

You Cannot Measure Spring

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We had a memoir by Joan Baez in my house growing up, titled *And a Voice to Sing With*, and an open bookshelf policy. I read the memoir when I was maybe eleven or twelve, the same summer that I read *Brazzaville Beach* (boring, I concluded, not realising that understanding all the words was not the same thing as understanding the story) and the entire collection of Dick Francis thrillers from the lowest shelf in the cold little room at the foot of the stairs that would become my bedroom many years later, when I thought distance meant independence. I don't remember much about Baez's story, but the title of the book stayed with me; it is drawn from a poem by e. e. cummings, and it was the first time I recall feeling the magnetism of a poem, feeling it drawing my thoughts and my heart back over and over. The verse from which the title came was printed on the flyleaf of the book and I read it, in thrall, again and again.

*While you and I have lips and voices which
are for kissing, and to sing with
who cares if one some-eyed son of a bitch
invents an instrument to measure Spring with?*²

I am sure that part of the poem's attraction was the allusion to kissing and the casual use of profanity; I was the age at which these seemed both mildly thrilling and within the realm of the possible, which increased the appeal. But it was the idea of an instrument to measure Spring with that I turned over in my mind in random moments. I imagined this instrument like a pair of compasses, silver and sharply pointed, hinged open to measure the unmeasurable, because Spring was the noise of the wood pigeons nested in the eaves of the house, the damp grassy smell of the garden, a soft blue light on sleepless anxiety. Spring was daffodils and bluebells on verges and in copses, the promise of hot days sticky with syrup from over-sugared ice-llies, summer holidays, and the lonely ache of freedom. How can that be measured?

I felt softly interpellated by cummings's poem at eleven when I first read it and I feel that way still: "you and I have lips and voices", he wrote, and I feel my way into the position of "you", because I was never going to be among the one-eyed sons of bitches inventing implements of measurement, abstraction, and rule. And yet, thirty-something years later, it is these whom I

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² e. e. cummings, 'voices to voices, lip to lip ... (XXXIII)'. Online, at www.americanpoems.com/poets/eecummings/voices-to-voiceslip-to-lip-xxxiii/.

serve. Contemporary academia, at least the manifestations of it with which I am familiar – in Australia, the UK, North America – seems to care not for kissing and song. It is, increasingly, a world in which we are required to measure the unmeasurable, to account for “output” and “impact” along with dollars of grant income and numbers of publications, which are more easily quantified and thus stand as an estimation of value. As if value can fit in the cell of a spreadsheet. Over the last two decades, academics in social science disciplines have learned how to measure Spring, and we are the poorer for it. This is not an individualised problem, even as it is a problem that individualises us; it is part of a broader shift towards “a quality assurance-driven audit culture”³ within the academy, a recalibration of the structures within which we operate that now cohere identifiably as “the neoliberal university”.⁴

While neoliberalism is a slippery concept for those of all political persuasions, its manifestation in the university setting revolves around “corporatisation, metrification, and performance-based funding models”, motivated by the desire to secure a greater share of the global market in student enrolments than proximate competitors, based on “consumer preferences”.⁵ These processes are themselves driven by economic scarcity as much as (in tandem with) ideology, a result of the systematic defunding of public universities by successive governments in Australia and the UK and presumably elsewhere; “the market turn has transformed universities from being a cooperating set of public sector agencies, to being a hybrid and fragmented industry of contractors to the state”.⁶ We are subjected to, and subjectified by, the will to measure within the institutional walls of this industry – and now within the walls of our own homes, and coffee shops, and libraries; our labour is extracted in ways that intruded into previously “private” spaces (though this distinction was always tenuous for many), gradually and then all at once with the “work from home” directives issued at the onset of the covid-19 pandemic.⁷ Every academic is a fungible unit, vulnerable to market trends, and every academic is conditioned by demands for constant availability (though again, these demands are unevenly distributed, with pressures felt most keenly by the precariously and temporarily employed).

The will to measure is exerted in hundreds of different ways throughout the career of every academic.

“[N]eoliberal apparatuses of the university work to construct our selves as lacking. We lack the qualities of a ‘good’ teacher according to our student evaluations, we lack the qualities of a ‘good’ researcher according to the metrics that quantify our inputs and outputs, we lack an Australian Research Council grant, we lack a publication in a ‘Tier 1’ journal, we lack tenure, we lack a promotion, we lack the ability to cross the country for a conference, we are voids. There are huge gaping holes in our credibilities as academics and we spend our days and nights, hours and hours, trying to plug up the holes, trying to stuff them with the cotton wool stuffing of appeasement, of reassurance,

³ Briony Lipton and Elizabeth Mackinlay, *We Only Talk Feminist Here: Feminist Academics, Voice and Agency in the Neoliberal University*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

⁵ Lipton and Mackinlay, *We Only Talk Feminist Here*, 6.

⁶ Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It’s Time for Radical Change*. London: Zed, 2019, 137.

⁷ Margaret Thornton, ‘Coronavirus and the Colonisation of Private Life’, *Legalities*, 2021, 1(1): 44–67, 46.

endlessly completing futile and empty tasks, searching for that moment of completeness, of success.”⁸

My colleagues and I are less than the sum of our parts, always, as we are reduced and managed and made manageable by these technologies of administration; we are lessened by this bankrupt process of accounting. There is rarely more of our selves to give, to account for, to express, and yet we are never contained by the measures favoured by our managers. Our productivity, our performance, is assumed to translate with ease into fields within annual planning and development forms, percentages of student satisfaction, numbers of outputs and citations to those outputs, but how can they quantify the act of kindness that fosters community, the expression of solidarity that reduces isolation and individualisation, the fulfilment of home-baked muffins brought to nourish colleagues through another endless meeting?

I have always been fierce about making myself visible in my written work. I want to be visible in the text because I am the author, I do not wish to hide my self because I am interwoven in every decision that produced the words on the page in the configuration that they are in. It brings to mind for me Donna Haraway and her deliberation on situated knowledge, in which she posits that recognising our positionality in research “allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see”.⁹ I sit with this emphasis on accountability often, and it guides me in the placement and revelation of my self in my research. Recently, however, I have worked on visibility in different ways, ways that are not always straightforward and are most often quite terrifying, given – as touched on above – how precarious the fiction that any of us are irreplaceable in the neoliberal university.

And I have worked this visibility, this vulnerability, from both sides. I have been an instrument, worn the threadbare mantle of “leadership” in a previous role, and I am flooded with the coppery taste of shame when I recall my complicity with the fictions of measurements that were wielded to discipline: I have – pseudo-respectfully, and with a smile – quieted dissenting voices raised in resistance, if not in song; and I have advocated for forms of measurement that increased vulnerability, precarity, the potential for harm, from which I myself was carefully insulated. I have benefited from this system and I have turned it against others.

I have made somewhat different choices this year. Perhaps there are shadows of atonement in my efforts now, in the acts that reveal my uncertainty, my own vulnerability, the tenuous hold that I have on coherence and stability in this environment, at the same time as I know my white skin and my title afford me privilege that makes risks less risky for me than for some colleagues. And so: it is my turn to create and hold space for others, into which they can step forward; it is my obligation to use the privilege I have accrued to hold managers accountable, as best I can, for the damaging effects of their disavowal of shared humanity; it is my intention to listen and amplify those voices raised in resistance, in song.

⁸ Eileen Honan, Linda Henderson, and Sarah Loch. ‘Producing Moments of Pleasure within the Confines of an Academic Quantified Self’. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 2015, 8(3): 44-62, 47.

⁹ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 14(3): 575-599, 583.

In the face of ongoing and relentless efforts to maximise our productivity and minimise our selves, putting effort instead into building circles of care is an act of radical resistance. Coming back again and again to the acts of kindness, the expressions of solidarity, the nourishment and nurturing which counters the numbness and the numbers grounds me, and brings me joy. “There are moments, cracks and fissures, tiny spaces where we produce pleasure, when desire is released from the restricted codes of the academy”¹⁰ and where instead of cells and fields and proclamations of peerless performance my colleagues and I find ways to connect, and be held, in relation. “Joy is a word not often spoken about today’s market-oriented universities. But there should be joy in learning, in making knowledge, in solving problems, in sharing”; joy is in the connection, the community, the space between us that connects us and that we share.¹¹ “Spaces where we can ‘talk feminist’ are often spaces for repair, for healing wounds, for reflection and vulnerability”,¹² in which I connect with my collaborators, spaces in which we remain alive to violence and exclusion and in which we nonetheless hold each other. We hold each other, imperfectly: hold each other up, and to account, and in light. We work as though people matter. When asked what we have produced, we cannot – dare not – answer: our selves; each other; love. When asked how our productivity can be measured, we cannot – dare not – answer: it cannot. Your spreadsheet cannot contain my heart. You cannot measure Spring.

The audacity of that one-eyed son of a bitch.

¹⁰ Honan, Henderson, and Loch. ‘Producing Moments of Pleasure’, 52.

¹¹ Connell, *The Good University*, 165.

¹² Briony Lipton and Elizabeth Mackinlay, *We Only Talk Feminist Here: Feminist Academics, Voice and Agency in the Neoliberal University*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017, 104.