

Contemporary Justice Review



Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gcjr20

Caring in the classroom: the hidden toll of emotional labor of abolitionist scholar-activism

S.M. Rodriguez

To cite this article: S.M. Rodriguez (2023): Caring in the classroom: the hidden toll of emotional labor of abolitionist scholar-activism, Contemporary Justice Review, DOI: 10.1080/10282580.2023.2181287

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2023.2181287





ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates



Caring in the classroom: the hidden toll of emotional labor of abolitionist scholar-activism

S.M. Rodriguez

Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, London

ABSTRACT

Abolitionist-academics who bring abolition into the classroom are teaching to transgress quite literally in the service of and hope for freedom. This article relies upon thirty in-depth, international interviews with academics teaching in universities and prisons. The research questions emotional labor's hidden toll on abolitionist scholars and finds that within the interdisciplinary field of critical criminology, participants commonly experienced working through hope, love, loneliness, fear and anxiety. While this research supports earlier understandings of the impact of expectations of caretaking on marginalized scholars, I also find that those who experience personal histories of criminalization may be especially vulnerable to burnout and pushout.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 01 Februray 2023 Accepted 01 Februray 2023

Keywords

Scholar-activism: emotional labor: classroom politics: abolition; university teaching

I was like a plant from which one takes cuttings. A piece for this one. A piece for that one ... Although there were times when I could feel the blade, I did not regret the cuttings. They strengthened my roots.

Gloria Wade Gayles (1996)

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

bell hooks (1994)

In 'Teaching to Transgress,' bell hooks reminds us that, 'for black folks, teaching – educating – was fundamentally political, because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed, my all-black grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution' (hooks, 1994, 2). Rather than the place the school has transformed into, the school is where hooks learned that 'a life of the mind was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization' (2). Like hooks, in my Black household, I grew with the mantra that 'knowledge is power' - and it was not any kind of knowledge, or any kind of power, but rather that Black knowledge is Black Power. The counter-hegemonic perspective of the subaltern fused into my father's athome pedagogy; books about the Moors, Malcolm X, Franz Fanon became mandatory readings before I entered my teenage years. Contrastingly, in my predominantly white school, teachers taught a history of righteous warmaking, including their valiant efforts against 'the War of Northern Aggression' and novels like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or To Kill a Mockingbird. I excelled in mathematics specifically as it served as a reprieve from the racist, colonial microaggressions of the few social science and humanities offerings.

Now, as a penal abolitionist in a community of educators, I take interest in how social justice meets university teaching. Social justice teaching, however, means not only centering pressing communal issues in curriculum, but also integrating justice (disability, racial, gender justice, etc.) into the pedagogical practices for an outcome that supports liberation, rather than social control and conformity. According to David Scott, penal abolitionists 'aim to incorporate emancipatory politics in the education process (both formal and informal) that can challenge social and economic inequalities' (Scott, 2020, p. 302). Therefore, social justice teaching by abolitionists is the creation of an educational mandate and environment that works in service of the promotion of 'critical thinking and agency for social change, and views students and teachers as actors in the struggle' (Greene, 2008). I see this pointed and purposeful educational aim less as a reformulation of an educational mandate, than a return to a pedagogy of the oppressed (such as the work of Freire, 1970).

Black feminists have shown us how liberal reforms, such as school integration, transformed the nature of schooling for Black people. Hooks (1994, p. 3) offers her perspective on schooling before and after integration:

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our allblack schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority.

The mission and mandate of teaching embraced by people like my father – immigrants, people without degrees, working-class people with a dream of intergenerational progress - transfused into my own teaching philosophy. Be aware of differences, seek truth by expanding your sources, use knowledge as shield, support and transportation to a better destination: migrant praxis. This mentality founded my scholar-activism and reflexive pedagogy, and I see reflections of it in my participants' stories.

However, engagement requires much more work than standardized teaching. And this extra labor is rife with emotions: those which sustain, and those which deplete. Emotions can bring us to our commitments, and emotions can sometimes bring us unforeseen difficulties. Within the context of the neoliberal university, we 'become caretakers, guidance and grief counselors, and life coaches' (Lawless, 2018, p. 86) while placed in increasingly precarious positions as laborers. The range and toll of emotional labor of scholar-activism, therefore, requires understanding so that we can preemptively build the necessary support networks in our places of employment.

Scholar-activists who bring abolition into the classroom are 'teaching to transgress' (1994) quite literally in the service of and hope for freedom. The philosophy of hope held by penal abolitionists is 'underscored by the principles of social justice, dignity, and a truly liberated humanity grounded in non-hierarchical, anti-oppressive, and non-exploitative human relationships, penal abolitionists aspire to build a new and thoroughly democratic society organized around human wellbeing' (Scott, 2020, p. 299). As it meets our formal employment, this hope embeds itself into the work, transforms pedagogical decisions and practices, and compels scholars to fuse compassion and emotion into the classroom.

In this article, I look at emotional labor as two-fold: hope work and care work. Therefore, my use of emotional labor describes the emotions required to sustain hope and those that arise from the politics of hope work. It also includes care work, the forms of pastoral care demanded of the professorate – particularly of feminized scholars and women, untenured and adjunct faculty, and scholars of color (Bellas, 1999; Mawhinney, 2011; Quaye et al., 2017; Tiwari et al., 2020). I ask what is the toll of a deep emotional investment in social justice and who carries the greatest burdens of care in the classroom? I apply this to the case of penal abolitionist teaching, as a growing movement network of scholar-activists globally (Coyle & Scott, 2021) grounded in the interdisciplinary field of critical criminology (Pepinsky, 2006; Saleh-Hanna, 2008). What I find is, as emotional labor relates to the scholar-activism of abolitionists in the academy, those who experience personal histories of criminalization are especially vulnerable to a disproportionate burden of emotional labor. That is, although all scholar-activists are likely emotionally invested – to some degree – in the work to progress toward a non-punitive society, not all are affected to the same degree.

Research methods

This research relies upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews with thirty academics teaching social sciences or humanities in universities. Representing a transnational movement, participants work in several countries: England, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Germany, and New Zealand. For participant eligibility, all scholars needed to identify as an 'abolitionist' as it relates to prisons, borders, policing, or penalty more broadly. Most participants chose a level of confidentiality and therefore have had pseudonyms assigned and used throughout this text. Others, however, wished to be named for the work.

As a Black, queer, abolitionist scholar, I attended academic conferences themed around abolition where I had a chance to interact with some of the participants before interviewing them. Through this, they had an opportunity to learn of my activism, theorizing and writing. I recruited other participants through searches of public syllabi hosted online. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, transcribed with software or by hand, and inductively coded using the qualitative analysis software *NVivo*. The data collection and management were approved by my institutional review board.

The interviews followed a general guide of ten questions on institutional environment, personal histories with scholar-activism, teaching strategies and modes of activism with and without students. However, a notable subset of academics interviewed discussed what kind of feelings they wished to arouse in their students, and experienced themselves while researching, teaching and navigating their institutions. To whomever initiated this line of discussion, I continued to ask the role of emotion in their work. Therefore, this article is a product of grounded theory, a qualitative research process that follows the codes generated inductively and organically in interviews, rather than focusing only on those generated through premeditation (Charmaz, 1996). I find the context of emotional

labor striking: when it is most burdensome, who engages in this form of labor, and what forms of attachments predicate the work of feeling. What I find is, even within the group of abolitionist-academics, those who experience personal histories of criminalization are especially vulnerable to a disproportionate burden of emotional labor.

Emotional labor in scholar-activism

Emotional labor is an expectation of many professors in the classroom. The term describes forms of work that in any way require the development or management of emotional experience of the individual worker, colleagues sharing the work environment, or students. Imagined alongside other service industry positions, scholars understand that the student-professor dynamic reproduces that of the client-laborer in a few ways: notably, university students are paying an ever-increasing sum for their education; they exercise a degree of choice over whose courses they take; and they are empowered through evaluations to police the tone and emotionality of lecturers along gendered lines (Lawless, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2011). Emotion plays a considerable role in the digestion of information (hooks, 1994); therefore, professors are charged with emotional labor as they 'try to elicit emotions in people with whom they interact' and manage 'their own emotional expression' according to conduct rules and ethical codes that accompany teaching and assessing students (Bellas, 1999, p. 97). When comprehensively accounted, the amount of emotional labor undertaken is often gendered, racialized and influenced by the job security of the instructor.

The consequences of emotional labor include work stress, worsened physical well-being and emotional exhaustion. In a quantitative, survey-based study, Mahoney et al. (2011) found negative emotional expression a positive correlate to emotional exhaustion, meaning that voicing frustration, anger or sadness ultimately relate to and grow with emotional strain, feelings of failure and job dissatisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2011). Similarly, Tiwari et al. (2020) found that this factor led to an overall decreased well-being and burnout. This holds especially true for women, who not only occupy a gender in society assumed to be responsive and sensitive to emotional needs, but are put in positions where emotional demands are disproportionately made. This means that women are more likely to have roles that focus on counseling and advising or teaching, whereas men are promoted to administrative jobs, where they interface with students for shorter amounts of time, are granted greater authority, and therefore assumed to have less capacity for emotionality (Tiwari et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, our criminal justice system relies on feelings, rather than fact, to reconstitute itself. Does the middle class *feel* safer than [imagined date] is a radically different question than is the middle class experiencing and/or reporting less violence than said date, yet political realities are created through this public imagination. The various moral panics generated around criminality work to ensure that fear, anger and disgust sit at the top of public consciousness at all times. Therefore, when we engage abolition in the classroom, we meet such feeling in real time. As Jackson and Meiners (2010) recall in their classrooms, discussion of abolition arouses a dance between anger at injustice and fear or shame about transgressions. While students may embrace an imaginative or analytical curiosity about a just future, that embrace collides with their own cognitive dissonance when they are brought to consider abolition: *yes, prisons are*

bad, but 'what about the bad people?' (24). Feelings of fear, vengeance, righteousness, obstinance foment in the classroom. It's up to the professor to manage these emotions, while managing their own. Simultaneously, the abolitionist-academic holds their own desire to deliver a fact- and reason-based lecture or discussion alongside the desire to evolve students' outlooks and sensibilities.

The myth of objectivity riddles the academic field with landmines for the scholar-activist. Caring not only about the subject matter that we teach, but also the methodologies for transmitting our messages, the abolitionist-academic remains very much a *subject* at all times. Similarly, we are more likely to treat students as people, rather than passively receptive, unchanging objects, meant to learn an unliving topic. The topics that we teach, alive and pressing, often agitate and confound people; contradicting sharply the worldview embedded into popular media. The objective of this teaching is to arouse awareness, agency, activists. It is factual, but not neutral.

Emotional labor in relationship to students

In universities, othermothering describes the relationships formed in the liminal space of family-mentor-teacher between racialized scholars and students (Collins, 2000; Foster, 1993). This practice, according to Patricia Hill Collins, emerges from the historical exclusion of those formerly enslaved from institutions of learning and centers the comprehensive care practices given by women who are not biologically mothers to the youth for whom they care (Collins, 2000). It is grounded in resistance to white supremacist oppressions, a collectivity that combats segregation, isolation, and exploitation. Latina scholar Jennifer Esposito embraces and reflexively explains the practice as developing the 'reciprocal relationships of caring and nurturing' (2014). Othermothering has been found to increase marginalized student success, as it helps students believe that the engaged professors are 'student-centered' and thus offer more comprehensive pastoral care, believe more in their students, and are stronger advocates for the historically excluded (Guiffrida, 2005).

As a practice understood to have racialized and gendered origins and impacts, othermothering necessarily implies a form of labor that women and feminine scholars of color undertake. While the scholars engaged with the practice may see this additional labor as welcomed, necessary, or fulfilling, it is indeed based in an ethics of care and its own emotional landscape (Esposito, 2014). Because the academy undervalues service, and colleagues – particularly those with gender or racial privilege – amplify this undervaluing, the psychic field around the labor can sometimes exhaust rather than sustain othermothers (Esposito, 2014). This means that rather than othermothering itself being the source of exhaustion, what depletes scholars is that the university invisibilizes the labor that is actually crucial for student retention and life. While often told by majority professors to create more separation between themselves and students, othermothers are less likely to understand the identities in such a binary, favoring instead the language of shared identity, experience or kinship: students are an extension of self. That collective self requires care.

Within the classroom, hooks (1994) understands a similarly nondualist approach as integral to social justice teaching:



Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though the mind is present, and not the body. To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders ...

bell hooks, 1994, 191

While hooks uses the language of eros and eroticism, she does not define or limit this to sexual interest and exchange. Rather, she reorients our thinking of eros as passion. Referencing Sam Keen, she brings us to center 'erotic potency' as that which 'propel[s] every life-form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality' (194). The erotic, in this way, is the kinetic force that moves our students' dissonance from mental inertia to ideological and theoretical connection. Then, it is the erotic that moves us to enact the thought. As such, my questions concern various embodied aspects of teaching. To follow hooks in her non-dualism, when I question the emotional toll of engaged scholarship and teaching, I simultaneously question the physical toll. When I describe the psychic elation of hope work, I describe the energy to continue on our paths toward abolition.

While my participants do not necessarily center the erotic, they do bring passion to the fore. Such passion most commonly appeared in the language of care and love. However, I also found forms of taxation that accompany love and care: fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Ultimately, the extraordinary amount of consideration that abolitionist-scholars infuse into their teaching, research and lifestyles has the potential to lead to burnout, and, in the worst-case scenario, pushout of the institution.

Love and care as abolitionist pedagogy and politics

As professors who engage themselves deeply in activist and research projects that they care for, in hope work, they integrate care into their pedagogy. The people-centered nature of scholar-activism allows for deep consideration of the meaning and tools of abolition. Love is one such tool of care and hope work that enables emotional safety in the classroom. Raleigh, in Canada, asserts that she is 'loving and caring of all of [her] students.' That love and care, in turn, opens up the space of possibility for students to engage with her without fearing that she will be spiteful or retributive when they either express or expose a line of thinking of which she may disapprove. She says that it is this space that actually allows her to open up about her own political ideologies and teach from a more authentic place. Students 'feel that all perspectives are welcome in class and that they don't feel alienated' for their starting points, or when her perspective proves to be more progressive.

Katherine, in the U.K., considers love and care in various aspects of her work. She shared that for her, 'It means to pursue this kind of research with the decarceral principles that we share ... we're thinking about how to embed love and care in the research process, our relationship with each other and the people that we're working with collaboratively.' The methodology and pedagogy that centers love, she reflects, excites her and brings her hope. She sees fostering love and care in her students and collaborators as a way to expand the emotional and empathetic responses required to change institutions of violence.

For Katherine, hope work is ultimately about connection: if we can get our students and the public to humanize those imprisoned, through various familiarization efforts, they can connect humaneness to basic comforts, and move away from the 'little meannesses' that they embrace that dehumanize the incarcerated other. That way, she integrates love – the underpinning of compassionate politics – into each aspect of her work.

In societies riddled with structural violence, especially the violence crafted by borders and prisons, pain permeates into our classrooms. The 'sites of pain' derived by and scattered throughout nation-states are reproduced in educational systems (Hudson and McKittrick 2014, p. 238). Therefore, when we conjure an image of detention, for example, we can as easily think of a school as we can the cage built to hold asylum seekers. The replicas of violence can take form as neglect of topics that need to be covered to foster safety in society. The mimicry also works alongside the same forms of (racial, gendered, heterosexist) hatred. Therefore, for the abolitionist, love is the antidote.

For my participants, this love must reflect various initiatives and ways of working. Meena in the Northeastern United States, reflects on her work as a true labor of love:

You probably think I'm odd, but at some point in the semester, it depends, I go with the flow of my thoughts, but I let them know that I love them. I want them to know that. I always say this is the greatest love affair you're going to have because by the time you actually realize you love me the class will be over so you can just carry it with you forever. But the point is I want them to know that there is nothing else. Nothing else, but love that basically binds us and our society and all the problems that exist are because of a lack of it.

A labor of love, for Meena, means multiple things. She chooses the additional labor because she loves it. Her work inspires more love. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Meena believes that the goals of her work require that people become more comfortable with non-romantic expressions of and beliefs in love. I found it surprising, not just Meena's preemptive defense 'you probably think I'm odd' – but that it was true, it is an odd practice to express oneself in loving language to students; to dissolve the immaterial borders between student body and teacher body. Hooks reflects on how, 'teachers who love students are loved by them are still "suspect" in the academy' (1994, p. 198), which is also true of men, for whom care runs counter to normative gender scripts and expectations. Similarly, while Esposito (2014) sees this emotional investment as crucial to student success and ultimately social change, she was also chastised for this closeness. This theme compels me to acknowledge that love is the emotion that combats the dehumanization, vengeance and punitiveness that sustain the criminal justice system, as well as carcerality within schools (Love, 2019).

Meena's perspective strikingly relates to the writings of Mecke Nagel, who believes that feeling is the way forward from criminal justice. In her articulations of ludic ubuntu as the antidote to hatred and vengeance, Mecke uplifts the prospect that recognizing a shared humanity, and asserts the need to collectively embrace the playfulness that accompanies human connection (Nagel, 2022). The abolitionist imagination centers feeling, even when those feelings leave us vulnerable to burnout or alienation. In her interview, Mecke located the importance of this care work, not just in society but in her own body. Rather than embracing the disconnected philosophy of many peers within her field, Mecke stresses to me that, 'this stuff really has its own afterlife, you know, this is not cerebral.' Rather than existing in an isolated, academic world, she counters that 'it's not



academic but it's this constant work of questioning what is it that I can do better; there's always this sort of urgency.' In their most balanced state, this motivates the scholaractivist. However, in tougher times, this leads to anxiety and depletion.

Anxiety and fear in activist teaching

Interestingly, Mecke also presents an innovative method to combat the anxiety, while still working toward an abolitionist future (in archetypical, indefatigable-activiststyle). She describes her anti-anxiety practice of teaching philosophy to children. Or rather, as she adds, to learn abolitionist philosophy from children. Mecke finds that, 'for my college students, it's a big mental health development. When they're going through anxiety and things, you know to hear the little kids giggle and laugh and be curious, right?' So remarkably, Mecke combats the fatigue of learning, teaching and activism with... more activism, teaching and learning. Irony aside, Mecke discovered that the change of pace required to teach children, and the elation that children evoke, offer the reset necessary for scholar activists to continue their urgent work. From the research, multiple themes emerge in which anxiety played a role, whether outside or inside of the classroom. Often, the different settings work to counterbalance each other: the joys of emotional labor offset the tolls of anxiety or fear.

The scholar-activist work setting includes more than the typical classroom, which impacts the source, range and mitigation of difficult feeling. Kelyn, in New Zealand, shies away from being a 'spokesperson' in activist channels as she worries about intimidating, silencing or shutting down others who may be wary of the privileged position of academic. Despite having experienced criminalization and imprisonment herself, she considers that the status of radical scholar will invite criticism from both philosophically aligned activists and more conservative antagonists (who may have power over her in the institution). However, her central concern relates more to the political ramifications of 'taking up space' that may be better given to indigenous, racialized, poor and marginally employed people.

In England, Stephanie similarly articulates some self-doubt that she roots in larger anxieties:

A number of colleagues who are on Twitter are doing a lot of the publicly same stuff that I would believe in. So it's not that, it's not things I don't believe in. I think I basically have a fear of a public exposure that I can't deal with ... or being called out ... So it's kind of, maybe it sounds like I'm making excuses as I go to rallies or protests or things, but I'm not a kind of front line with a megaphone kind of like I can't let my own personal kind of neuroses. I'm really bad at being out publicly.

I find that, similar to Kelyn and Stephanie, many others - only women - worried about what kind of space they 'took up' in grassroots organizing. While speaking and disseminating thought remains the central activities of academics, some women were particularly critical about where they speak, their right to speak.

However, for those women, the classroom became a sacred space of political dissemination and self-actualization. It is precisely because of the multiple forms of labor expected within a social justice-informed pedagogy that these scholars may encounter 'creative (and quite achievable) possibilities for activism' (Ball, 2016). Despite having a personal history of criminalization, Kelyn, came to identify as an abolitionist through her teaching commitments, not by her anti-criminalization activism that predated her academic position.

Within the classroom, however, many participants mentioned anxiety in the context of student backlash to the professor's politics, especially as demonstrated by course evaluations. This anxiety arose not from fear of rejection or that students disliked the course, although, of course, that can be disappointing. Instead, participants tied anxiety most often to the precarious work positions that they were in, with the short-term contracts of the tenure-track or serving as adjunct faculty. Student evaluations have grown in importance and link with a neoliberal, consumerist model of higher education, so much so that students believe that if they're not happy with the product, they should get a refund (Lawless, 2018). Alternatively, students also express that their customer satisfaction should drive the content of courses. As such, neoliberalism of universities contributes to political stagnancy and despair (Scott, 2020).

French scholar, Julie, for example, still reels over various incidents when her scholarship or perspective has incited troublesome backlash in academic spaces. As someone who has incarcerated family members, she is sensitive to the commonly distorted meaning of 'safe space' in academic settings. She described a situation at an academic conference where people felt 'safe' to express their violent ideologies and ambivalence toward violence that imprisoned people suffer. When she, emotionally taxed, responded with upset, people went to console the person who Julie yelled at, rather than defuse the situation, contextualize 'safety,' or combat the harmful ideas. This is often paralleled in the classroom, where students believe that they should be safe from expressions of negative emotion (Mahoney et al., 2011), rather than construct and promote safety of oppressed peoples (Ball, 2016). Julie now anticipates so much hostility and backlash to her beliefs in decarceration that she preemptively strategizes ways to calm her anxiety.

In the classroom, Julie faces the fear of her students' conservatism, which she did not have to consider as seriously in France. She says, 'I feel that I need to be a little bit cautious about what's happening in the classroom and all foreign teachers told me, be careful they will take seriously your students' evaluations.' Her peers encouraged her, especially as someone with an accent, to exercise caution and discretion in the classroom, as nativism encourages students to become hyper-vigilant and critical of outsiders. Therefore, Julie worries not only about student retribution, but also their desire for punishing migrants who espouse 'foreign' ideas. She reiterates that caution when discussing the precarity of her situation:

When I arrived, it was my first experience in teaching in the U.S. and some other foreigner told me that I have to be very cautious about what happens in the classroom, especially because even if we're in California, our students are quite conservative and you know, I'm not even an immigrant. I'm considered a visitor. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but it means that I do not even have a green card. And with Trump administration even with a job contract in a university, the immigration process was quite tough. I will just make a point. I got my visa two days before I had to move to the US. So you can imagine, you know, the stress. So being a visitor, not even your green card, and not getting tenured . . . and if you add the fact that, you know, when I was in France, I was tenured, I had a home, I had my own flat and I have no more of that.

The fear that Julie holds, as a foreign visitor, an untenured scholar, and a woman, still does not stop her from introducing critical perspectives in her classes: the reality of what her

family endures in prison is just too present. However, she does believe that if she were a man, she would be able to teach more confidently. At least, if she were in France, she would be confident that she would not lose her home and residency in the nation from negative student evaluations that can cost her the job in the neoliberal U.S. university system. Alternatively, the ostracism Julie faced from French colleagues, due to the stark difference in social status between her and most, inspired her desire to leave. In France, she faced isolation because the professorate clearly had no connection to the incarcerated; in the United States, she feels that is not as true. In the United States, however, the student body holds a different power, which she fears they will wield disproportionately against marginalized topics and people, particularly women, immigrants, and people of color. For the most part, this toll of emotional labor was indeed limited to these precarious demographics.

The emotional tolls of isolation, loneliness and self-doubt

Notably, despite Julie's confidence in increased collegiality in the United States for abolitionist scholars, other U.S. based academics noted feeling isolated in their departments, and that their colleagues attempted to shame or embarrass them for their hope work. Meena noted, shortly after offering her perspective on the labor of love that is teaching about the injustice of criminalization, that she feels incredibly alone because of the work she does. She shares, 'I have a really hard time with that honestly, even though I'm telling you I do all this stuff. I question it all the time because I know no one else is doing it.' She goes on to describe herself as an outlier.

The most disappointing aspect of Meena's story is that this isolation may lead to pushout. She shares, 'I might have to change my career since in another couple of years anyway, because it's to me the loneliness of the job, the self-doubt that I have ... the constant re-evaluation of my teaching by me is so mentally draining. This is the job is the hardest job I've ever had.' Meena, notably, is a well-sought-after speaker, theorist and social scientist. Rather than a novice academic, she has a twelve-page CV with three pages of publications written in fine text, single spaced. I say this because Meena is not new to academia, or to public advocacy, but that the emotional toll of alienation in a department pushes out even highly accomplished women of color. While she expresses some ambivalence around racial labeling, she does note that it influences others' treatment of her. She shares that rather than 'feel bad' about being 'of color' in its essence, she is negatively impacted by the way students and colleagues perceive and then behave based on their perception of her. She adds that when 'in the insurance industry, a white male dominated industry, I never felt quite as different. I felt different because I was the only woman in the room. Most of the time I was the youngest person in the room, but I never felt different because I was Indian.' This story was, in stark opposition to her experience of working within a social science department of a university, where she has felt the impact of categorization and alienation due to her ethnicity.

Ken, a young, Assistant Professor of Criminology in the U.S. South, experiences ostracism not because of his race, ethnicity or gender, but because of his age. The political centrist and liberal who most populate university systems often align leftist and futurist politics with 'youthfulness' to effectively dismiss progressive thought. Therefore, scholaractivists who have achieved the doctorate while young face strategies of disqualification from multiple avenues. The persistent battle against rhetorical disqualification exhausts

and saddens abolitionist-scholars. Ken shares that, while it doesn't change his research ambitions, he does receive comments like, 'You haven't been around long enough. You'll learn. You're still naïve.' He attributes this to being the youngest faculty member by roughly 12 years, so even in Sociology, where he'd expect allies, he instead receives comments that exacerbate his isolation like 'you're just a little pup, you don't know what you're talking about' or, 'I used to think like that'. He adds, 'there are days where those comments, they kind of suck because I feel like I'm trying really hard and the people who make those comments usually don't seem to be the people that are trying very hard. They kind of got tenure and then just stepped back and stopped. That's kind of irritating.' The ambitious and passionate approach to work makes employment in a university very lonely:

There are these days where you're already having a crappy day where you're like 'what am I doing? Like, why am I fighting so hard? No one else seems to be fighting, why am I fighting?' I've had that a few times here. And it's not just about research, it's about a lot of things. Like we can do this to make the university better, but someone will say 'well that's more work' and I'm like, that's why we're here that's what we're doing.

In part, Ken offers a glimpse into the type of complacency that builds with tenure in an academic institution, activism's 'indefinite postponement' in universities (Flood et al., 2013). Another part, however, of what Ken explains is that the daily, psychological wear and tear of taking company with non-activist de-energizes the abolitionist in academia.

When it comes to isolation in academia, I see two trends, one of which has a cyclical component. First, academics with intersecting, oppressed identities often lack formal mentorship and experience the margins of the academic social network. That lack of mentorship results in a harder time trusting one's voice, navigating the publishing land-scape and landing a tenure track job (where networking holds preeminent importance). Therefore, academics from low-income backgrounds, scholars of color and first-generation scholars find themselves perpetually isolated in the institution. The second trend appears when scholar-activists come to abolition through activism, rather than through scholarship. The two are obviously interrelated. Learning abolition in school, as many of the white males interviewed, meant having an academic mentor and an introduction through tempered, intellectual language that best appeals to political centrists (the target of the message, the majority of the institution and often, average neighbor).

The substantial toll on scholars in proximity to criminalization

Of the thirty participants in this research, six had a personal history of criminalization. Five of the six mentioned that they were personally arrested as youth and one of the six made an explicit note of the impact of family imprisonment. Two of those with proximity to criminalization were white (non-American), two were Black American, and two Chicanos. None of the six were cismen. This sample was therefore able to offer notable commentary on the relationship between proximity to criminalization and the toll of engagement in emotional labor. Importantly, all but one of this group represent a subset of academics in precarious positions, as workers on short term contracts with universities. As such, scholar-activists become particularly vulnerable to institutional hostility and precarity. The *structural vulnerability* (Shange, 2019, p. 86) constructed by educational systems' tenure process determines the labor experienced, expected, and/or rewarded.

Structural vulnerability also, notably, often maps on to the social locations of educators in larger society; people of color, immigrants, and those from lower socioeconomic statuses often experience greater precarity in educational institutions.

While precarity does not impact the hope work of abolitionists in academia, it can impact the extent to which they can involve themselves in any particular institution and it can constrain their outlets for expressions of hope. Jack E, after describing academia as a reprieve from working in retail or living with their family, demonstrates their perception of their own academic limits. They share, 'I'm not hoping to be some amazing, published scholar. Like it's just you know, 10 years (of schooling) and I think that ultimately I mostly just want to make more than \$20,000 a year.' Jack E describes their lack of confidence with academic publishing, but that they do what they can in the classroom to share abolitionist thought and critiques of state violence. They ultimately point to universities as 'tiny microcosms of the world' that function as 'settler colonial police states' and struggle with violence, punishment and gatekeeping. So, while the classroom experience was important to Jack E, they reflected more on the need to integrate abolitionist practice to larger campus struggles and to work on alternative and accessible publications, like zines. This invites isolation, however, as their investments and perspectives of the function of a university are radically different than those who approach it from permanent employment, material comfort, or a narrower focus on publishing and teaching than service.

My interview with Lena shows the roots of isolation. Lena is a queer, Chicana (former) scholar-activist who left academia in the course of this research. She experienced a toxic workplace that mirrored the same failures of the criminal justice system, post sexual violence. As she describes her isolation, the sense of fatalism and despair becomes clearer and clearer. She shares, 'trying to navigate this institution, which is overwhelmingly punitive, but then at the same time not accountable.' In conversation with me, she predicts the pushout that she would soon experience; the same disposability that, in her childhood, left her to figure out how to move forward after surviving assault. She states, 'it's happening again. Right. And the same kind of decision-making process now (of whether to embrace vigilantism or resign). But I'm not going to I'm not going to take that route, even though I'm going to probably be asked out of a job unless I leave beforehand. But at this point in my department, only the admin assistants talk to me now.' Although well loved by her students, the differences in ideology with her colleagues and the institution's inability to face transgressions isolated and neglected Lena, as our criminal justice system does all victims of violence who are left with the pessimism gifted by an unchanging structure.

Simultaneously sensitized to violence and disenchanted with traditional response of retribution, when abolitionist-scholars experience harm, they often lack the equivalent network to a community that may encourage or be skilled with non-state accountability processes. Lena's story highlights the parallels between the institutional space of the university and the systemic violence experienced at home or in our communities. The spaces share the firmly entrenched systems of sexual violence and the university is equally (if not more) ill-equipped to deal with such violence. The emotional labor that comes with managing loneliness, alienation and isolation effects more than just a personal, psychological state. It disproportionately falls on queer people of color and, simultaneously, leads to pushout from the academic spaces. Just as Lena has fully separated herself from her



department and academic career, I heard Jack E and JC (both queer people of color) both question their fit within academia.

Notably, the controversial topics of race, migration and capitalism required to address criminal justice put a target on teachers who choose to bring criticality, personality, or emotion to teaching. While this does not typically change the decision to embrace engaged pedagogy, it has jaded some abolitionist-scholars, who decide that the classroom is not the space for agitation. Nico, a Canadian scholar, sees the classroom as a place to expose, but not to 'proselytize.' He shares that he sometimes integrates abolition into his courses 'here and there' but later concedes his belief that there is 'no point to discussing abolition.' His cynicism is unique within the sample, given that he is a program director and one of just four tenured members of his program's faculty. Beyond the secure status, he also offers that neither his department nor his institution is hostile to abolition, stating 'the idea of abolition circulates smoothly in the department' and that the administration does not impose upon his academic freedom. Rather than stemming from a place of anxiety, this disposition matches Nico's general agnosticism about the role of academic institutions and actors in wielding the academic setting for abolitionist use. He is, interestingly, best situated to offer abolition in the classroom, as a white, non-migrant male (and therefore, in a position of assumed authority) who is least affected by the criminal justice system. Yet, it is perhaps this very position that enables him to choose when to (dis)engage and concede such a prominent avenue for disseminating his thoughts and influencing society.

Conclusion

Both the labors of hope and care require a great emotional demand on the abolitionistacademic. This 'third shift' of scholar-activism occurs when faculty work to promote change in universities (Quaye et al., 2017). Marginalized scholars must navigate 'racial battle fatigue,' microaggressive attacks, discouragement of activism, and the generally shared responsibilities of university employment (Quaye et al., 2017).

Those who identify as scholar-activists and abolitionist-academics engage not only with a philosophy of hope, but with the practice of it. As those who have chosen to work within universities, the majority of abolitionist-academics see the 'university as an arena for struggle,' in which they choose to engage their politic for liberationist ends (Scott, 2020, p. 301). Hope work, along with care work, are infused into and outside of classrooms and are accompanied with various emotional tolls. Gendered, racialized and status-based expectations alter the forms of labor required for hiring, academic retention, and staying safe while teaching politically urgent material. Black feminist studies have long informed us of this, as ascribed statuses impact precarity regardless of the pedagogical decisions made in classrooms (Quaye et al., 2017). While these ascribed statuses often impact teaching philosophy, the teaching philosophies generated by abolitionist scholars cross racialized and gendered boundaries. Hope work creates a politic that impacts the utility of care in the classroom. In turn, compassion becomes as much an ethos as a goal of teaching.

While a body of literature – largely Black feminist scholarship – has considered care as a central part of teaching (hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000; Wade Gayles, 1996), newer scholarship retraces the growing demand for and diffusion of caretaking in the neoliberal academy (Lawless, 2018). Precarity intensifies the tolls of emotional labor as scholars grow increasingly vulnerable to student backlash and the effects of political alienation. Therefore, hope work can lead to isolation, as disengaged staff members blame scholaractivists for complicating their jobs with compassion and labor imagined as unnecessary. With the simultaneous demands of this hope work and greater care work in universities – counseling, responding to crisis, supporting students through an understandably emotional period in their lives – scholars find managing their own emotional wellness difficult.

Simultaneously, the neoliberal university also fosters precarity in the forms of short contracts and low compensation for most lecturers. Therefore, the academy undermines the ability to form intellectual or emotional support networks. Hope and care – two of the primary motivations for scholar-activist teaching - become imagined in the neoliberal educational setting as additional and unnecessary forms of labor that are mired in risk. This risk, as understood through these interviews, become associated with various devalued cultural markers such as youth, femininity, queerness or ethnic difference.

As such, this article supports previous research that provides evidence for disproportionate emotional labor along demographic lines. However, it specifically questions the hidden toll of emotional labor on abolitionist scholars and finds that within criminology, it is also important to consider the scholars' historical proximity to criminalization as a variable impacting burnout and pushout. Proximity to criminalization provides a different way of thinking about status and while it certainly overlaps with other demographic factors, especially race, class, and queerness, it may serve as a more informative marker than any singular factor.

Ultimately, scholar-activists need to strategize around support and build an aligned network for counterbalance. When institutions continually squeeze us for uncompensated labor, when collegial support falters, and when students meet intellectual exercise with conservative hostility, it becomes increasingly important for the abolitionist in academia to find renewable sources of hope. This may mean finding avenues for action elsewhere which may offer more immediate successes or joys (like with Mecke's example of sharing philosophy with children). It may mean diversifying expressions of hope, like writing and publishing abolitionist zines for political peers, like Jack E. It may, however, mean not working at all and instead relying on campus collectives for emotional reprieve. Regardless, this article demonstrates the forms of vulnerability contributing to and exacerbated by the tolls of emotional labor and should help us reimagine such vulnerabilities so that we may provide greater peer support.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Genesis Rivera, Lucy Byrne and Lucas Isaac for their work toward this project as undergraduate research assistants at Hofstra University, funded by the Faculty Research Development Grant. This research was also supported by AAUW's Postdoctoral Research Grant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



ORCID

S.M. Rodriguez (b) http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3944-5600

References

- Ball, M. (2016). Queer criminology as activism. *Critical Criminology*, 24(4), 473–487. https://doi.org/10. 1007/s10612-016-9329-4
- Bellas, M. L. (1999). Emotional labor in academia: The case of professors. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 561(1), 96–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271629956100107
- Charmaz, K. (1996). The search for meanings grounded theory. In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp. 27–49). Sage Publications.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. Routledge.
- Coyle, M. J., & Scott, D. G. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge international handbook of penal abolition*. Routledge.
- Esposito, J. (2014). "Students should not be your friends": Testimonio by a latina on mothering one's own, othermothering, and mentoring students in the academy. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 47(3), 273–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2014.933666
- Flood, M., Martin, B., & Dreher, T. (2013). Combining academia and activism: Common obstacles and useful tools. *Australian Universities Review*, *55*(1), 17–26.
- Foster, M. (1993). Othermothers: Exploring the educational philosophy of Black Ameri- can women teachers. In M. Arnot & K. Weiler (Eds.), *Feminism and social justice in education: International perspectives* (pp. 101–123). Falmer Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Herder & Herder.
- Greene, S. (2008). Introduction: Teaching for social justice. *CounterpointsLiteracy as a Civil Right: Reclaiming Social Justice in Literacy Teaching and Learning*, 316, 1–25. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42979836.pdf?casa_token=CylUmuTEzcUAAAAA:Et8xIUfPu8xhRJYIVs8uA9JrWgv4hiSj2QdBC_JwBNCPVD4kH0WyJhsGG4HerQPSCx66q5hASaHzRumikKWB-GmxYbxLCdNjkkhcozk9Ay-9sluRcacl
- Guiffrida, D. (2005). Othermothering as a framework for understanding African American students' definitions of student-centered faculty. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *76*(6), 701–723. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2005.0041
- Hooks, B. (1994). Teaching to transgress. Routledge.
- Hudson, P. J., & McKittrick, K. (2014). The geographies of blackness and anti-blackness: An interview with Katherine McKittrick. *The CLR James Journal*, *20*(1/2), 233–240.
- Jackson, J. L., & Meiners, E. R. (2010). Feeling like a failure: Teaching/Learning abolition through the good the bad and the innocent. *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist and Anti-Racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching*, 1(88), 20–30. https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0008
- Lawless, B. (2018). Documenting a labor of love: Emotional labor as academic labor. *Review of Communication*, 18(2), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2018.1438644
- Love, B. L. (2019). We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom. Beacon Press.
- Mahoney, K. T., Buboltz, W. C., Jr., Buckner, V. J., & Doverspike, D. (2011). Emotional labor in American professors. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 16(4), 406–423. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025099
- Mawhinney, L. (2011). Othermothering: A personal narrative exploring relationships between Black female faculty and students. *The Negro Educational Review*, 62/63(1–4), 213–232.
- Nagel, M. (2022). Ludic ubuntu ethics: Decolonizing justice. Taylor & Francis.
- Pepinsky, H. (2006). Peacemaking in the classroom. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 9(4), 427–442. https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580601014359



- Quaye, S. J., Dawn Shaw, M., & Hill, D. C. (2017). Blending scholar and activist identities: Establishing the need for scholar activism. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10(4), 381. https://doi.org/ 10.1037/dhe0000060
- Saleh-Hanna, V. (2008). Penal abolitionist theories and ideologies. In Saleh-Hanna, Viviane (Ed.), Colonial systems of control: Criminal justice in Nigeria (pp. 417-456). University of Ottawa Press/Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa.
- Scott, D. (2020). Abolitionism as a philosophy of hope: 'Inside-Outsiders' and the reclaiming of democracy. In H. Kathryn, & S. Rita (Eds.), Routledge handbook of public criminologies (pp. 299-310). Routledge.
- Shange, S. (2019). Progressive Dystopia. Duke University Press.
- Tiwari, A., Saraff, S., & Nair, R. (2020). Impact of emotional labor on burnout and subjective well being of female counselors and female teachers. Journal of Psychosocial Research, 15(2), 523-532. https://doi.org/10.32381/JPR.2020.15.02.14
- Wade Gayles, G. J. (1996). Rooted against the wind: Personal essays. Beacon Press (MA).