

Reclaiming failure in geography: academic honesty in a neoliberal world

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Davies, T, Disney, T & Harrowell, E 2021, 'Reclaiming failure in geography: academic honesty in a neoliberal world', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 38, 100769, pp. 1-6.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2021.100769>

DOI 10.1016/j.emospa.2021.100769

ISSN 1755-4586

Publisher: Elsevier

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Reclaiming failure in geography: academic honesty in a neoliberal world

Abstract:

Failure is a pervasive yet rarely articulated reality of being an academic. From grant rejections to fieldwork mistakes, this editorial introduces a special issue that engages with the notion of ‘failure’ within the neoliberal university. Highlighting the uncomfortable impacts of ‘failure’ across contrasting spaces and career stages, the authors explore its politics, power, and emotional resonance, as well as raising crucial questions of resistance, hope, and refusal within geography and its allied disciplines. Three key themes emerged from these 16 papers: (i) failure is embedded in the structures of the academy; (ii) failure is an inherent part of academic knowledge production; and (iii) failure is an experience that is not equally felt, but is contingent upon uneven power relations and positionalities. We situate the special issue within the context of the coronavirus pandemic and suggest that the failure of the university sector to cope with this existential threat has exposed the very worst characteristics of market-driven education. Ultimately, this special issue aims to push back against the fear and loneliness that ‘failure’ can create, in order to confront the neoliberal university. In troubling conventional models of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in academia, we conclude that refusing to accept the unrealistic expectations, impositions, and demands of the University-Industrial Complex is not a failure at all.

Introduction

From fieldwork mistakes, to grant rejections, and from troubling teaching experiences, to feelings of pervasive imposter syndrome; failure is everywhere within geography and its allied disciplines. So why has failure remained a largely unspoken part of academic life? Despite well-crafted resumes and polished publications, failure is a ubiquitous yet often hidden part of being an academic. Our emotional encounters with failure are mediated by the neoliberal trajectory of higher education, with its unmanageable workloads, anxiety-inducing ranking systems, and self-serving managerialism. The neoliberal context in which we labour has often made it difficult to *talk*—let alone *write*—about the spaces and times where things go wrong. There have been recent attempts to normalise failure within academia, through sharing ‘CVs of failure’ or openly discussing grant and paper rejections, as well as other career setbacks, often within the confines of Twitter. Though welcomed by many, such ‘performative business’ (Clare 2019, 3)—if done uncritically—can also risk reproducing the very logics of over-productivity and ‘success’ that it claims to resist (Lisle 2017; Horton 2020a). Alongside these discussions have been compelling Marxist, feminist, and queer theoretical explorations of what ‘failure’ signifies in contemporary academia, where invitations to upend the political economy of success might allow us to think differently about what it means to fail (see Halberstam 2011). Despite this counter argument, discussions of failure within geography remain relatively rare (cf. Horton 2008; Harrowell et al 2018; Frazier 2020), and the

emotional burden of failure, including feelings of shame, anxiety, and frustration, can at times feel professionally and psychologically debilitating.

Back in 2018 when we wrote an article in the journal *The Professional Geographer* titled ‘Making space for failure in geographic research’ (Harrowell et al 2018), we were struck by a shared feeling that little had been said—in public at least—about the pervasive role of failure within the discipline of geography. The three of us had recently completed our doctoral research, an experience marked by fieldwork failures, missed opportunities, and embarrassing mistakes that belied the careful prose of academic publications. Attempting to enter the academic job market for the first time, we also wanted to signal our unease around the neoliberal model of higher education, which often felt as if it was designed to spit out a steady stream of newly-minted PhDs into a sector utterly incapable of providing secure, permanent employment. ‘*Where was the honesty?*’ we thought. For some time, geographers had poked around the edges of failure, with words like ‘messy’ creeping into the geographic lexicon as a euphemism for the tricky realities of *doing* geography (see Law 2004; Horton 2008; Kay and Oldfield 2011; Clare 2017; Gibbes and Emily Skop 2020), but a sustained confrontation with the wider notion of outright ‘failure’ was long overdue. Instead, in the peer-reviewed utopia of “Journal Land” it seemed as if everything in academia was plain sailing and anxiety-free: research methods worked; projects resulted in clear and satisfying outcomes; findings were published and helped researchers contribute to their community of knowledge and practice. But we didn't feel this way at all, and nor—it turned out—did many others. Indeed, as the contributors to this special issue on failure make abundantly clear, nothing could be further from the truth.

This special issue provides a space to critically engage with the notion of *failure* within academia—its politics, its power, and its emotional resonance. Across sixteen articles and interventions written by 28 academics, the authors provide honest accounts of what ‘failure’ can mean in contemporary academia. These contributors bring together different perspectives, geographic contexts, career stages, and disciplinary backgrounds. They highlight the personal, affective, and troubling impacts of failure in contrasting moments and spaces of academic life, as well as its revelatory potential with regards to crucial questions of emotion, resistance, and hope. This collection of articles and shorter interventions seeks to facilitate an open discussion from a range of kindred scholars who have reflected on their encounters with failure in positive, negative, and at times ambivalent terms. Together, the papers discuss how to make sense of—and struggle against/with—the stigma of failure within the academy, as well as the possibilities for creating friction with the hegemonic allure of normative success and against the notion that all published research is – and must be – ‘successful’. In a modest way at least, we hope that this collection of candid papers helps to push back against the isolation, the fear, and the downright loneliness that ‘failure’ can create, to trouble and confront the neoliberal university. By doing so,

we hope this special issue provides some well-needed respite from the toxic insecurities, injuries, and ‘collateral damage’ (Horton 2020a, 2) that ‘failure’ has wrought in our academic lives.

An industry of failure: the University-Industrial Complex in the time of Covid-19

To be a critical geographer is to be held in constant dialogue with the great many failures of late modernity. Failure—in all its social, environmental, economic, and political guises—so often provides the “source material” for our research, writing, and pedagogy. From the failure of governments to deal with the climate catastrophe, to rising global inequalities, and a hundred-other issues of social injustice, geographers often provide empirically rich and theoretically informed commentaries about the important failures of our age. As Danny Dorling argues in his contribution to this special issue: ‘those of us who work in the academic discipline of geography, largely work on the subject of failure’ (Dorling 2019, 1). As we write this introduction, for example, working remotely from our homes in the UK, we are confronted by the largest public health failure in living memory. The coronavirus pandemic has provided governments and institutions with opportunities to fail in catastrophic new ways: lockdowns were introduced too late and lifted too early; many governments failed to provide even basic protective equipment to frontline workers; and, across the world, communities already rendered vulnerable to the structural violence of racial capitalism are facing the worst health outcomes of all (see Pirtle 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has also powerfully illustrated our interdependence and need for solidarity. In revealing just how much we are enmeshed in the world around us, it has also exposed the failed primacy of individualism that is so critical to the workings of neoliberal regimes (McDowell 2004).¹

As will be familiar to many readers, the neoliberal university system has not stood apart from the deadly pandemic but has—in certain contexts—helped exacerbate its spread (Yamey and Walensky 2020). While it is beyond the scope of this short editorial to fully explore how universities have mishandled the ongoing crisis, the *failure* of the university sector to cope with this existential threat—and its capacity at times to make health outcomes *worse* for many students, staff, and local communities—has been a damning indictment of the free-market experiment in higher education. In the UK, for example, universities became ‘a major hub of community transmission’ (Gurdasani et al 2020, 1), and university leaders have been accused of prioritising tuition fees and rent-income over the physical and emotional health of their students and faculty (see Fazackerley 2020), as well as enforcing risky practices such as face-to-face teaching, despite the health warnings of independent scientific advisors (Independent SAGE 2020).² In the USA meanwhile, university leaders have ‘generally expected campus infections to happen as merely the cost of doing business’ (Yamey and Walensky 2020: 1). In failing to

¹ For the purposes of this article, we join with Mountz et al (2015) in defining neoliberalism as ‘a contextually contingent articulation of free market governmental practices with varied and often quite illiberal forms of social and political rule’ (Sparke 2006,153)

² Other countries took a more precautionary approach to higher education during the Covid-19 crisis, including Japan, Iran, China, South Korea, Afghanistan, and Malaysia, who closed universities earlier than usual to avoid subsequent waves of the pandemic (Khan et al 2020).

prioritise health over financial revenue, the pandemic has exposed the very worst characteristics of market-driven education. It has also shone a spotlight on existing structural issues within the academy, including its willingness to cut short the contracts of more precarious employees; and the increasing reliance of many Global North universities on extracting capital from overseas students (Devinney and Dowling 2020). Writing about Covid-19 in this special issue on failure, Colin Lorne observed:

'in what may likely come to be seen as the biggest public health disaster in many decades, it is becoming acutely apparent that academics are at ever more risk of being enlisted in mobilising policy narratives whilst being unable to talk publicly about failure' (Lorne 2021: 6).

Indeed, the increased emotional turmoil experienced by many academics during the pandemic, combined with an inability to speak openly and honestly about failure, has added to pre-existing stresses and anxieties that have long characterised the commodified system of higher education (see Thompson 1970; Berg et al 2016). This has compounded what feminist geographers have called the 'emotional and embodied effects of the neoliberal university' (Mountz et al 2015: 1239).

Future geographers will doubtless dissect and discuss the milieu of failure in which we are now writing, and some have begun this important work already (see Faria 2020; Rose-Redwood et al 2020; Searle and Turnbull 2020; Tyner and Rice 2020). However, the structural issues facing higher education long predate the ongoing pandemic. Our emotional encounters with failure take place alongside the onwards march of the University-Industrial Complex: a commodified model of higher education that has turned students into customers, academics into content providers, and Vice Chancellors into grossly overpaid CEOs. Looking out from our perspective in the UK, the increasingly marketised agenda of higher education—complete with performance metrics, insecure contracts, and fundamentally flawed frameworks for measuring 'excellence'—is having an emotional toll on the lives of many academics (Jaremka et al 2020; Berg et al 2016). The competitive and precarious context of academia means that 'disclosing failure remains an inherently risky act in the contemporary neoliberal university' (Pickerill 2019: 121). Indeed, neoliberalism's stranglehold on UK higher education is a grim portent for how marketisation can create anxiety-inducing systems obsessed with arbitrary measures of 'success'. According to a large survey of UK-based academics (n = 4065) commissioned by Wellcome Trust (2020: 15), 78% of researchers found that high levels of competition have created 'unkind and aggressive' research conditions. The study also found that long working-hours and high expectations means 'failure can feel deeply personal' (Wellcome Trust 2020: 8). As the report concludes, the current academic research culture creates 'stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of isolation and loneliness at work' (Wellcome Trust 2020: 3). The very fabric of university life, it seems, is not conducive to happiness.

As several contributors to this special issue discuss (see Butler-Rees and Robinson 2020; Lorne 2021), early career academics are especially vulnerable to the neoliberal trajectory of higher education, with clear implications for their emotional wellbeing. For many would-be lecturers, obtaining permanent employment within academia requires an ever-longer list of achievements. Recent research within sociology departments for example, found that newly appointed lecturers had published roughly *double* the publications of their predecessors in the early 1990s on the day they started their jobs (Warren 2019). Indeed, for many academics the praxis of ‘slow scholarship’ (Mountz et al 2015) —though a highly laudable aim—remains a restricted preserve of the tenured classes (and an increasingly small proportion of the tenured, at that). Put differently, slowing down is no option for the ‘academically-subaltern’ (Clare 2019, 4), who are forced to jump from one temporary contract to the next: their precarious labour both undergirding the neoliberal university system, as well as ensuring the seamless ‘success’ of more senior colleagues. Exacerbating this further, emerging evidence suggests that the coronavirus pandemic has (re)produced further academic inequalities. Female academics report spending less time on research activities (Myers et al 2020), and a gendered divide in journal article submissions is emerging, with women who are disproportionately burdened with caring responsibilities having less opportunity to write (see Faria 2020; Mitchell-Eaton 2020). Given the value assigned to such publications in a metrics-driven market, as well as the failure of equality programmes such as the UK’s Athena SWAN (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) to adequately deal with long-term gender inequalities within higher education (see Tzanakou and Pearce 2019), there is a very real risk that the current crisis will further entrench structural inequities. Indeed, a key theme that spans many of the contributions to this special issue, is that ‘failure’ is not an experience that is equally felt. *How* one experiences failure is moulded by the gendered, racialized, classed, and dis/abled positionalities one occupies as one navigates through academic life. It is into this uneven, precarious and evolving neoliberal context that the authors of this special issue make their contributions about failure.

This special issue: traversing the sites and spaces of failure

This special issue on ‘Reclaiming failure in geography: academic honesty in a neoliberal world’ emerged from two sessions at the annual conference of the RGS-IBG in Cardiff in 2018, and then grew with additional invited submissions beyond the confines of the conference. The papers reflect a diverse engagement with failure in geography and its allied disciplines, and in doing so also provide novel insights into understandings of what failure is and what it means to fail in higher education. Given the journal’s focus, contributors were asked to reflect on the role of emotions in relation to failure. Whilst implicit in many previous discussions of failure, the emotional element of the experience of failure in academia had been subject to little explicit scrutiny in existing scholarship. This is surprising since, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, failure provokes a range of powerful emotional responses from anger to shame, discomfort, loneliness and anxiety. It is the

profound emotional impact of failure—what Sara Ahmed (2014, 85) named the “weightiness” of feelings’ — that makes failure both a difficult experience and a powerful potential catalyst, but above all a very difficult feeling to ignore. As such, the special issue was designed to offer authors a flexible space to engage with failure – in either full-length articles or shorter ‘snapshot’ interventions, allowing the contributors to approach the idea of failure in a variety of ways.

Though each intervention is unique, three particular themes emerge from the contributions to this special issue. First, an attention to the failure *of* the academy. The failure of academic systems that increasingly reproduce neoliberal logics, but also in the operation and development of disciplinary fields that sit uncomfortably within and alongside these systems. There are questions to be raised for academics about how we engage with failure in our disciplines and in our professional settings. Second, a clear theme emerged around how academic knowledge is produced, constructed, and potentially destabilised in the process of conducting research, writing, and developing ideas. Third and finally, contributions to this special issue have highlighted that failure is always situated within power structures and contingent on the identities, motivations, and experiences of the diverse groups of people, and more-than-human subjects, involved in our academic work.

Many of the authors in this special issue have grappled with how failure is experienced within disciplinary fields of knowledge and higher education institutions (Broeckerhoff and Lopes 2020; Butler-Rees and Robinson 2020; Clare 2019; Dorling 2019; Holdsworth 2020; Horton 2020a; Turner 2020; Whittle et al. 2020). Failure in the academy is experienced as uncomfortable and distinctly embodied; drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2014) and Jack Halberstam (2011), the contribution by Aurélie Broeckerhoff and Maíra Lopes (2020) highlights how, as cross-disciplinary researchers, their bodies were marked out as ‘other’. Such experiences echo recent feminist geographical scholarship that explores the exclusionary nature of academic conferences where certain bodies are made to feel like they do not belong (Oliver and Morris, 2020). Indeed, an attention to the contextual geographies of failure is critical, as several authors in this special issue observe (Butler-Rees and Robinson 2020; Horton 2020a; Clare 2019; Lorne 2021). In his autoethnographic contribution to this special issue, John Horton (2020a) discusses six dominant forms of failure that persist within academia, which are also reflected throughout the rest of the special issue. These include: (i) things not going to plan; (ii) pervasive anxieties about performance within the neoliberal academy; (iii) regret, or wanting to do more; (iv) embodied senses of personal inadequacy and (not)belonging; (v) assessment criteria and procedures; and lastly (vi), a toxic triumphalism that can pervade less critical discussions of failure (Horton 2020a). As he describes, ‘in considering failure in the academy we must do more than tell tales of triumph-over-adversity’ (Horton 2020, 5), which can reinforce neoliberal logics of individualism.

This observation is echoed by Nick Clare (2019, 3), who takes a scalpel to the notion that all discussions of failure are necessarily helpful, observing that failure can become (yet) ‘another terrain on which to compete’, inadvertently making other academics *more* anxious, *more* excluded, and *less* able to navigate the classed, raced, gendered, and heteropatriarchal hierarchies of the University-Industrial Complex. With many people shut out of academia altogether, through its exclusionary structures and uneven geographies of knowledge production, some scholars are never provided the opportunity to formally ‘fail’ in the first place. As such, ‘successful voices dominate failure debates,’ (Clare 2019) and stories of academic failure, whether shared online or in more formal settings, are not (necessarily) acts of humility or solidarity, but demonstrations of *privilege*. As with so many aspects of geographic praxis, when it comes to discussing failure, positionality and an ethics of care matters. Indeed, we must remain aware that not everyone is afforded the same opportunity of discussing failure openly, and if approached uncritically, revealing individual ‘failures’ may exacerbate and (re)produce academic inequalities, rather than resist them.

The intervention by Angharad Butler-Rees and Nick Robinson’s (2020) powerfully illustrates the anxieties and precarity of early career researchers attempting to navigate fieldwork and an academic career pathway. They draw attention to how specific groups within academia are particularly exposed to precarity, and in doing so, develop our understanding of failure as operating along an axis, differentially experienced in the academy. The contributions of Butler-Rees and Robinson (2020), Horton (2020a), and Clare (2020) certainly add weight to arguments that neoliberal academic systems perpetuate inequalities. As Maclean (2016: 181) has identified elsewhere, the ‘neoliberal onslaught of corporatization, metricization, and managerialization...is concurrent with a growing epidemic of anxiety, distress, and depression,’ with PhD researchers, early-career academics, women, and people of colour particularly taking the strain.

Both Danny Dorling (2019) and Jennifer Turner’s (2020) contributions to this special issue, as well as that of Rebecca Whittle and her collaborators (2020), seek to shift the current focus on academics’ experiences, to consider how students are impacted by failure, which has thus far been largely overlooked. In a radical departure from conventional metrics of ‘success’ within geography, Danny Dorling (2019, 3) champions the importance of *kindness* within geographic scholarship and teaching, and positions it as a form of ‘rigour’ within the discipline. Noting that often academics too quickly and easily provide brusque feedback to students and the potentially debilitating impact of that for undergraduates, he emphasizes kindness as a ‘vital yet unseen aspect of academic work in general’ (Dorling, 2019, 3). As he explains, ‘[without] kindness, we are all surely destined to fail’ (Dorling, 2019, 3). In shedding light on the uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing impacts of failure on our own subjectivities, we must not forget how failure similarly shapes the worlds of our students. As others have identified, to ‘enact care, kindness, and generosity to others’ (Pickerill 2020) should be an important part of being an academic (also see Saville 2020; Horton 2020b). Dorling also draws attention to some of the failures

within the discipline of geography itself; from its inability to fully grapple with its imperial past and colonial inheritance (see Radcliffe 2017; Hamilton 2020), to its failure - in the UK at least - to diversify its student intake.

In exploring the mechanics of the university system, Jennifer Turner (2020) notes the inherently relational nature of failure; for there to be success, there must also be its opposite. Turner critically considers what we can do as academics while we are embedded in systems that produce failure in various ways, suggesting we might find ‘power in failure’ (Turner 2020, 5) by locating alternative means to engage with the quotidian processes of academic life. Rejecting accounts of failure that have emphasized its *invisibility*, Turner instead suggests that failure is a highly visible part of academia and is baked-in to the infrastructure of higher education, through the way we mark, grade, and assess our students. As such, failure is ‘a present, consistent, fundamental and visible constituent of academic life’, which begins at the very start of our undergraduate careers and must therefore be negotiated to succeed (Turner 2020, 2). Also focusing on student perspectives, Rebecca Whittle and her colleagues (Whittle et al 2020) report on an action-research project conducted with students exploring experiences of failure. They note that admissions of failure, for both staff and students often only emerge in informal spaces rather than designated places within the university. If we are to take seriously the calls for openness around failure, they argue, then we must develop safe spaces for this to take place. Clare Holdsworth (2020) similarly notes the embedded nature of failure within the systems of academia, acknowledging that the majority of grant funding applications end in failure. In order to resist the debilitating impacts of failure, in her ‘manifesto for failure’ Holdsworth calls for us to resist the fetishization of individualisation, and instead to collectivise success *and* failure. In all of these contributions, failure emerges as something embedded in the structures of the university complex, and which sits uncomfortably alongside our disciplinary identities and backgrounds where we strive for ‘success’ or seek to combat the inequalities that constitute failure in academic processes. It is this feeling of discomfort that is at the heart of the ability of failure to upset accepted narratives within the academic system, casting an unflinching light on the confluence of personal and political within these structures and processes.

Through these contributions failure also emerges as a key but largely unacknowledged facet of knowledge production within research practice. Drawing on long-term ethnography in the Midlands of England, Ed Wright focuses on the ethnographic ‘blind spot’ of toilets in a men’s boxing club. Repeated thefts of the club’s toilet roll were impossible to explain. However, as he discusses, there is plenty of ethnographic scholarship that is about *not knowing*, yet:

‘Rather than being permitted to actively address the messy, complicated realities of the field, within the neoliberal university there is a compulsion to produce linear, smooth accounts, which whilst counting as excellent within a metric, misrepresent or ‘distort’ the field.’ (Wright 2020:3)

As such, by excluding failure we risk sterilising our knowledge of the field. Unlike more dramatic or institutionally recognised failures that mark out academic careers, or limit them, such as grant or paper rejections or fieldwork struggles, Ben Anderson (2020: 1) draws attention to the ‘ordinary failures’ that fall between the cracks of our daily lives and often go unnoticed. He describes how interest in research projects can ebb and wane over time, and reflects on the role of the ‘small, invisible events that pile up as part of academic life and can’t be so neatly separated into success and failure’ (Anderson 2020, 3). His contribution challenges us to think more broadly about failure, its affects and resonances. Vibeke Sjøvoll, Geir Grothen, and Lars Frers (Sjøvoll et al 2020: 6) similarly consider the role of knowledge production in relation to failure, exploring how ideas become abandoned. Through their discussion they conceptualise failure as shifting and mobile; ‘[how] we treat failure depends on where we are, and experiences of failure can create very different trajectories in the personal and academic landscapes.’ As they note, much existing academic research is purged of its ghosts of failure.

A final theme that emerges from this collection of papers is that of activism and the situated nature of failure, in particular for participants involved in our research. Failure emerges as something that is multifaceted and contested. Catherine Oliver in her intervention considers the challenges of conducting beyond-human research, noting how feelings of anger and failure do not only frustrate research, but also provide ‘the emotional sustenance’ for vegan-activism and activist-research (Oliver, 2020: 3). Though attuned to the ‘felt impossibility of realising a vegan world’ (Oliver 2020: 4), she finds cause for hope within wider environments of failure. Dovetailing with other contributors in this special issue, she proposes that ‘when we fail, we might open ourselves to engage within moments of re-orientation and expansion’ (Oliver 2020: 4). Sofia Dedotsi and Gorana Panić (2020) similarly find hope in activist research, however the authors found that transformative research was not always welcome in the contemporary academy, which bristles at research that appears to challenge the status quo. Importantly, they also move discussions of failure and academic precarity beyond the dominant geographic contexts of the UK and USA, offering perspectives from their home countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Greece. Dedotsi and Panić encourage readers to avoid supporting the conventions of neoliberal academia and to pursue activist models of social research, even if resisting established norms might lead to cautions of possible failure. This position echoes the reflections of Francesca Meloni (2020: 3) in conducting research with marginalised populations, in which she calls for a commitment to participatory and collaborative practices to ‘unsettle dogmatic paradigms of knowledge and learning as processes towards definitive “truths”’. Drawing on her experience of undertaking long-term research with undocumented young people in Canada, she describes how failure is often central to the everyday practice of doing ethnographic research, and highlights the importance of becoming emotionally attuned to issues of power, ethics, and responsibility.

While participatory approaches may not always be welcomed by the academy, Katy Jenkins, Hugo Toledo, and Angélica Oyarzo (Jenkins et al 2020) describe how their own participatory research activities were not disrupted by a resistant university system, but by the very people they had hoped to research and collaborate with. In attempting to make sense of the refusal of Indigenous participants to take part in their research project in northern Chile, Jenkins and her co-authors note that western approaches and protocols to research cannot escape the way coloniality produces knowledge about the ‘Other’. In dealing with this failure, they reflected on how: ‘we felt judged to be on a par with the extractive companies whose behaviour we sought to critique, an un-settling experience that has stayed with us beyond the research “moment”’ (Jenkins et al 2020 7). Situated within ongoing efforts to decolonise geography (see Radcliffe 2017), their reflexive discussion raises vital questions about the way we engage with subaltern participants; the need to question *who* is benefitting from our research; and ultimately, how ‘some stories are not ours to tell’ (Gahman 2019, 507; also see Tuck and Yang 2014). The authors astutely note that such failures ‘are characteristic of ongoing attempts to decolonise research, a messy, partial and inevitably fraught process in which we need to be prepared to take risks and to deal with failure, rejection and refusal’ (Jenkins et al 2020, 7). Failure here emerges as productive but multifaceted and contingent—the participants’ refusal to engage is an important demonstration of agency to be respected, and while the failure of their workshop is experienced as painful, it is also highly instructive in illuminating the possibilities and challenges of decolonizing knowledge production.

Conversely to this focus on researching subaltern groups, Colin Lorne (2021, 4) details the difficulties, uncertainties, and uncomfortable entanglements he faced while attempting to research the elite decisions of powerful policy makers. Occupying an uncertain insider-outsider relationship with the field, Lorne describes how he was unable to pin-down exactly how he was becoming attached to—and part of—the policies he was researching: ‘I felt immensely conflicted as to what I could say publicly’ (Lorne 2021, 4). Being neither able to talk openly about the inevitable failure of policy, nor discuss his own failures to fully know his positionality within the research, his candid contribution to this special issue draws attention to the ‘unsettling “betweenness” of policy researchers’ (Lorne 2021, 2), who, as Lorne notes, are often early career academics. Failure here is markedly contingent, and he highlights how precarious employment contracts and the need to maintain access can sometimes impede our ability as academics to challenge what we research, which can often generate a sense of failure. Such failures and the associated emotions should, however, not rest on our shoulders. Despite the neoliberal fetish for measuring the ‘impact’ of research (see Rodgers et al 2014), there is a need to recognise how certain change is often beyond our control (Klocker 2015). As Lorne (2021) concludes, it is important to ‘inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognising that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our own hands (Rose 1997: 319).

Conclusion

Like any scholarship on academic ‘failure’, this special issue inhabits an inbuilt irony, that ‘published papers about failures are, almost by definition, successes’ (Clare 2019: 4). This paradox exposes a wider *epistemic* impasse at the heart of critical discussions of failure within academic spaces: if only the ‘successful’ are given voice and column-inches to describe their failures, then whose failures really ‘count’ in the neoliberal university? Though we have tried to include a range of academic perspectives in this special issue—from upcoming PhD students to established professors—we are also attuned to the fact that there are many scholars and students who toil beyond the edges of the neoliberal (and predominantly Anglophone) academic system; academics and students ‘who have been pushed out or who never gained admission due to gendered, racialized, classed, heteronormative, and ableist structures and daily practices in the academy’ (Mountz et al 2015, 1240). It is vital that we think structurally about failure within academia, and in doing so, we must consider perspectives that have been derailed and de-voiced by the neoliberal academy altogether, and have never been allowed to ‘fail’ in the first place, let alone succeed. As Horton (2020a, 5) asks in his contribution to this special issue: ‘Who is (and is not) able to speak of failure in the academy?’

While the many factors that shape experiences of failure in the academy are structurally produced, the forms of *resistance* discussed by the contributors in this special issue come from a place of emotion, hope, and refusal. From an appeal for greater ‘kindness’ (Dorling 2019) within the discipline of geography, to the demand for ‘more collegiate, critical ideas of success’ (Horton 2020a); and from calls for *collective* push back (Clare 2019), to the hope encompassed in activist and participatory forms of research (Dedotsi and Panić 2020; Meloni 2020), there is a strong sense that however we come to act and think about failure, it cannot be individualized and must be built on solidarity (Holdsworth 2020). As Pickerill (2020) has identified: ‘there is also power in failing together’. We hope this collection moves this conversation forward and encourages further debate and dialogue about failure. In doing so, we might reclaim and repurpose our academic failures—not just to *salvage* a feeling of success—but to recast academic failures as ‘counter-conducts’ (Foucault 2007, 201) with which we can challenge and critique all that’s wrong with the academy. Perhaps, in particular, there is scope in discussions of failure to question what universities are actually *for* (after Collini 2012), in order to resist the uncritical drive for income, impact and corporate visions of ‘success’.³ In unsettling the neoliberal University, we must be careful not to hark back to a halcyon age that never was, yet must equally be willing to demand change where needed, and reclaim failure on our own terms.

As Jenny Pickerill discussed in her keynote speech at the 2020 RGS-IBG Midterm conference, experiences of failure might instead be repositioned as radical acts of *refusal*. She argued that ‘embracing failure as a political

³ To further problematise the notion of ‘*success*’ within academia, we highly recommend the ‘*Reclaiming Success*’ initiative created by geographers Hannah Dickinson, Laura Shipp, and Viktoria Noka, which attempts to ‘redefine success to include the small, everyday, and mundane, working towards a more positive space for academics’ (see Dickinson et al 2020).

act' (Pickerill 2020) can turn situations of failure into ways of refusing the unfair structures in which we labour. We agree: refusing to accept the unrealistic expectations, impositions, and demands of the University-Industrial Complex is not a failure at all.⁴ In convening this special issue, we are very aware that the important work of negotiating failure and refusing neoliberal norms of success will take place far beyond the confines of academic journal articles – after all, if 'the revolution will not be televised' (Scott-Heron 1971), it certainly won't be peer-reviewed. Nevertheless, we hope the articles and interventions presented here, in all their frank, critical, and radical forms, will further normalize failure in geography, and provide more space for academic honesty in a neoliberal world.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all 28 of the authors in this special issue, who have - with such honesty and openness – shared their failures. We would also like to thank the army of academics who have peer reviewed and further strengthened each of these articles and interventions. Many thanks to Danielle Drozdowski, Kate Swanson, Kye Askins and the rest of the editorial team at *Emotion, Space and Society* for supporting this project, and making it possible. We would also like to thank Nick Clare, Arshad Isakjee, and Colin Lorne for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. All mistakes, shortcomings, and failures remain our own (to an extent). Thanks for reading.

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⁴ A striking example of collective academic refusal took place recently on picket lines across the UK, when an unprecedented number of university staff took industrial action against rising workloads, pay inequality, job insecurity, and devalued pensions (see Legg et al 2018). Not only did this highlight a widely held feeling that the neoliberal model of higher education was systemically failing, it also demonstrated the importance of collective action and solidarity. For geographers especially, it further illustrated the perennial importance of turning the *idea* of 'critical geography' into a *praxis*.

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