

# excerpts from The (Im)possibility of Intellectual Work in Neo-liberal Regimes

by Bronwyn Davies

■ Oppressive state language—that is, currently, the language of neo-liberal government—is more violent than its bland, rather absurd surface might lead us to believe. It is at work here, busily containing what we can do, what we can understand. It is the language in which the auditor is king. It is a language that destroys social responsibility and critique, that invites a mindless, consumer-oriented individualism to flourish, and kills off conscience. What can the academy do in the face of such a powerful relanguaging of our work when that relanguaging is tied to our economic survival?

How might we put to one side our own safety and comfortable certainties and ask the impossible questions that exist outside of the already known, the already asked?

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Toni Morrison warned in 1993 that

[t]here will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbours; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness (p. 18).

This is exactly what neo-liberalism has done and continues to do. It co-opts research to its own agendas, it silences those who ask questions, it whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable.

A question I have asked again and again in my work is how can we, as teachers, as scholars, as

students and as members of the public, learn to catch ourselves and each other in the act of taking up the terms through which dominance and oppression take place. How might we catch ourselves mouthing the comfortable clichés and platitudes that together we use to shape the same world that we shake our heads at with sorrow and resignation—or that we secretly in our darkest hearts applaud? How might we put to one side our own safety and comfortable certainties and ask the impossible questions that exist outside of the already known, the already asked, the comfortably conservative discursive universe that shores up our certainties and keeps the world a safe place—for us? How are we to resist engaging in the neo-liberally induced surveillance of ourselves and each other, surveillance that limits, that holds us neatly packaged within economic and utilitarian discourses. How can we dare to ask, in the face of that discourse and its constraints, the questions that unsettle, the questions that disrupt the certainties and securities, the questions that honour a passionate ideal of the academy where intellectual work is without fear, where it does not know, necessarily, where its questions might lead—passionate work that recognizes no boundaries that might prevent its development and where it also cares passionately about its effects. ■

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#### SOURCES:

Morrison, Toni (1993). *Lecture and speech of acceptance, upon the award of the Nobel Prize for literature, delivered in Stockholm on the seventh of December, nineteen hundred and ninety-three*. London: Chatto and Windus.