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### The quiet professional

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## **Chapter 16: 'The quiet professional: on being alone/together in higher education', Anne Pirrie and Nini Fang**

### **Abstract**

This chapter explores how loneliness, alienation and solitude set their stamp on 'quiet professionalism' in a climate of neoliberalism. This theme is considered in the context of a higher education system that is increasingly associated with efficiency, effectiveness and 'time-management' rather than passion or vocation. Departing from the example of Greta Garbo, who famously declared that she wanted to be let alone, the authors explore how the notion of correspondence – with its echoes of response, responsibility and responsiveness – sheds new light on the state of being 'alone together' as conducive to the freedom to think. They explore attacks on subjectivity through a novel reading of the psychoanalytical notion of impingement. This is considered against the background of a form of alone/togetherness that arises in and through a quest for ethical forms of collaboration.

## Introduction: 'I want to be alone'

In an article published in *Life* magazine in 1955, Greta Garbo, that most eloquent star of silent cinema, set the record straight on the phrase that has since become so closely associated with her public and private personas. 'I never said "I want to be alone." I only said "I want to be let alone." There is all the difference.'<sup>1</sup> Garbo uttered the words 'I want to be alone', in the role of the dancer Elizaveta Grushinskaya in the film *Grand Hotel* (1932). In the many decades since, that phrase has done much to forge an indelible association between solitude and melancholy in the public imagination, even although during the Covid-19 pandemic many people were silently screaming that they could no longer bear to be alone. Further light is cast on the Garboesque association between solitude and melancholy in another silent medium: namely the letters written by Garbo to her close friend and confidante, the Austrian actress and writer Salka Viertel. Only the letters from Garbo survive – a testament, perhaps, to the sense of isolation that so often accompanies fame. In 2019, sixty-five intimate letters written by Garbo to Viertel between 1932 and 1973 were put up for auction.<sup>2</sup> In these letters, which were hand-written in pencil, Garbo revealed the extent of her isolation. 'I go nowhere, see no-one', she wrote to Viertel in 1937 during a trip to her native Sweden. She added that it had been the same when she was in Hollywood, and confided that 'it is hard and sad to be alone, but sometimes it's even more difficult to be with someone.' These are words that will resonate with many in the era of Covid-19.

Garbo's remarks on the theme of being alone/together hint at the sense of impingement she was referring to in that famous statement. Impingement is a term used in the psychoanalytical literature, and has its origins in the seminal work of the paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) (1953, 1958). Impingement can be defined as 'the attack on subjectivity through the imposition of a

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<sup>1</sup> Garbo went on to become even more successful when her first sound film proclaimed 'Garbo talks!'. This is a salutary lesson for 'quiet professionals' everywhere.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/05/garbo-letters-for-sale-echo-lonely-life-of-film-icon>

relationship' (Levine 2017: 75). Perhaps what Garbo was objecting to was the threat to her original vitality, her true self, posed by stardom. She clearly regarded this as a form of encroachment, the infringement of a selfhood subordinated to a public persona. Or maybe she was making a psychoanalytic point, namely that there is a self to which one is true in solitude, and a self to which one is true in company (Phillips 1999: 87). Then again, perhaps what she was objecting to was projection, not in the literal sense related to the medium of film, but in the metaphorical sense used in psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic terms, projection is regarded as 'the most primitive form of object relation, or, more accurately, a transitional form that makes objects part of a subjective world' (Levine 2017: 74).

'All the lonely people, where do they all come from?' asked the Beatles. More to the point where do they go? Perhaps they go to the cinema, where they afforded ample opportunities to sit alone/together in almost total darkness and to project their social isolation and existential loneliness onto the silver screen. There they gather round an absent presence, and experience intimacy at a safe distance, silently. The very notion of a 'screen icon' conjures up the idea of a façade, an empty shell, a representational object without substance, bereft of a subject, as it were. It is, of course, foolhardy to attempt to psychoanalyse a dead movie star. Nevertheless, it is tempting to suggest that what Garbo was experiencing was a sense of personal loss. Perhaps what she was objecting to was the fact that in the public imagination, her luminous screen presence eclipsed the sense of loneliness and existential confusion that pervaded the rest of her life. It is as if this star of the silent screen were screaming '*see me!*'. Garbo retired at the age of 35, having appeared in twenty-eight films. Needless to say, calling it quits at 35 is not a viable option for most 'quiet' professionals (or even for noisy ones). Try asking anyone who works in a university, particularly those who are employed on no-fixed hours casual contracts, with no job security.

## **Correspondence: relationality in solitude**

It is particularly telling that Garbo's revelations of loneliness and isolation appear in the context of an intimate exchange of letters. Correspondence in this literal sense is by definition a silent medium. According to the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1999: 88), 'reading literature is a relationship conducted in silence.' Letter writing is another way of entering into relationship with an absent presence. Garbo's correspondence is rendered even more poignant because the letters from her confidante are no longer extant. Garbo comes into her own, as it were, in the company of a friend who is not there. Perhaps her star burned so brightly that it obscured the view of lesser stars. The notion of correspondence – which in its broadest sense carries echoes of response, responsibility and responsiveness – sheds new light on the state of being 'alone together'. Correspondence, defined both as a form of communication through the exchange of letters and as the action or fact of corresponding, provides a useful vehicle through which to consider 'quiet professionalism' in the context of higher education. The latter definition of correspondence, i.e. attunement, or the creation and maintenance of a particular form of ethical relation, encapsulates our mode of working as co-authors with different academic backgrounds (the arts and humanities and counselling and psychotherapy, respectively). In broad terms, we were drawn (in)to thinking (together) about how loneliness, alienation and pleasurable solitude set their stamp on our particular variety of 'quiet professionalism'. We shall explore below how these various forms of aloneness and togetherness are responses to external pressures to adapt to the demands placed upon us by the university system. We shall also consider the creative tensions between being on one's own and thinking with another person. The capacity to embrace both solitude and 'ethical loneliness' (Stauffer, 2018) within the ambit of quiet professionalism is a necessary precondition for the ability to converse, in the sense of turning towards the other as well as talking and corresponding.

As regards the former definition of correspondence, the exchange of letters, the subsequent musings of Greta Garbo shed some light on the peculiar variety of loneliness that can emerge in a relationship. In contrast, our emerging relationship as co-authors was an antidote to the sense of loneliness that we experienced in our professional lives (see Pirrie and Fang, 2020). The sense of ‘ethical loneliness’, alienation and isolation that we explore further below is encapsulated in the following observation by Judith Butler (2004:15): ‘I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself’. At the moral level, our personal and professional relationship demonstrates that ‘our relationship to ourselves [is] inextricable from our relationship with others’ (Phillips 1999: 81). Alone/together is a Janus-faced notion. In Garbo’s case, it speaks of restless nights in grand hotels, glitzy restaurants and oyster shells. Our encounters are played out in more mundane circumstances, for instance in a coffee shop near the university where one of us works, in the city where both of us live. Meeting and corresponding with each other enable us to hold on to what we cherish about our work. It is only through working with and through each other that we are able to remain alert and open to arousals of pain, discomfort and anxiety that are part and parcel of quiet professional practice.

In Garbo’s correspondence with Viertel there is an intimation of an alternative and more affirmative version of solitude, something that for her at least remained tantalisingly out of reach. This offers us a glimpse of a form of solitude that is associated with strength and endurance. The latter term might be defined as the ability to remain with a situation until one has found one’s way into its deepest recesses (Pirrie and Fang 2020). Until relatively recently, this might have been considered a hallmark of ‘quiet’ academic practice. In Garbo’s correspondence, there is the merest suggestion of a readiness to embrace the capacity to be alone, a desire to protect the self from the demands of those intent on creating a fantasy world. Garbo’s correspondence with Viertel might be read as an indication that it was entering into relations with a confidante through the silent medium of letter-writing that made it tolerable for her to be alone. It is entirely in keeping

with the Janus-faced nature of solitude (and its close companions silence and loneliness) that the seminal work of Donald Winnicott suggests the obverse: namely that the capacity to be alone, to feel at ease in the company of one's 'true self', is a prerequisite for being able to enter into relationships with others. And as we shall attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, 'corresponding' with others (including in our case corresponding with each other as co-authors) is a pre-requisite for being able to embody and enact the version of 'quiet professionalism' that we explore below.

We should make it clear at the outset that we use the word 'quiet' in the sense related to the absence of impingement, i.e. 'being free from disturbance; not interfered or meddled with; left in peace' (OED, 1988). This secondary definition of quiet resonates with what Garbo referred to as being 'let alone'. It is important to recognise that the sense of stillness associated with the term need not imply settlement or quiescence, nor indeed a reluctance to cause a stir or to question the *status quo*. Indeed, as we shall see below there is often a fair degree of disquiet in the background. In short, the quiet professional can be a persuasive force for resistance, even in the silent medium of text. Having put on record straight what we mean by 'quiet' in the context of academic work, we shall now clarify what we mean by professionalism and its associated terms.

### **A 'quiet word' on professionalism**

Throughout this chapter, we use the word 'professional' in its broadest contemporary sense, i.e. to refer to 'engaging in any occupation by which a person regularly earns a living'.<sup>3</sup> The references to engagement in 'one of the learned or skilled profession', or the sense of vocation that was evident in earlier definitions (e.g. OED 1988) seems to have faded from view, as have earlier references to 'following an occupation as his (or her) profession, *life-work*, or means of livelihood'. The reference to life-work suggests that at

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/152052>

some point there may have been scope for *amateurism* under the guise of professionalism. In recent years, professionalism has become dreary and debased, and more closely associated with notions of efficiency, effectiveness and ‘time-management’ rather than with passion or vocation. Nearly 30 years ago, Edward Said (1993) drew attention to the forces that jeopardized the sense of excitement, discovery and curiosity that animates us as academics, co-authors and friends. According to Said (1994: 74), professionalism means

thinking of your work ... as something you do for a living, ... with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour – not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable ...

As academics, our immediate frame of reference is the contemporary university. This is an environment in which noisy, shouty cock-eyed professionalism is clearly in the ascendency. In the public imagination, universities have traditionally been associated with the practices of reading and writing, teaching and learning, and research. (The latter often amounts to no more than searching and searching again, with quiet and dogged determination.) These activities have been increasingly subjected to various forms of regulation as a means of ‘professionalising’ the sector in a way that makes it inimical to a true *amateur*. Yet we hope that what we have to say here will be of interest to anyone who is concerned with doing good work well in a climate of constraint, whether they are employed in a small and medium-sized enterprise, in a large corporation or in a health and social care setting. We anticipate that some of what we have to say will resonate with those who are self-employed, particularly in some capacity related to the ‘knowledge economy’ (or even the plain old economy). The climate of constraint to which we refer can be attributed to the irresistible rise of what has become known as neoliberalism. This has been defined as ‘a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the “market” as a basis



for the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives' (Shamir 2008: 3).

As we indicated above, 'quiet professionals' working in universities (and indeed elsewhere) have increasingly been subject to ever more rigid systems of 'performance management', surveillance and control. Academic subjectivities are now governed by man-made (and we use the term advisedly) systems of information management, professional development, annual staff reviews, and distorted by the relentless promotion of 'research excellence' and other dimensions of a 'policy technology...that links effort, value, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output' (Ball, 2012: 19). The aim of these mechanistic systemic fixes is to render 'more and more of the scholarly disposition ... explicit and auditable' (as well as audible and tweetable). The corollary of this is to render academic work more amenable to the relentless logic of competition that pervades the university sector, militating against the possibility of relational encounters that sustain us. Responding to the incessant challenges of reporting and recording means that 'social structures and social relations are replaced by informational structures' (Ball 2012: 19): we are increasingly subjected to audit and 'enhancement' rather than care and attention.

As we suggested above, our joint exploration of quietness in a professional context turns on an apparent paradox: namely that the ability to enter into relationship is dependent upon the extent to which we are able to 'protect ourselves from relating' (Levine, 2017: 69). Quiet professionalism inflected by amateurism provides some immunity against the unintended consequences of the ruthless audit culture that has taken root in recent decades. It seems that in order to be 'alone together' in a manner that is both pleasurable and productive, we need to find ways of being with others that nourish and sustain us, and enable us to forge a new relationship with what we do and how we do it. As a pre-requisite for this, we also need to be able to find a resting place in the private environment of our 'inner world' in order to be able to keep the incessant

demands of the performance engine at bay. In short, we need to learn how to be alone, and to persuade others that we need to be *let alone*. We also need to appreciate that the secret of our endurance might reside in being quiet, and in being alone/together.

Below we draw on contemporary interpretations of psychoanalytic theory in order to explore the hypothesis that the capacity to be alone is a necessary pre-requisite for being together. This should not be read as an alternative formulation of the well-known maxim 'know thyself'. Nor do we mean to suggest that it is necessary to know other people personally in order to be able to relate to them effectively in a professional context. To claim as much would be significantly to misrepresent the nature of the inner world, and indeed the nature of collaboration in the workplace. As we suggest below, fully to inhabit one's inner world entails circling doubt rather than grasping at certainties or pursuing goals that are out of reach. The very notion of an inner landscape conjures up images of pushing and probing through the gathering darkness rather than standing firm on solid ground in broad daylight. It invites us to marvel at the disarray of seedlings cast to the winds as well as to stare in admiration at embedded flowers planted efficiently the previous season. As the use of the word landscape in this metaphorical sense suggests, there is a mysterious, porous quality to this inter-relationship between the inner and outer worlds. Both can be hostile or benign, and neither is complete in and of itself. As the Scots educationalist Nan Shepherd (2011: 3) [1977] observes in relation to her 'traffic' with the Cairngorm mountains in the north of Scotland, 'the mind cannot carry away all that it has to give, nor does it always believe possible what it has carried away.'

### **Correspondence and the quiet art of scholarship**

As we saw above, in the professional environment that we inhabit reading and writing, teaching and learning are key elements of academic practice. The manner in which they are inter-related is inscribed in some of the words used in this context. For instance, a lecture is commonly understood as a 'discourse before an audience or class (e.g. in a

university) upon a given subject' (OED 1988). As one of the contributors of this volume has pointed out, the lecture is a 'special form of human encounter', a particular mode of address that is 'modulated specifically for the hearing of the student' and is the 'initiation of a dialogic relationship between teacher and student'.<sup>4</sup> The word lecture is derived from the Latin *legere*, to read. A lecture might thus also be regarded as a way of giving voice to the experience of a prior relationship conducted in silence. The purpose of a lecture is not (merely) to transmit knowledge. Rather, it marks a site of knowledge creation by opening up the possibility of dialogical and relational encounters. As such, it is a process imbued with the subversive power to reassess codified knowledge through the creative and inherently risky enterprise of thinking together.

Reading is another example of a relationship conducted in silence. Quietly reading a book was a commonplace activity for an academic, before noisiness, shouting, and tweeting took over. It is important to reinstate it as a practice associated with quiet professionalism, as a means of 'experimenting with what is possible in the absence of the object, of finding out what [we] can do, what experiences [we] can have without the palpable presence of another person' (Phillips 1999: 87). In short, reading offers scope for drift. Inherently resistant to audit, drift opens up paths to 'improvisational spontaneity, untiring gathering'. Reading, as a form of entering into relation with a presence that is at once absent and silent, allows us to create a 'hospitable habitat'. Perhaps most importantly of all, it imbues us with an 'ecumenical readiness to admit all-comers' (Macfarlane and Donwood 2019:18). By the same token, writing (that other mainstay of quiet professionals in academic circles) is also a form of dialogue that is subject to a variety of fluctuations. As the novelist A.L. Kennedy (2012:) explains in her book *On Writing*, 'the process of personal commitment, exploration, loss, surprise and puzzlement fluctuates and coheres. Initial ideas are shaped and re-shaped, sometimes consciously, sometimes – once again – in a rush of pressure which can seem external.' Like reading

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/philosophical-defence-traditional-lecture>

(and indeed lecturing), writing can be regarded as an aesthetic process, a silent dialogue with an absent presence; an uncertain form of engagement with an unknown terrain. Reading and writing are often regarded as solitary activities, yet as we saw above, they both represent forms of engagement with an absent presence. They speak to the ethics of collaboration (or in our case co-elaboration) rather than the neo-liberal imperative of competition.

Sigmund Freud (1937) once described education as one of the 'impossible' professions, that is to say one in which an unsatisfactory outcome is more or less guaranteed from the start. The other two 'impossible professions' were psychoanalysis and government. According to Freud, the impossibility of education and psychoanalysis resides in the fact that they are both oriented towards co-constructing insights through relational, collaborative encounters between, say, a lecturer and students, or an analyst and analysand. Furthermore, what makes both professions attractive is simultaneously their unrelenting curse – the unpredictable journey towards acquiring the knowledge of 'the fears and anxieties, the fantasies and desires, the loves and hates, the less than rational and the strange logics of our passions and our unconscious' (Bibby, 2011: 3). Education and psychoanalysis offer challenging insights into the fossilized and often implicit knowledge that we hold about the self, others, and the world. In sum, the mission of professional educators, including those employed in universities, might be considered as akin to psychotherapeutic endeavours. Take the lecture, for instance. It too unfolds with a necessary interspace, an 'intimate distance', that enables the emergence of 'critical, appropriate, intimate encounters' (Pile, 2010: 493). Pile reminds us that none of us is immune from the need 'to please and be liked' (ibid). The intimate distance established in the course of ethical educational or psychotherapeutic encounters safeguards the real work from the inevitable desire on the part of the lecturer or the analyst to make thinking easy. The ethical question for exponents of both professions is how to remain securely on one's own in order to 'think with' who and what causes pain.

In a climate dominated by institutional imperatives to ensure ‘student satisfaction’, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that thinking itself has the capacity to generate suffering. The American humourist Don Marquis encapsulates and expresses the plight of both educators and analysts in the following pithy epithet: ‘if you make people think they’re thinking, they’ll love you: but if you really make them think, they’ll hate you’ (Ratcliff, 2016: unpaginated). But this is a digression, and in the meantime something very important has occurred.

*Nini, you’ve arrived! I thought you were never going to come.*

If the practice of psychoanalysis ‘lives in the ruins’ as Kingsbury and Pile (2014: 8) suggest, then it seems reasonable to suggest that the psychoanalytic insights to which education gives rise might also emerge from the ashes.<sup>5</sup> And so it was that Nini arrived for her meeting with Annie, covered with ashes and dust, and with the scent of decay in her nostrils.

### **Quiet (impossible) professionals alone/together**

The final day of teaching for the term is now done and dusted. On her way to her meeting with Annie, Nini hastened past university buildings that ranged in style from gothic and neo-classical, before finally arriving at the functionalist, modernist building of the Business School, where she and Annie had arranged to meet. ‘All the lonely people, where do they all belong?’ the Beatles’ familiar, enigmatic refrain streaming through her headphones had served its purpose by immersing Nini in the private, existential terrain of her overwrought mind. She immediately caught sight of Annie, perched slightly off-centre, on the far side of the café. Nini shed her headphones as she re-entered the world.

These days (that is to say, pre-Covid-19) Nini and Annie were generally content with a no-frills greeting of ‘hi’, combined with an effortless smile and sometimes a hug.

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<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic geographers Kingsbury and Pile describe that it is ‘the unstable ground of ordinary human suffering’ (Kingsbury & Pile, 2014: 8) out of which the pillars of psychoanalysis emerge. Even more evocatively, ‘[L]ike Rome, psychoanalysis lives in its ruins’ (ibid).

When they meet, neither of them feels a particular need to rush (the other) into any organized articulation of inward musings. The work takes its time, and they have become better at taking their time. They have learned to sit alone/together in silence, which seems to be particularly conducive to incubating the flowering of private thoughts. Gradually, in the mysterious course of things elements of their inner worlds morph into something that is worth sharing. How might these thoughts be received, what kind of response might they invoke? Those moments of gentleness and attention soften their experience of time and serve to mend the broken links between potential utterances and mental events. Nini and Annie have developed a way of caring for themselves and for each other that serves as a bastion against the fast-paced, auditable (and audible) demands imposed upon them by their respective institutions. On this particular occasion, the intimate distance is as 'relational' as Nini can bear, having come from her final lecture deeply unsettled and full of doubts. She has been scorched by her passion in what she does – the kind of educational fervour that is ultimately what keeps one going in the impossible profession of education. As Nini has discovered to her peril, it is this very fervour that has the potential to arouse 'epistemic anxiety' in learners (Rustin, 2018). Epistemic anxiety is a state of being in which the desire to learn is subordinated to an overwhelming anxiety about the threat that new knowledge may pose to the subject's sense of self. This is what happens when curiosity is stalled by ontological insecurity evoked by situations of deep learning. Nini knew that she had prompted such a response yet again. In response, one of the students had become overtly antagonistic and questioned whether Nini had 'gone too far' this time. This generated a wave of nervous exchange of glances amongst students. (See Pirrie and Fang (2020) for an account of how Nini has struggled with her capacity to disrupt, how she gets into hot water, and how she never learns her lesson.) Her intention for the session, and any session, for that matter, had been to help students to understand that sense-making is political; and how, through working with that awareness, it can be a transformative act that helps us to shape visions of alternate

realities. How, in turn, might that emerging awareness afford scope for more meaningful, reflexive encounters with the fuller range of psychological and ontological states that had previously been guarded (Waddell, 2002: 61)? Yet again, her passion had seemed out of proportion, excessive even, to the learners' desire to think with her in this final session of the term. 'Enough is enough'. Whose thought was it that entered her head at that precise moment? Enough is enough. She muttered the words into thin air, not fully grasping where they came from, where they were going, and to whom they belonged. She was relieved to notice that the thought seemed to have transmitted itself to Annie, who has been there all along.

She is glad when Annie raises her head as if to ask 'what is it?' She is glad because she realizes that this moment, she could say anything to Annie about 'enough is enough'. She does not have to be chained to the origin of the thought. This alone/togetherness is capacious, enabling her to free-associate, to dwell with what otherwise might have escaped her attention. She revels in the freedom of not being held to account for what she says, not having to consider the consequences or worry about whether or not she is displaying her academic credentials to good effect. Nini can be defiantly alone with thoughts that defy any form of regulation or marshalling, knowing that Annie will bear witness. It briefly crosses her mind how different this feels, this moment, from her occasional encounters with Professor Somebody. On these occasions she feels compelled to give a coherent account of the project she has been working on, even though Professor Somebody does not appear to be that interested. In that kind of encounter, what matters is to demonstrate that progress has been made, that impersonal theories and methodologies are in alignment. The inexorable logic of temporal progression is encapsulated in the very notion of 'providing an update'. This being here with Annie is not one of those hierarchically coded interactions that commonly occur between those styled as Reader (with a capital R) and lecturer. Just now she appreciates how Annie is comfortable with a small 'r', that she is a reader at heart. A reader with a

small 'r' is a quiet professional who does not impinge on her early career counterpart's hopes and imaginations, as wild or modest as they are, with persistent invocations of seniority in relation to her juniority. (The latter term seems awkward, as if it doesn't get out in public enough.) This was what she said to Annie in response to her curiosity about 'enough is enough'. How senior (white) people tend to speak to her like everything that comes out of their mouth is a droplet of wisdom worthy of quotation and everything cohering around in her racialized head worthy of correction. These routine exchanges in the anglophone academy carry with them an implicit expectation that she should content herself with being a consumer of knowledge and not a co-producer.

Nini tends to go quiet on occasions like these, not by choice, as she is well aware that her quietness only serves to reinforce a Western stereotype of demure Eastern femininity. She has seen how being quiet affords those around her the confidence to pin her down further, to keep her at a distance, to place her firmly on the receiving end. So much so that when she ventures to speak about her work, she has to endure not only being questioned about the conceptual or methodological nitty-gritty, but about the fundamental worth of her experiential understanding. 'How can you be so sure in those moments that your anger is politically evoked?' 'How do you know if your anger speaks to that of other women of colour?' 'Aren't there also oppressive forces against women in the Taiwanese context and not just the UK?' 'Would you say you are an angry person generally?' 'I just don't understand it.' These were common responses to hearing about her inquiry into anger after she risked as far as to clarify that she's interested in the kind of anger that is provoked by intersectional oppression at work, in life. She believes that this kind of anger has the potential to re-configure the social, interpersonal and institutional into emancipatory spaces in which she can be both passionately engaged and authentically quiet without feeling coerced into mute acceptance of a singularly framed ontology of the Other. Her wildest hope, on the rare occasions when she dares to name it, is that by exposing 'the apparent gestures of mastery and certitude behind



every production and assertion of the stereotype' (Cheng, 2006: 101) she, and all the 'Others', can defy the *status quo* and break free from the colonial grip on the social imagination. This means tearing down the barriers placed by white people in charge that limit the representation of racialized forms of lived experience and banish her as a ghost-like other from relations of equitable exchange. But either as 'the thingness of persons' or 'the personness of things' (Cheng, 2017), she is never meant to speak like this, like she has a mind of her own, like her pain is real.

Sitting there with Annie, Nini can no longer keep track of what has been thought or said. Yet it is in this apparently unproductive *mano-a-mano*, which is so exhilaratingly different from the routine elaboration of 'pathways to impact' and 'knowledge exchange', that here she is finally able to let her thoughts arise unrestrained and unsuppressed – and to be surprised by the creative vitality of the process of thinking itself. 'Impingement?' Ah yes, she was talking to Annie about impingement.

### **Impingement and ethical loneliness**

To be alone, according to Winnicott (1953, 1958), is a capacity which should not be taken for granted. The capacity to enjoy being alone arrives as a developmental triumph only after the child has weathered the storms of pain, insecurity and anxiety associated with the inevitable psychological tasks in early life. In essence, these amount to the process of differentiating and separating oneself from others. In brief, the capacity to be alone is acquired as part of a developmental process in which the child gradually comes to experience herself as existing independently from the mother. She is gradually able to forego the all-embracing, comforting sense of oneness with the mother, as the one who adapts to the child's needs. The mother's caring adaptation and continual centring her child as what truly matters strengthens with time the child's inner security, preparing them for an eventual break away from the maternal universe towards coming to 'discover [their] own personal life' (Winnicott, 1958: 418). Breaking away from being engulfed by the mother allows the child to begin to explore the surrounding world as full of uncertainty

and exciting newness. It allows the child fully to experience herself as the creative nucleus that conjures up an internal world and develops a deeper understanding of the external world as a place of co-habiting with others. It is in this sense that Winnicott believes that our capacity to be alone gives rise to our capacity to engage in social relationships. Yet, maternal adaptation can never be a perfect act. A mother is also a real person confronted by multi-faceted challenges of life which limit her ability to always get it right with her child. Winnicott knows this well and reassures that the 'good-enough' mother depends 'on her devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment' (Winnicott, 1953: 94). It is her devotion that enables the child to conjure a representation of a soothing motherly presence that can be invoked for a sense of safety and reassurance when encountering the unknown.

If a good enough mother is a devoted mother who cares for her child because she believes she deserves it, impingement reveals the breach to such a devotion. Impingement emerges by way of the mother's continuous disruption rather than strengthening of the child's process of self-discovery. She makes the child realize that his or her developmental needs are subordinate to her own happiness, and their welfare secondary to her own. A child can be enabled by good-enough mothering to gain confidence in exploring the external world which appears to correspond to their 'own capacity to create' (Winnicott, 1953: 95). Yet a child can also be made aware through the process of impingement of the need to develop 'a false life built on reactions to external stimuli' (Winnicott, 1958: 413). In the latter case, a child is coerced to adapt to environmental demands in order to survive in a world which they come to perceive as indifferent to their needs, values and desires. Garbo's dictum 'I want to be alone' articulates the seeking of an enjoyable, relaxing state of solitude as what nurtures creativity and self-discovery. In contrast, 'I want to be *let* alone' can be heard as a distraught cry that draws attention to the impinging Other and to environment that is at

best indifferent and at worst hostile, and in which the individual is held responsible for the fulfilment of their unending desire.

### **(No) last words**

The university is not Hollywood. Fame and stardom do not typically generate sufficient means to support an early exit at 35, as we jokingly remarked early on. However, like the denizens of Hollywood, academics chase recognition and endure the existential mayhem constituted by the impingement that arises from routine measurements of individual success in terms of their public appeal. Academics are increasingly expected to adapt and adjust, requirements that have gained fresh impetus in the era of Covid-19, and to identify themselves with a specialist comfort zone that is then made readily accessible to the highest bidder. They need to ensure that they never stray beyond it. This is a daunting prospect for those with a long way ahead of them. The road ahead seems faintly silhouetted by tacky fluorescent signs announcing ‘you said, we did.’ How do we hold on to a vision of academic labour that is more expansive and eclectic, offering more scope for curiosity and playfulness?

‘It is hard and sad to be alone, but sometimes it’s even more difficult to be with someone’. This certainly rang true for us as co-authors. Notions such as ‘strategizing’, ‘smart working’, and ‘student satisfaction’ leave a sour aftertaste and only served to entrench our desire to be let alone, at a time when we face the manifold challenges of coming together to respond to the aftermath of the pandemic. It is tempting to regard solitude as the way out, as the only way to harness the emotional and conceptual resources necessary to resist entrapment in lifeless ‘productivity’. As we have discovered, all too often the latter proves to be sterile and unproductive. Yet we gradually became aware that being ‘let alone’ was not the whole story. But we struggled to find our voice, or more precisely our pitch. We found ourselves facing the same challenges that

Edward Said pointed out in his final 1993 Reith Lectures on representations of the intellectual:

... the intellectual ought neither to be so uncontroversial and safe a figure as to be just a friendly technician nor should the intellectual try to be a full-time Cassandra, who was not only righteously unpleasant but also unheard (Said 1994: 69).

We have attempted to forge a link between the psychoanalytic idea of impingement and the cultural-political issues of contemporary university. This has led us to conclude that our capacity to enter into meaningful relationships with others, either in social spaces or in solitude, also depends on our capacity to protect ourselves from ‘damaging forms of relating as those develop in political processes and institutions’ (Levine, 2017: 69). The latter are certainly in evidence in an institutional climate in which mistrust has become the default setting. The capacity of academics to enthuse, inspire and challenge future generations is premised upon a culture of trust, in which we are *let alone* in order that we may generate explorative spaces where thinking becomes possible – alone and together. In this sense, thinking is aligned with the ‘quieter epistemic virtues’ outlined by Pirrie (2019). Thinking is a necessary antidote to blind ideological assimilation. It beckons us to ‘surrender ourselves to the uncertainty of the elements and to open ourselves to a perceived mystery’ (Pirrie, 2019: 65).

This is what drew us to academia in the first place. This is our heart’s desire: to lecture, read and write, to withstand conformity and to ride the generative tension between value and knowledge that plunges us towards research praxis that is unafraid of what feels too ‘close to home’ (Pirrie and Fang, 2020). The things that matter most for quiet professionals, namely, an ‘unquenchable interest in the larger picture ... making connections across lines and barriers ... refusing to be tied down to a specialty ... caring for ideas and values in spite of the restrictions of a profession’ cannot be moved by profit or reward (Said, 1994: 76). We have both felt lost and out of place in the maelstrom of

late-capitalist ideals sugar-coated in the discourse of efficiency, productivity, and sustainability, and, in the pandemic era, of mindfulness, ‘headspace’ and wellbeing. How we respond to the normalisation of oppressive violation in the form of impingement is an existential and a wider ethical inquiry that is reserved for another chapter – or indeed for action that extends beyond text. For now, we have chosen to embody quietness as a form of non-engagement with the impinging agenda that requires us to produce and reproduce like battery hens. Quietness is our way of living with and attending to the disquiet that we experience as a result of refusing to live a ‘false life built on reactions to external stimuli’ (Winnicott, 1958: 413). We go on, doggedly, alone and together. As impossible professionals, we steadfastly refuse to learn our lesson. We fail to comply with the incessant demand to sell our services to the highest bidder. We are not immune to the state of ethical loneliness that has afflicted others who have been ‘refused the *human relation* necessary for self-formation and thus is unable to take on the present moment freely’ (Stauffer, 2018: 26; italics added). Self-formation amounts to far more than the impoverished forms of ‘self-aggrandisement’ (Pirrie, 2019: 70) brought about by the relentless logic of competition that pervades the contemporary academy. Self-formation, in our view, speaks more to the explorative praxis within human relations towards reaching out to what ‘made a call on our thinking attention’ and to ‘the manner in which it took us in and held us’ (Pirrie, 2019: 70).

In a final act of mischief, for now, we slip out from under the yoke of the *quiet professional* and reinstate amateurism as the ancillary virtue of the *unquiet intellectual*. Only thus can we speak truth *to* power, rather than genuflect to the truth *of* power. For now, we embrace, we wave each other goodbye and resolve to continue our adventures in a new chapter. At this point in the volume, our readers have the opportunity to do the same.

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