



## Autoethnographic Poetry: On Being a Casual Academic

### Description

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### AUTHOR'S MEMO

The following autoethnographic poetry represents the experience of being a casual academic before the COVID-19 pandemic. The writing highlights the personal-professional challenges of negotiating employment precarity, organisational subjectivity, and performativity within the academic workspace. While personal, the situations and sentiments are shared across the casualised cohort. The collection forms a bell curve, highlighting one year's experiences of changing employment conditions and engagement within the neoliberal university arena (pre-pandemic). The writing starts with emergent hope and shared understanding, through the realities of casualisation, organisational power, and draconian decisions, before gently finishing with loss, regret, and coffee. Early versions of *Cap in hand*, *I ask*, and *Conversations* appeared in *Major Threat: Punk Rock Academia* (A 'zine).

In Australia, to meet the ebb and flow of student attendance and budget needs, universities employ teaching and research academics on a short term basis (semester by semester), colloquially referred to as 'casuals' or 'sessionals' (or 'adjuncts'). Other terms within the literature include academic underclass, disposable academics, gypsy scholars, lost tribe, invisible faculty, and throwaway academics. This transient cohort is paid on a set hourly rate calculated and allocated by task expectations and student enrolment.

The stories and experiences of casualised academics are often unheard. This marginalised and transient cohort exists outside the formal university structure, without access to many of the resources required to perform tasks, including office/computer access, photocopying, and paid professional development. Many academics engage in casual employment hoping it will lead to permanent work (Brown et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2009). However, casual work does not provide the full range of skills required for ongoing academic employment (May et al., 2013). Casualisation of labour, especially within the neoliberal university, can alter an individual's personal and professional perception of their

abilities, further influencing their employment opportunities and sense of self-worth.

Government reporting requirements and university record-keeping make it difficult to accurately report actual casual academic figures (Baik et al., 2018; Dodo-Balu, 2017; Junor, 2004). Discrepancies are highlighted in the NTEU's 2013 comparison between Government statistics showing 21.8% casual academics in Australian universities, compared to 61%, reported by Unisuper data. Four years later, Kniest (2018) reported that around 65% of university employees were precariously employed, with 43% on casual contracts and 22% on limited fixed-term contracts. While casual staffing models have become integrated within the university structure, there has been a lack of attention to the necessary infrastructure to provide support, training, and inclusion.

The pandemic has rewritten the priorities and role of all academics in universities and provided a catalyst for university staff reform. Initially, casual academics were the first to lose work, with over 8,000 job losses by May 2020 (Littleton & Stanford, 2021). Currently, work opportunities and conditions are changing with increased public scrutiny, legal action to redress wage theft, conversion of casual roles to ongoing/fixed terms, and changes to the Fair Work Act to define the role of a casual employee. Change is coming, slowly but surely.

The AutoEthnographer





### **Casualised Conversations**

Collectively, casualised academics share stories carefully

Words weighed and measured for possible repercussions.

Guarding any semblance of inclusion while knowingly othered.

Renegotiating personal boundaries, playing a game without rules or a team, without end.

Losing self in service of others, without professional identity, just another casual academic.

*Deliberately uninformed until the due date when urgency becomes a weapon.*

*Creating safe spaces for students without an office.*

Courageous, each morning finding a new smile.

Unspoken feelings. The rejection, the hurt, and the betrayal.

*Not 'qualified' to hold a position, but useful enough to fill it casually.*

*Required to create and deliver resources without photocopier access.*

Each person shrugs, saying they love what they do, just not the conditions.

Constantly careful, compliant, courteous.

*Told you are not 'enough' to run a unit but asked to act as relief coordinator.*

*Receiving a termination letter while caring for a dying parent.*

Listening quietly, I encourage, I note, I care,

Pragmatically protecting and nurturing my own employment opportunities.

### **Cap in Hand, I Ask**

Yesterday was a hark-back to my childhood. Requesting permission, asking for favour, seeking approval. As an adult, I embody an 'un-childlike' existence based on responsibility, self-control, self-direction, being part of the social sphere, conforming, and performing. Between the two, I exist as a sessional, casualised academic. A responsible and educated adult when facing students, yet a submissive child when seeking support and resources.

Bemused at the situation, I took a deep breath and began a litany of polite requests.

- for my salary to be approved (already a fortnight behind)
- for space to perform my job (not entitled to a desk)
- for access to the resources required to fulfil obligations
- for departmental communications and information currency

Barely pausing, I continue asking

- for contract creation to ensure work started is acknowledged and paid
- for a title change to allow my role to be listed in the handbook
- for the processes required to avoid terse notes about protocol non-compliance

Humility is grounding, but putting others above self and believing in the greater good is not serving me well.

Casual employment situates and dictates worth, 'considered' an academic without necessary resources. Asking locates me as needy, vocal, constant. I become 'that person', the one to avoid, perceived as high maintenance, an annoyance.

Today I will ask myself for permission to be silent and worthy, to view my efforts as valuable. At least there is surety of an answer, without judgement.

## **Flightless birds**

Today my working space was reallocated, without warning, consideration, or humanity.

I no longer belong, removed from the collegial academic space, without resources.

Lacking explanation or discussion, how can I not assume reduced value, judgement, disdain?

Caution and care are required due to the 24-hour termination clause.

Embracing my workspace, I had gained recognition and acceptance.

No longer a visitor assigned to a shared space or no space.

People stopped to chat, making conversation, sharing insights, swapping stories.

Creating small moments of respite for academic travellers.

I was Instructed to label and box all papers for storage, an academic funeral rite.

What of my role? How am I located in the new regime?

Peeling away the homemade nameplate removes my existence.

Who can see me? Do I even exist?

I make noise, asking questions ... without being heard.

My office space was a representation of privilege, position, and acceptance.

Existing no longer within the academic space, I am now invisible.

I was told; instructed. Mandatory compliance demanded by administrative powers.

Communication is digital, stilted, careful and considered.

I was assured that my work value is not in question.

My position is current, work yet to be completed, I exist on paper.

Again, a transient passing through without agency, belonging, or occupancy.

For a brief time, I experienced inclusion and recklessly embraced belonging.

My home study creates safety, silence, acceptance, a haven from the university.

Ceramic birds perch flightless on the windowsill, waiting, watching, encouraging.

I briefly forget my worth is allocated, my value is contracted, and my is time borrowed.

## Staffroom Intersections

On-campus to attend training that may support employment, but mainly to be present,  
I visit the staffroom and engage with the steady flow of staff coming in for morning coffee.  
Conversation bubbles around me, questions not always requiring answers.

*"I haven't seen you for ages!"*

*"Where have you been? What are you doing?"*

How do I respond positively, stay upbeat, meeting others at their point of enquiry?

Do I tell them I'm not around because I don't have work, surplus to requirements?

Cup in hand, I smile mutely as they continue.

*"Let me tell you about my latest project.*

*It's so much work, and I'm swamped,  
but it's fabulous, and I love it."*

Internally I turn three shades of green with jealousy at another's opportunities.

I wish to be busy, to be involved, to be engaged, to be needed.

The glib sentences continue as words without thought.

*"I really must go. So much to do, so many pressures.*

*You should see the emails.*

*I just don't have time to do everything.*

*Lovely to see you again."*

Others ask quietly, 'are you ok?' 'Do you have work?' 'Are you managing?'



They care, knowing the rollercoaster ride of insecure work and understanding.

For these, I am grateful. Whispering in response, “I’m tired of coping, but I’m managing.”

Standing quietly, breathing slowly, I return to my coffee.

Counting blessings while hoping for work, craving acceptance, and seeking belonging.

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