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"Teach Me How to Stay on Top of Things": Navigating Ontological (In)Security and Optimistic Attachments

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted universities across the globe to shift to digital platforms. This shift has ensured the minimization of disruption by offering flexible, transparent, and accessible remote learning that aligns with the intensified "business-as-usual" structure of higher education. This ethos has led to renewed ontological shifts through the production of persons who sustain a neo-liberal project of world-making. Utilizing Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and subjectivity, I present an analysis of the reconfiguration of a neo-liberal normalcy, whereby the student-as-academic subject encounters an ontological insecurity that requires a (re)constitution of the self through mechanisms of risk assessment, surveillance, and self-responsibilization. Situated in my own experiences as a tutorial leader facilitating an undergraduate critical social work course during the pandemic, I consider how this constitution of the subject seems to be at odds with the commitments to social justice that are part of critical social work education. The article complicates students' and instructors' dual desires of achieving a critical understanding of social issues and of obtaining a coherent subjectivity to "stay on top" of their learning trajectories. I argue that as bodies become oriented toward a political rationality of normalcy, security, and continuity, students increasingly deploy moral technologies that (re)invent the human as an optimistic enterprising subjectivity.

Keywords: digital learning, neo-liberalism, ontology, subjectivity, critical social work

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Introduction

I was inspired to write this article from my experiences while leading a first-year university tutorial group during the fall term of 2020. It was for an introductory course on critical social work in Toronto, Canada. As the campus had shut down all on-site activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, course lectures and tutorials were conducted through video-conferencing software such as Zoom and the university's e-Class platform. I became concerned as the course progressed about how the shift toward digital learning was causing many undergraduate students to experience a profound sense of confusion and ontological disorientation. Aside from the numerous questions students had asked me that focused on course content and software navigation was another kind of inquiry that revealed a sense of urgency. Student concerns revealed a sense of insecurity: how does one *be* a student in this current environment? Were there any "tips" or "hacks" one could learn to adjust to online education? "It would be helpful if you could teach me how to stay on top of things," was one student's comment to me during an office-hour segment that left me feeling disoriented and questioning my own competency as a tutorial leader.

I began to think of the discursive and material conditions that have allowed the current mode of digital learning to be conceptualized as a beneficial necessity. In particular, dominant forms of knowledge informed by neo-liberal ethos produced specific subjectivities considered as "good" or able to "stay on top" of their academic performance. What are the modes of differentiation that distinguish between one who stays on top and one who does not? If this ideal subjecthood is achievable, how does its process reassemble existing world-making approaches that are embedded in neo-liberal rationality? Lastly, how does this type of subject-formation erode social-justice commitments that are explored in critical social work? This article thus offers an initial examination of how pandemic pedagogy demonstrates a reliance on neo-liberal technologies of normalization, which can hinder critical social work's disruption of current modes of knowledge organization and activity that privilege disciplinary and regulatory ways of thinking (Macías, 2013).

Setting the Context: Pandemic Pedagogy in Present Times

Digital learning in post-secondary institutions has been framed as a forward-thinking modality that rewards technological innovation and ensures economic interests: it is seen as an effective approach that offers inclusivity, autonomy, and flexibility (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Grimaldi & Ball, 2019; Selwyn, 2016; Smith & Jeffery, 2013). In early 2020, university campuses quickly shut down as the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly around the globe, with students and instructors receiving and teaching course material through online platforms. These developments have shown that current forms of online education delivered using private-sector technologies aim to outlast their initial role of responding to the pandemic. In this way, the pandemic has become conceptualized as an opportunity for educational institutions to modernize and keep up with the ever-growing, global digital-information economy (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). Online platforms for higher education have allowed for synchronous or asynchronous lecture formats, offering students partial control over the time, location, and arrangement of their own learning process. Specifically, digital learning technologies have been discursively constructed as another way of servicing the frontline during times of emergency, where students—seen as valuable future contributors of Canada's knowledge economy—can continue their post-secondary education uninterrupted (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020).

Online education is not only seen as a ready-made, common-sense remedy that will alleviate current pressures but also provides a platform for moral subjectivities to be (re)constituted in ways that reflect one's own "fight" in the battle against the pandemic. If citizens are conceptualized as doing their part in the pandemic-as-war, education is doing its part in providing undisrupted teaching to the nation's students as a way for them to stay on top of their studies in order to prevent academic disillusionment. As both a doctoral student in a social work program and tutorial leader for an undergraduate social work course, I engaged paradoxically in the optimism and resilience discourse that had been flourishing since the beginning of the pandemic. I utilized slogans such as "We are all in this together," which have been used widely in various contexts, and demonstrated my understanding and compassion in hopes of bolstering student confidence in weathering the pandemic by quickly adjusting to online learning. I was orienting students to optimistically embrace the reality of "going digital" as their lives were quickly transformed to rely on digital technologies more than ever (Coeckelbergh, 2020). I felt that my role as a tutorial leader was to calm students'

uncertainties and to position educational institutions and their roles within them as continuous and coherent. By positioning myself as "doing my part," I was being shaped in a way that required me to morally regulate my students through a discourse of optimism and resilence to adopt a business-as-usual pandemic pedagogy.

Contextualizing Digital Learning: A Foucauldian Theorization

In this article I propose a critical examination of celebratory heroism as higher-education instructors and students experienced the shift to online education through a digitalization of pedagogy. Particularly, the absence of ambivalence toward this complex assemblage of technologies, material practices, and discursive knowledge regimes is in need of critical interrogation since digital learning technologies are often viewed as value-free and sustained by "master narratives" of human progress and ingenuity (Mertala, 2020, p. 181). I am troubled by how both student and instructor subject positions have been constituted in this historical moment, fortifying a business-as-usual neo-liberal normalcy by shaping and constituting a subjectivity that is bound by moral regulation. This type of regulation reinforces the logics of consumer calculation in striving for enhanced expectations of professionalism and effectiveness (Smith & Jeffery, 2013). It contributes to paradoxical effects that shape critical social work education, where critical social work identifies itself as actively pursuing social justice by fostering an analytic between social structures and power relations (Preston & Aslett, 2014). As critical social work strives to be transformative in its pedagogical approach, it is inevitably shaped by the governing rationality of the digital platform, which can obscure the discipline's political commitments.

I look at how online education discursively (re)organizes what is considered knowable and thinkable within a neo-liberal capitalist arrangement of life that produces subject positions whereby individuals constitute a *subjectivity*, how one experiences oneself as a self-forming activity within constituted power relations (Macías, 2012). Here, Foucault's theoretical conceptions become necessary in order to think through how practices of digital learning can lead to specific "regimes of truth" of knowing what it means to be human. A Foucauldian analytic reveals how digital technologies "assemble themselves with a distinct set of political rationalities, educational epistemologies and economic interests" (Grimaldi & Ball, 2019, p. 2) that sustains neo-liberal capitalism. These implications are often not easy to grasp since they can be difficult to name, because neo-liberal rationalities govern *through* people's motivations and desires (Dean & Zamora, 2021).

Governmentality has been described as "the conduct of conduct" (Lemke, 2002, p. 50) that involves the various ways the subject organizes itself. The subject participates in the exercising of power relations and can assign the self an identity propped up by particular knowledges (Dean & Zamora, 2021). Governmentality concerns itself with organized and legitimate knowledges that shape and orient subjectivity, tracing the productive effects of power that are beyond a critique of state structures (Lemke, 2002). I draw on Foucauldian concepts of subjectivity and governmentality to interrogate digital learning's subject-making effects as part of an ongoing project of constituting a neo-liberal normalcy, looking at how these effects play out in less obvious ways as digital learning's process of subject formation attempts to naturalize its deployment.

Pandemic Teaching and Learning: Reflection and Analysis

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, I discuss how the massive and sudden transition from in-person teaching to remote, digital technologies has presented an ontological challenge to the student that has threatened their sense of stability and continuity, orienting them to work on themselves as a mode of self-governing. These practices of self-management and self-governing have reproduced the political rationality of digital technology that not only has embraced a reinvention of educational structures but also invited students and instructors to reconfigure themselves ontologically as the ideal academic subject, well-positioned to thrive in the neo-liberal market.

Secondly, I examine the self-regulating mechanisms that students have taken up, such as surveillance, risk assessment, and difference-making, that I argue are key to sustaining a neo-liberal world project. The modification in spatial–temporal arrangements caused by the mass shift to digital-education platforms that result in the production of "recognizable strangers" has been central to the formation of academic subjectivities, since there could be no self-production without the production of Others (Macías, 2012). Here, modes of subject differentiation have been actively practised to enhance risk aversion for the academic subject and produce a modern individuality that aligns with the logics of capital accumulation and Enlightenment rationalism. Utilizing neo-liberal strategies of risk avoidance and self-management, academic subjectivities have produced an internal gaze to focus on themselves, one that is imbued with personal agency and the freedom to make strategic choices but also with sole responsibility for their academic failures. The practices of difference-making and a heightened sense of self-preservation amid digital learning have constituted the academic subject as a universal individual.

Thirdly, I look at how academic subjects are governed through the production of individual freedom within the digital life-world, since neo-liberal ethos promises a freedom that requires consistent self-regulation and self-management. I suggest that Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism offers an understanding of one's investment in normativity by moving toward an optimistic ideal of the self. Through optimistic progression, political uncertainty and social injustice become recast as personal challenges that one needs to overcome by forming a particular disciplinary relationship with oneself. To be attached to optimism can mean being reproduced in relations of flexibility, competition, and accumulation that have historically constituted exclusion and dispossession in the name of normalcy.

Toward the article's conclusion, I posit that there exists an ethical compromise within critical social work's declaration of pursuing social justice when it is situated within the market-oriented processes of digital education. Attention to the the complexities and contradictions of digital learning may prove helpful in examining how dominant forces that shape and constitute academic subjectivities can be suspended and unsettled.

The Academic Subject Always in Becoming: The Threat of Ontological Insecurity

The rapid shift toward online education became framed as a necessary response to the COVID-19 pandemic, positioned as an ongoing process of the development of "pandemic pedagogies," whereby "emergency remote education" was elevated to prominent visibility (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 108). The shift toward online education has worked to ensure that there have been no disruptions to post-secondary education and the revenue stream that students

bring to educational institutions. Digital learning technologies have become imagined as transforming the existing pedagogy of academic institutions by building an "inclusive digital future" (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 111), when all students will feel a sense of belonging and attachment to learning. As digital education has been seen as proactively responding to the pandemic by rolling out its progressive and democratic platform, the vision of inclusive education merging with developments in technologization has rarely been questioned in ways that examine how, within inclusive education frameworks, norms and desires are produced to be in line with a capitalist, neo-liberal project (Smith & Jeffery, 2013). *Neo-liberalism* was described by Brown (2015) as a mode of governance that prioritizes economic conduct as the proper way of living one's life, whereby "all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (p. 10). Educational institutions operating under neo-liberal rationality view their conduct as acts of commerce and look to maximize capital by refining measurements of effectiveness and efficiency (Giroux, 2014).

Selwyn (2016) argued that when students engage with online education and adapt to the requirements of digital learning, they are going through a process of *total pedagogization* (p. 1017), which contains distinct processes of identity transformation through a wide range of technologies, altering the way students engage with the institution and the materiality of its academic content that shape their self-formation. This self-formation is achieved through negotiation with the digital-education platform and virtural classrooms as they navigate and build a public presentation of their student-self through the apparent separation of mind and body. Boler (2003) named this process a "new digital Cartesianism" (p. 331), by which the mind becomes the dominant presence needed in virtual classrooms, dismissing one's body and the pedagogical signifiance that it brings.

In my tutorial group, students adjusted unevenly to new ways of relating to each other and themselves in this new digital landscape. Instead of speaking in tutorials to comment or ask questions using their voice, students would utilize the chat function built into the video-conferencing platform. Students would engage with a peer's comment by clicking the "thumbs up" function that could be completed with ease without turning on their microphone or webcam. Reliance on these technological features meant students could get through the entire course without ever having to be vocally or visually accessible since lectures were pre-recorded and one could be "live" in tutorial sections in piecemeal and transitory ways. This ensured a certain degree of invisibility, anonymity, and efficiency as long as one had successfully performed all the digital markers of being "present" in the virtual classroom. During these shifting pedagogical moments, students were asked to produce a *re*invented ontological position that encouraged the constitution of a self that could overcome the challenges of digital transition, contributing to the construction of a determined and hard-working academic subject that could manage the current state of exception amid the pandemic.

Although neo-liberal discourses can offer students a glimpse of a future that "pays off" on their accumulated market value, they also can bring about a pervasive sense of ontological and epistemological insecurity and discontent with the self when subjects encounter "a sense of uncertainty, dissatisfaction and guilt about whether one is doing enough, doing the right thing, or doing as much or as well as others" (Keddie, 2016, p. 109). This uncertainty regarding students' concept of self works twofold: first, it subjects them to neo-liberal education's

normalizing gaze, and second, students reposition the self as both an object under modification *and* as an autonomous individual, a subject produced through self-modification. When one student approached me, she explained that not only did she feel she was not understanding how to excel in the course but also that she felt like she was "slipping" in all her remote courses. She needed guidance on ways that would place her "back at the top," an ontological position that she had been used to achieving before the transition to digital learning. She indicated that she was willing to do the work but that she just did not know how to work or what she had to work on. In other words, this self-as-object formation was becoming conceptualized as the personal labour of students as they engaged in all-encompassing pedagogization in hopes of achieving academic success.

Ontology is a theoretical concept that concerns itself with the realm of one's existence, being, and becoming in the material sense in the world. According to Foucault (1984), it is useful to perceive ontology as not a fixed or permanent body of knowledge. Rather, a critical examination of ontology can be perceived as

> an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (p. 50)

It is worthwhile to note that the process of subjectification is not based on a dominating force but involves the operationalization of a productive power, exercised in forms of ambitions and strategies which are then "connected to various forms of government of individuals into alignment with individuals' own ideals" (Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 61). Thus, a critical ontology of ourselves looks at the complex and contradictory ways in which academic subjects are constituted through a finite range of subject positions available within neo-liberal rationality.

Ontological security positions itself as highly individualized and tacit. While general tutorial topics such as the grading rubric and guidelines around academic integrity can be collectively discussed and standardized to ensure transparency and fairness, insights into how to be a good student remain elusive, taking on a mythical quality of being attainable only to a select few. Further, it is implied that these insights are discovered intuitively by students, who need to *want* to succeed. Students struggling with ontological insecurity feel the pressure to discover "truths" on how to learn. It is believed that if they acquire ontological security, they are protected from the harmful effects of uncertainty and are better equipped to tolerate and manage the changes that come with the mass shift to digital learning.

Utilizing Foucault's (2005) concept of confessional practices as a technology of the self, Fejes (2008) studied the role of confession within educational guidance procedures. By engaging in self-reflection and accepting one's own deficiencies in learning, subjects are discursively constructed into becoming active learners who learn to view the self as an ongoing, intentional manager. Active learners then acquire the responsiblity and desire to enact certain knowledges on themselves in order to gain self-actualization as proper academic subjects. When my student asked me how to stay on top of things, she—the student-subject—exercised a confession by revealing how she was not on top, causing her academic subjectivity to be deregulated. Acting in the role of tutorial leader, I participated in my performance as a capable instructor who understood what it meant for an academic subject to stay on top of things, and my desire to help the student was shaped by the

expectations that academic success was measurable, traceable, and capable of being digitially transmitted from instructor to learner. In this way, the ontological insecurity experienced by both the student and myself contributed to an ontological reconstruction toward a successful "translation of the 'self' through technology-mediated relationships" (McCarthy et al., 2021, p. 2). Academic subjectivities are repeatedly performed into security and coherency that become intensified within the pedagogization of digital learning, which sustains the moral regulation of liberal subjects within a neo-liberal market rationality.

Risk Assessment Within Spatial–Temporal Reconfigurations: Threats that Disrupt One's Sense of Self

As disconnection and increased abstractions involved in digital learning elevate the potentiality of risk, pandemic pedagogy is capable of rearranging human relations, prioritizing individuality as key to harnessing utility within a newly constituted "insurantial imaginary" (Ewald, 1991, p. 198). *Risk*—as a type of technology within governmentality—is understood to be a current or future situation that involves exposure to danger and uncertainty. By identifying and naming what is risky, one is already participating in the organization of knowledge that suggests what is normal and what is considered deviant. Within my tutorial group I received feedback of relief and gratitude from students that their assigned presentations would be individual rather than group projects. In this case, their virtual peers were seen as potential risks since one could not guarantee that they would complete their portion of the project or even attend tutorial sessions. It was interpreted that students felt they could only rely on themselves during digital learning and that working collectively might reveal undesirable underlying risks.

The insurantial imaginary that contains risk avoidance is intimately linked to the constitution of neo-liberal subjectivities. Neo-liberalism emphasizes the human ability to exercise calculation and rational thinking in order to "economize" oneself as an attractive investment (Ewald, 1991; Giroux, 2014). Risk avoidance as a technology thus serves in establishing the neo-liberal subject's metrics-based toolkit. The technology of risk avoidance imagines itself to be effective in (re)ordering one's relation to oneself and others. Risk is reduced or eliminated by assessing and decreasing potential deviations, distractions, or inadequacies that seem to be a threat to one's pursuit of optimal efficiency.

Grimaldi and Ball (2019) argued that risk discourse is produced alongside the construction of online educational spaces, where risk becomes privatized as part of an individual's mode of self-management, a reflection of their investment in the "economic game" (p. 12) of currency accumulation. Confronting risk is also seen as part of the enterprising spirit, as active participants in this game are invited to calculate and strategize (Ewald, 1991). Thus, failure to predict and recognize risk indicates that one is not correctly exercising their freedom with the goal of enhancing their competencies (Fejes, 2008). Academic subjectivities are oriented to ensure that their academic selfhood remains continuous and intact by constantly customizing their educational experience. This includes exercising self-mastery, which involves enacting individual responsibility and prioritizing competition, effectiveness, and practices of self-auditing (Smith & Jeffery, 2013).

The boundaries of one's *learning environment*—all the activities, digital options, and personalized functions available to students within the digital platform—become

materialized and reified into an active border that needs to be patrolled in order to protect academic well-being. I sensed that my students were focused on making sure the e-Class platform and the Zoom digital classroom were operational and working as it should, whereas completing assigned readings and participating in class discussions were seen as less important to the formation of their digital learning personas. Similarly, the desire I had to construct myself as a capable and productive tutorial leader was fuelled by an investment in enacting "good subjecthood through technology" (Smith & Jeffery, 2013, p. 375) and an anxiety that feared what would happen when this good subjecthood was not performed well. As a result, during my time as a tutorial leader I took on the responsibility of auditing, which prioritzed pragmatics: giving clear, measurable, and concise instructions via digital teaching in hopes of constituting a form of quality assurance that was promised to be achievable (Ball, 2003). With a focus on evaluating what was measurable digitally, I became involved in regulating both myself and my students through disciplinary technologies deployed to instill neo-liberal norms of conduct (Shore, 2008). Paradoxically, providing digital education during the pandemic both revealed the pandemic's moment of exception and exposed the neo-liberal expectation of normalcy as courses were framed as continuing with a renewed emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. Shaped by this contradictory moment, my pedagogical goals became prioritized on regulating academic subjects to be successful in meeting digital learning expectations, treating each student as an individual project to be improved on, rather than disseminating critical social work pedagogy for a collective consciousness-raising to disrupt hegemonic normality.

Inhabiting this spatial–temporal configuration among peers can lead to specific risk-avoidant behaviours, such as decisions by students in my tutorial to turn off webcams or mute microphones to avoid visibility as they exercised caution about making social connections in the virtual classroom because self-improvement projects were a priority. By viewing everyone else on the digital platform as a stranger, the self became tasked with the job of allocating varying degrees of "stranger-ness" to others depending on where they were situated in the digital landscape. As a result, students increasingly experienced their subjectivity as mediated by boundaries of division, which reinforced the values of self-reliance and privatization. As I delivered my weekly tutorial sessions, students chose not to turn on their webcams or microphones since they had been told that doing so was optional. These decisions made in the name of flexibility were also mediated by the discourse of compassion that was encouraged by administrators at the university. The students were only required to turn on their webcams to give their individual presentations, a grading requirement. My computer screen often comprised little black squares, and there was an odd feeling of centralization on myself as a taskmaster rather than an educator. At times I wondered whom I was speaking to, individuals or a collective? My own presence in the virtual classroom became hyper-individualized and privatized, and my teaching content was increasingly conceptualized as private property ready to be accumulated and consumed through individual means (Grimaldi & Ball, 2019).

The Problematic of Staying on Top: Governed Through Freedom, Normalized Through Optimism

As online education presents itself as the solution to educational equality, learning is presented as having undergone a technological (re)assembly aimed at providing students with

more agency to study anywhere, anytime, and in any format. This often results in overlapping activities conducted simultaneously. In my tutorials, I noticed an intensification of students tapping into the seemingly limitless choices offered to them as they experimented with the digital-education platform. Students would send an email with questions during my tutorial session, expecting an immediate response, or view portions of a recorded lecture during the session. The boundaries between academic activities seemed to have undergone a dissipation, enabled by online platforms and their built-in multi-tasking options. In this way, both students and instructors have been provided with the opportunity to be activated in multiple ways as an active learner who is constantly "on," whether to upload coursework, respond to emails, or slot in appointments (Smith & Jeffery, 2013). The instructor subjectivity has become constituted by student and platform expectations to be a diligent and all-aware taskmaster, shifting critical pedagogical commitments as the entrenchment of digital technology increasingly replaces "the political with the technical" (Smith & Jeffery, 2013, p. 376) as new pedagogical benchmarks to be reached.

Academic subjects that operate as multi-tasking and multi-functional individuals compile their digital fragments of labour, all adding up to an accumulation of performance indicators that measures a coherent, secure, and continuous subjectivity. Students are encouraged to carefully build their virtual learning persona through a mode of individualized choice selections offered to them by online education platforms guided by technologies of self-evaluation that measure one's productivity and conduct (Shore, 2008). Students are involved both in the classification of data as an action item *and* are simultaneously produced through the classified data in order to recognize one's agency and freedom. This duality positions students as ideal subjects to further neo-liberal interests:

> The free and active digital learner, and learning self, are subject to a careful, unrelenting, and empirically vigilant digital gaze, which constitutes a particular kind of truth about learning and the learner. The learner "sees" data and is "seen by" the data, and through the datafied visualizations their value is made transparent for the exercise of (self) government. Here the digital gaze is not "reductive, it is, rather, that which establishes the individual [as a learner] in his irreducible quality" (Foucault, 1973, p. xiv). The digital eye, as a projected gaze, endlessly works to absorb the experience of learning in its entirety and to master it, establishing itself as "the servant" of learning and the master of truth about learning. (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021, pp. 126–127)

Students and instructors become transformed into auditable commodities, and they are assessed and calculated against quantifiable standards of effectiveness and individual capability (Hayes, 2021; Molesworth et al., 2009). Each tutorial session, assignment, presentation, or exam risks a (re)lapse into incapacity, risking precarious academic standing. If the academic subject does not manage themself according to the neo-liberal work ethic of entrepreneurialism, their sense of ontological security becomes unsettled and threatened. To safeguard against this disorientation, the academic subject is constantly engaged in practices of reconfiguration, produced through power relations, by which the student is invited to be responsive, to be alert to changes in their self-assessments, and to carefully monitor any changes in their digital life-world.

In her book *Cruel Optimism,* Berlant (2011) argued that the effects of optimism and the investment of the normal are deeply intertwined, embedded within the larger liberal project

that aspires to constitute and maintain stability, linear growth, and progress as a permanence. This theorizing of *cruel optimism* identifies a modern subject's desire to obtain optimism, often through attachment to an object, concept, or idea that paradoxically becomes an obstacle to their flourishing. The student as a liberally produced academic subject situated in the narrative of progress is oriented to embody optimism as an indispensable part of the development narrative (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021). It was with this optimism that the particular student from my tutorial came to me and asked for truths to be taught, a body of knowledge that would allow her subjectivity to obtain mastery over layers of uncertainty pertaining not just to the course but also to navigating online education itself.

I suggest that what normalizes both the current pandemic crisis and the response to it is an attachment to the discourse of optimism situated in the political project of advanced liberalism, which requires subjects to demonstrate their identity with individual performance and self-actualization (Rose, 1999). The desire to produce an optimistic self that strives for particular goals, such as staying on top of one's coursework, can reassure students about their level of productivity and reinstate a degree of normality to their subjecthood. The academic subject's attachment to optimism also mirrors the way educational institutions have carried on in a business-as-usual manner, reflected by the rapid transition from in-person classes to using online software with a kind of attitude that implied that the solution had always been there, waiting to be called into action. Higher-education institutions have strategically utilized the discourse of modernity, resiliency, and creativity to legitimize the deployment of digital learning during the pandemic. This language produces "a grid of intelligibility" (Stoler, 1995, p. 11), whereby only optimistic affects can be recognized as worthwhile to perform and reproduce. Berlant (2011) pointed out that if the attachment to optimism requires an investment in one's ontological continuity, then any intention to challenge existing hegemonic structures is viewed as threatening wider humanist ideals, since the structures are themselves situated in a liberal project of norm-making:

> The hegemonic is, after all, not merely domination dressed more becomingly—it is a metastructure of consent. To see hegemony as domination and subordination is to disavow how much of dependable life relies on the sheerly optimistic formalism of attachment. As citizens of the promise of hegemonic sociability we have consented to consent to a story about the potentialities of the good life around which people execute all sorts of collateral agreements. This is why the people who enforce the reality-effect of this commitment to imminent generality are not just "the hegemons" like CEOs, heteros, Anglos, and U.S. Americans.… we might also attend to the convolutions of attachment that involve a desire to stay proximate, no matter what, to potential openings marked out by fantasies of the good life, self-continuity, or unconflictedness. (pp.185–186)

Students' success in securing an ontologically coherent self can be seen as aligning with neo-liberal aspirations that recentre an optimistic normativity as the only intelligible and imaginable way to organize human life, limiting possibilities otherwise[1] (Keehn et al., 2018;

[1] A number of critical scholars, such as Rhee (2015), Stein and Andreotti (2017), and Adam (2019), have drawn crucial linkages between the advancement of neo-liberalism in higher education and its contribution to producing evolving forms of coloniality and colonial logics that limit other possibitilies of subjecthood and knowledge formation. A full discussion of these critical insights is beyond the scope of this article.

Stein & Andreotti, 2017; Walcott, R. personal communication, March 25, 2014). The aspiration that comes from being optimistic involves being hopeful that one is not merely just surviving but is thriving in spite of the conditions of neo-liberal precarity. Cautioning against the discourse of optimism that flourished in this ongoing pandemic, Akomolafe (2020) warned that sometimes desiring hope can be a dangerous thing. To not hope may be read as a refusal of the current organization of knowledge and self-conduct. As long as hope continues to be produced by a neo-liberal normality, the desire for optimism negates the effects of violence and exploitation that have historically constituted the normal (Berlant, 2011).

Who Does Online Education Benefit? Digital Learning's Ideal Subject and Implications for Critical Social Work Education

Historical and contemporary social work champions liberal values of goodness, innocence, and competence as indicators of maintaining a coherent professional identity for the helper (Macías, 2013; Rossiter, 2001). Recognizing social work's complicity in structures of violence, critical social work is committed to anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and decolonizing pedagogies that are built around the idea of examining white privilege and one's participation in relations of dominance in order to disrupt Eurocentric knowledge production (Chapman & Withers, 2019). These objectives function as political commitments that students can engage with to detach themselves from dominant power-knowledge regimes that organize their knowledge and social relations in particular ways (Macías, 2012). I wish to contextualize the operationality of these objectives in the context of pandemic digital learning and suggest that through the inclusive logic of neo-liberal rationality, social justice within social work pedagogy has not only been sidelined by, but also produced through, digital pedagogical technologies, which results in a problematic compromise. The shift to digital platforms has reassembled a form of governance that undermines critical social work as political practice.

While scholars have critiqued the impacts of neo-liberalism's entrenchment in critical social work teaching and practice (Jeffery, 2005; Macías, 2013), face-to-face learning and its particular spatial rearrangements, such as circle teaching and taking on ethical ways of embodying space, have allowed critical social work to foster notions of sustainability, accountability, and community within the classroom that refuse western liberal education's orientation toward individualized competiveness and the Cartesian mind/body divide (Boler, 2003; Wong, 2018). Face-to-face learning within critical social work, although far from occupying a "pure" space away from neo-liberal collusion, can be more politically potent in exposing the contradictory subjects that a neo-liberal rationality requires students and instructuors to be. In-person learning has the potential of forging subversive paths that challenge the institution while occupying subject positions constituted within it. (Boler, 2003; Smith & Jeffery, 2013)

Digital learning becomes something that is rendered teachable and learnable only if cognitively consumed, not physically embodied. Learning is constructed in tandem through digitalization and results in the production of selves for which knowledge becomes service-oriented—to increase academic capital and to add market value. These self-management practices may aspire toward what Jeffery (2005) cautioned as being the "masterfully knowing, more self-aware, competent social worker" (p. 411). This positionality also aligns with the liberal narrative of a linear, stabilized form of knowledge that itself is a part of institutional optimism, which operates in co-operation with education increasingly organized toward

customer-service approaches (Giroux, 2014; Jeffery, 2005; Macías, 2012; Morley et al., 2017). Despite critical social work's political commitments, online education paradoxically requires a status of normative recognition that works to stabilize the students' investment in neo-liberal world-making.

Akomolafe (2020) observed that any epistemological inquiry during the COVID-19 pandemic itself needs to be situated within the greater context of a neo-liberal modernity. There exists "a ground of priorities that instigates the quest for reductionistic images, solutions, and categories" (p. 17) that are able to respond to pressing issues of the moment. The concept of social-justice education as a complex mode of decentring a normative model of social relations has been recoded and reformulated with individualist appeal to ensure the ease of its pedagogical transition to a digitized platform. This embrace of a coherent identity within structures of online education comes into conflict with critical social work's potential to create "bubble bursting moments" (Macías, 2013, p. 321), during which students become unsettled, to allow for a meaningful engagement with uncertainty as holding political value rather than as evidence that one lacks competency and mastery.

Before critical inquiries could be made, pandemic pedagogies were quickly authored, legitimized, and institutionalized, arguably to prevent a sense of economic stasis, hopelessness, and disorientation. The operationalization of digital technology to ensure uninterrupted education as a viable solution to the current pandemic has presented critical social work with an ontological contradiction and an epistemological impasse that neo-liberal institutions have asked educators not to notice. It is unsettling but necessary to think about how the imagination of world- and subject-making have been arrested by the rationality of neo-liberal and capital accumulation and have continued to sustain unequal power relations in the name of profit and market growth. A crisis that threatens to throw people off the course of normality has created within itself the conditions for the possibility of recentring a neo-liberal ontology, with the operationalization of digital learning as one of its central regulatory mechanisms.

Conclusion

What I have presented in this article is not conclusive, nor does it reveal "the truth" about online education, but it provides an analytic which "opens a field of problematisation" (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021, p. 127). The moral technologies of surveillance, risk assessment, and attachment to liberal optimism all work to produce an ontological status for the student who stays "on top". Staying on top of what exactly, and how this desire was formed are questions worth exploring. As Berlant (2011) noted, interrupting this optimism would be a risk in itself because it contradicts one's consistent need to predict and avoid risk. If attachment to optimism promises intelligiblity of the self within neo-liberal logics, then an intentional effort to resist neo-liberalism's work ethic of self-activation and self-regulation may be read as irresponsibility, irrationality, or incapacity, since neo-liberal rationality has been "designed to work on and through our capacities as moral agents and professionals" (Shore, 2008, p. 291). If optimism for ontological security is an attachment that is rooted in the pursuit of an ideal modern subject, then perhaps it becomes urgent to ask, How does one interrupt this optimism and resist being oriented to possibilities already established as definite?

My analytical position does not lead me to suggest a ready-made alternative that can replace current mass-deployed platforms of digital technology nor does it conclude with theoretical apathy. Instead, I evoke Foucault's (1984) position of a "hyper-and pessimistic activism" (p. 343), theorized as an ethical-political interrogation committed to examining the dangers associated with a particular process or idea instead of simply characterizing something as bad. Central to Foucault's politics is the interrogation of limitations and internal contradictions of the present and also suspicion that what has appeared as a necessary solution may actually not be so. As the promise of pedagogical innovation and its mode of digital delivery works to intensify and reassemble the regulatory boundaries of a neo-liberal normalcy, it becomes crucial for critical social work to formulate imaginaries that aim to disrupt higher education's relentless pursuit of continuity, precisely at a time when the world is motivated by the overwhelming desire to return to normal.

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