' may exist (cf. Noon, 2018; Tate and Page, 2018), many people equate sexism and racism to the behaviours and attitudes of deviant

individuals and do not accept that gender and racial dominance are normalised and institutionalised in everyday life (Acker, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Essed, 1991; McRobbie, 2008; Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Those whose research cross the previously unseen boundaries can confront the precarity of academic freedom to write against the status quo (Hoepner, 2019). My experiences colliding against the invisible limits of academic freedom have shaped my self-constitution as an 'outsider' (Kenny et al., 2018). I embrace the subjectivity of the 'space invader' (Puwar, 2004) who holds no loyalty to the norms of the 'ivory tower'. I hold onto the belief that my writings are more than just a function of my job. I write to ease the pain I have endured and continue to endure as a woman of colour living and working in a patriarchal white supremacist settler-colony. I write to assert my humanity in a world that can often refuse to see me, my family and my friends as fully human. I write for my survival (Lorde, 1997). As an outsider to the white masculinist academy, I console myself that I can and I will withstand the costs of truth-telling, even though to write and speak against patriarchal white supremacy in these times can feel like a declaration of war (Ahmed, 2017; Yancy, 2018).

Fearing the truth

Popular discourses of truth-telling tend to focus on the figure of the whistleblower, who are often constructed as either '"heroes" standing up against a morally corrupt system or as "traitors" who threaten the moral integrity of this very same system' (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016: 1622). Their presence varyingly inspires awe and contempt, highlighting the intense affective landscape in which whistleblowers will often find themselves (Kenny, 2019; Kenny et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2011). The stories that tend to feature in our public imagination include familiar examples like former United States intelligence analyst, Chelsea Manning, who sent classified military information to WikiLeaks in 2010 that disclosed information about civilian deaths in the Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan. On a smaller scale in my own country of Australia, a royal commission was only recently conducted into the banking sector after whistleblowers such as former financial planner, Jeff Morris, released to the media evidence of his bank's compliance breaches. For their exercises in truth-telling, both Manning and Morris encountered significant political and organisational backlash for their actions. Manning was charged with 22 offenses including aiding the enemy and initially sentenced to 35 years in prison. She has spoken publicly about the trauma she endured during her pre-trial detention that left her on suicide watch in solitary confinement. Morris has also alluded in media interviews of how his decision to become a whistleblower attracted death

threats and eventually cost him his job, straining his marriage in the process (Barker, 2017). Truth-telling, as is apparent, can have terrifying consequences for those who choose to do it (Kenny, 2019; Lee and Kleiner, 2011; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016).

Alongside Manning and Morris, my own experiences of truth-telling over my short career as a critical management scholar pale in comparison. Yet the two different responses to my work I shared earlier were frightening and bewildering when they occurred. Early in my role as a research fellow, I feared the precarity of my career as a new graduate on a fixed term contract. I was baffled by the kindness that those in power extended me for what I thought was just the ordinary function of truth-telling as an academic. As I could not make sense of the purpose of the rewards bestowed on me, I feared that one day all their kindness would go away.

That fear was realised in the second year of my role. While my critiques of sexism were embraced by senior managers at my institution, my critiques of racism were regarded as having gone too far. The same man who effused his gratitude for my presence would less than a year later see me as a liability to the research centre. At first, I feared the material consequences of my truth-telling. I feared that I would lose my job and lose my income. I feared that my reputation would be tainted as a 'troublemaker', and I would then struggle to find employment elsewhere. Although I was not retrenched, my fear grew more intense and irrational as I stayed at the research centre. In the last few months before I resigned, my heart would race at the sound of the director's footsteps walking towards my office. I flew into a panic when I saw an email from him appear in my inbox or a call from him come through on my phone. I could no longer sleep through the night as I replayed the ways he mocked, denigrated and shouted at me, over and over. And on the days I did not meet him, the dread and despair would lift for just a moment in which I could exhale, before becoming overwhelmed by the fear of our inevitable next encounter. The fear wrecked through my body and left its mark (Westwood, 2003). A part of me continues to live in fear that I would be made a hero only to fall from my pedestal and be labelled a traitor again.

Now years on, I can also see with greater clarity the boundaries of my truth-telling. The mainstreaming of liberal feminist politics in Australia has enabled certain critiques of sexism to become socially acceptable (Liu, 2019). At my institution, my critiques of sexism had the potential to be commodified, sold to elite executive women in order to attract their philanthropic funding or enrolment in a research degree. My work was thus readily embraced as a branding opportunity where my truth-telling could enhance the university's

public image as young, bold and progressive. The commodifiability of 'feminism' in the corporate sector prompted my heroicisation as the whistleblower of sexism.

In contrast, Australia's cultural shame and wilful forgetting of our colonial history has meant that discussions of race and racism remained taboo (Hage, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). My writings on race became what Ahmed calls a 'sore point' (2017: 149). It refused commodification because no one (at the time) was willing to buy an indictment against racism for doing so would be to admit that racism exists in Australia. Since I left the institution, far-right movements have been mobilising a brutal backlash against what they see as an increasingly diverse world and scholars have begun to ask how the academy may respond (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Yancy, 2018). As with the case of feminism (Silva and Mendes, 2015), liberal co-optations of anti-racism have begun (Dar et al., 2018). A growing number of universities in the United Kingdom have signed up to the *Race Equality Charter* in a commitment to 'improving the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students in higher education'. Whereas my critiques of racism were in the past met with anger and contempt, in more recent years, my work has started to attract offers of funding to develop and implement 'diversity and inclusion' programmes for organisations.

Try as I might to intellectualise what happened, even now, I am still perplexed by how my writings could engender such extreme expressions of admiration in one moment and contempt in the next. My own emotions, therefore, comprise only a fraction of the affective landscape of truth-telling. In calling out the injustices of power regimes, critical scholarship will inevitably trigger anger, anxiety, shame, guilt, disgust, and indeed fear, among those who believe their power and privilege to be threatened. But to not speak, to remain silent in the face of gender and racial violence, would be worse. It would to be complicit in patriarchal white supremacist power, complicit in my own destruction. Lorde's words at the opening of this note lend me courage: fear may remain my constant companion, but it is better to continue speaking the truth.

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