

POLEMICS / POLÉMIQUES

*On Burnout
and Recovery:*

*Academic Life,
Lately*

*/Susan Cahill
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GUEST EDITORS:

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At the 2023 Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Annual Conference in Banff, Alberta, we co-chaired a session on burnout and recovery. We wanted to explore the personal side of professional academic life over the past three years, under the weight of the latest global pandemic still impacting our work and ourselves, constantly yet unevenly. We aimed to gather together a group of artists, affiliated and unaffiliated university scholars, and graduate students, in recognition of the fact that much of academic and creative work is bound up in the pressure to participate in professional hustle culture at all levels, from graduate school to academic and alt-academic career paths. We often discount the personal toll that such consistent and often non-boundaried scholarly work takes, particularly in a moment with increased health risks and caretaking responsibilities. And while these tolls are felt by many within the academic context, they have certainly put additional strains on those whose positions were already precarious and who have long carried inequitable burdens within the labour spaces of the university, including women and gender non-conforming people, Indigenous, Black, racialized diasporic, queer, trans, and disabled scholars.

In organizing a session on this topic, we were motivated by our experiences of alienation, overwhelm, and loneliness, as we felt rudderless in terms of how to navigate through the new expectations and the lack of clarity of university life in a pandemic. We reached out to a group of colleagues and friends to share this conversation and to critically reflect and think through their own experiences of academic life within the pandemic. Our goal was to find spaces of community and care not offered individually through professional systems, and to envision other possible ways grounded in compassion and acknowledging the personal side of the professional.

ERIN: When we proposed this session, I was negotiating and navigating a major career shift. The shift was not prompted by regular motivations, such as a promotion or career advancement. Rather, it was the result of me rethinking my professional and scholarly career following an eight-week medical leave that took place in the winter of 2022. This leave was prompted by existing mental health issues exacerbated by pandemic work in a university setting, which meant teaching and doing a major service role while also homeschooling two kids, caring for a toddler when daycares closed, and supporting a partner whose work was in-person and front-line in the medical system in children's mental health. The short medical leave was necessary, according to my family doctor, psychologist, and occupational therapist, but it was challenged at multiple levels both personally and professionally. The wound of this experience led me to pursue other career opportunities, and my partner did the same. At first, we both found ourselves in different roles in our existing community. Within six months into these new jobs, however, I had applied and eventually secured a new position at another university. We quickly moved interprovincially, with my partner leaving his career altogether to be a stay-at-home parent, temporarily, while also looking for new work. I showed up at the Universities Art Association of Canada conference in a Costco sweatsuit and Crocs, because by the time I moved away from a place I had lived for fourteen years and arrived as a stranger in a new institution, that was about the level of energy I had left in me to show up at a scholarly event.

SUSAN: Parenting and taking on a new administrative position during the pandemic greatly exacerbated my pre-existing anxiety issues. When the pandemic first hit Calgary and prompted mass lockdowns (including childcare centres), I was two weeks back at work from maternity leave. As a first-time parent to a very young toddler, I found navigating the lack of childcare and the expectations of a new university position very difficult. My partner and I were both working at home

and had some flexibility in work schedules. Even with this relatively privileged setup, we still found the management of parenting and work-life overwhelming. It took a major toll on each of us and our relationship. Because we have no family or extended supports locally, we traveled cross-country to stay with my parents during lockdown. I am so grateful the option to work remotely was available to us, because it allowed us to make this temporary move. When I sought out additional workplace support, I found the university indifferent in this regard: the systems available were challenging and addressed me with suspicion, adding to the strain I was already feeling. It made me feel like my inabilities to adapt as a parent, academic, and partner were my own fault. To be honest, my memory of this time is pretty foggy: I remember taking long walks near the ocean, and talking on the phone to friends in distanced time zones as my main community of support. While I'm back in Calgary and reintegrated into day-to-day life here, this experience of aloneness and alienation has forever changed how I think about my life in the academy, and what I want to (and can) give to it.

We raise our personal situations here to make it clear that we were thinking about burnout and recovery personally but also structurally—as Shaista Patel has argued, it remains important to attend to the personal while also critiquing deep structures of intersectional inequities, wherever we see them.¹ This is less about centering our own individual experiences as those who have moved in and out of burnout and recovery, and more about thinking through the ways in which the structures of the neoliberal university, connected as they are to colonial late-stage capitalism, do not create spaces of care. We often try to create these spaces between individuals, to form solidarities around shared struggle and grief, which is more difficult when we collectively find ourselves in burnout rather than in recovery. Where do we go when we don't even have each other? We struggle in this Polemics contribution, as well, to write about our privileges and complicities in these systems while critiquing them.

We tried to strike a balance, as each piece that follows is both personal and concerned with collective struggles: around COVID-19 but also around intersections of disability, racialization, climate, and genocide. Each of the contributors situates their life, emotions, and tactics for moving through burnout in relation to what recovery even means when working at the university in an ongoing, still-present pandemic. The pieces included in this section also reflect the personal experiences and collective conversations of this conference session. Each contributor positions themselves within the context of pandemic life and the university, and provides different ways of accessing care for themselves, for children, and for community. We are thankful for the openness and generosity of Kristy, Triny, Dia, and Mél. Please note, there are some discussions in these pieces that address difficult subjects, so please take care when reading.

The resulting section, however, is notable not only in what appears here, but also in what is absent. When this session was first organized, it included people who represented a variety of professional positions within the university: emerging pre-tenure faculty, graduate students, artists, alt-academics, and established scholars. However, by the time we got close to the UAAC conference, several participants had to step down from contributing to the panel and/or this Polemics section. While their reasons varied, what we notice here is that the additional strain of thinking through, articulating, presenting, making art, and writing on their experiences could not always be a part of recovery. We want to acknowledge the persistent inequities of the workloads, space, and energy required even in building a network and community of care.

1 Shaista Aziz Patel, "Talking Complicity, Breathing Coloniality: Interrogating Settler-centric Pedagogy of Teaching about White Settler Colonialism," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 19, no. 3 (2022): 211–30, doi: 10.1080/15505170.2020.1871450.