How Treating Prospective Undergraduate Students as Customers and Commodifying Postsecondary Education Led to Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Alienation in the Neoliberal Academy: A Personal Experience Narrative

Kirk S. Robinson

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States of America

Abstract

This personal experience narrative details the dissonances I experienced conducting my ethnographic dissertation study as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) studying GTA teaching development. These dissonances arose due to my recognition and scrutinization of the blatant transmission of neoliberal ideology in my research setting ("Cardinal State University", where I was also a GTA myself) and its role in creating a campus culture undermining to GTAs. Drawing upon field notes, interviews, and document analysis from my 15-month dissertation study, I illustrated findings in the form of two written accounts, or confessional tales, with analytical interludes integrating tenets of both theory and research on neoliberal postsecondary education. Overall, through various channels, Cardinal State University (CSU) transmitted neoliberal ideology in the form of messages framing prospective undergraduate students as customers and commodifying aspects of postsecondary education. The content of these messages was explicitly undermining to GTAs and fostered a campus culture demoralizing to GTAs at CSU, as they sowed competition and antagonism between GTAs and other campus actors and were dismissive and dishonest

about GTAs' instructional labor. Engaging in this work and making these discoveries was personally alienating, leading me to reconsider my approaches to GTA centered scholarship.

Keywords: *graduate teaching assistants, neoliberalism, qualitative research, postsecondary education*

Introduction

This personal experience narrative attempts to capture and illustrate some of my experiences conducting my ethnographic dissertation study about graduate teaching assistant (GTA)[1] preparation for collegiate instruction. The narrative centers on my recognition and scrutinization of the blatant transmission of neoliberal ideology in my research setting ("Cardinal State University"[2], where I was also a GTA myself) and its role in creating a campus culture undermining to GTAs. I wanted to write this narrative for some personal catharsis, but to also add to the relative dearth of scholarship addressing how neoliberal postsecondary educational institutions shape the experiences of GTAs. Few studies specifically address this topic; one such recent work, a dissertation study, demonstrated how such institutions enabled an audit culture that unfairly punished GTAs when teaching (Zhang 2020). Another was a collaborative autoethnography in which the authors described their struggles as women-of-color navigating their duties as GTAs within the neoliberal university (Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017). Others observed how neoliberalized institutions converted GTAs into teaching factories, designed to get students "through" collegiate coursework efficiently (Raaper 2018, p. 13) or undermined GTAs' peer-to-peer learning and community building in a GTA teaching preparation seminar (Robinson 2020).

Considering the apparent challenges neoliberal postsecondary institutions impose upon GTAs, combined with the scarce amount of research on this topic, more scholarship is necessary. My narrative attempts to add to this body of work and offer insights into this research problem, addressing it from the somewhat unique perspective of a GTA (me) who, during the events highlighted in this work, was completing their dissertation about GTA teaching development in a setting in which I was also enrolled as a student and GTA. I also hope this narrative can show how transmission of neoliberal ideology in places on a campus not frequented by GTAs can nevertheless be damaging to them. Two general questions guiding this inquiry were:

- How did transmission of neoliberal ideology at a postsecondary educational institution in the United States shape my experiences as an enrolled student and GTA doing research on GTA development at this institution?
- How did transmission of neoliberal ideology at this institution facilitate a campus culture undermining to its GTAs?

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The current economic era of global neoliberalism is still intact, even in the aftermath of the two most recent crises of capitalism brought about by the 2008 financial collapse (Peck 2013) and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Neoliberalism is still, in the words of Giroux (2020), "…the dominant ideology[3] of the times," as it operates to:

> …produce and distribute market-based values, identities, and modes of agency, but also in wider cultural apparatuses and platforms to privatize, deregulate, economize, and subject all of the commanding institutions and relations of everyday life to the dictates of privatization, efficiency, deregulation, and commodification (pp. 1-2)

How aspects of neoliberal ideology manifest within and across postsecondary educational institutions varies based on institutional context (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg 2017). Regardless of how neoliberalism (or neoliberalisms) show(s) up in these institutions around the globe, Saunders' (2015) contention that, "neoliberal ideology gains a material existence through a series of actions, which are inserted into practices and then ritualized within various institutions, including those associated with postsecondary education" is a broadly applicable description for how this ideology operates in postsecondary education (p. 398). An important supplement to this description is the notion that the ubiquity of global neoliberal ideology often makes it imperceptible, or seem like "common sense," because it applies economic rationales to all things, in all places (Giroux 2020; Saunders 2010).

Neoliberal thought originated in the 1940s but remained marginal as an economic approach in the United States until the challenges of stagflation arose in the late 1970s. Seen as a possible solution out of this crisis, President Carter and the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank began implementing neoliberal economic policies; the subsequent Reagan Administration accelerated this implementation (Harvey 2005). Key features of the now over-four-decades-long neoliberal era in the United States are deregulation of industries, attacks on labor unions, tax cuts, and decreases in state funding for social services, along with general decreases in funding for public postsecondary institutions (Giroux 2020; Harvey 2005; Mitchell, Leachman & Saenz 2019; Schwartz 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades 2004; Whitford 2020). As a result, postsecondary institutions seek ways to increase their revenues, often by adopting corporate models of operating that emphasize efficiency and competition (Giroux 2020; Saunders 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades 2004). The corporatization (neoliberalization) of public postsecondary institutions diminishes their role in

American society as public goods that reinforce free inquiry and democratic values in exchange for promoting business principles and culture (Giroux 2015). For example, these institutions treat college students, especially undergraduates, as customers (Canaan & Shumar 2008; Giroux 2020; Saunders 2007; Saunders 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades 2004) in the sense that a postsecondary educational credential is a commodity students purchase for future economic gain; this transaction ultimately becomes the chief relationship between students and institutions (Saunders 2010).

To attract prospective undergraduate students to participate in this transaction, to gain tuition revenue and beat the competition, postsecondary institutions engage in building their "brand" (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez 2017). Not limited only to institutions in the United States due to the global nature of neoliberalism, postsecondary institutions around the world build their brands by appearing in periodicals that rank institutions using various types of metrics (Canaan & Shumar 2008; Saunders & Blanco Ramirez 2017). One such common metric, "return on investment" (ROI), informs the student-customer of their earning potential once they obtain their degree, or the long-term value of the commodity they are purchasing (Giroux 2020). Regarding commodification in postsecondary education, Saunders and Blanco Ramirez (2017) provide a useful conceptualization using postsecondary teaching rankings as an example. They note such rankings make the nuances and dynamism of the student-faculty relationship invisible: "No longer are students and faculty in creative, imaginative, unpredictable, and educational relations. Instead, those relations become disembodied and disemplaced, and the individuals and institution become known…through their commodity form (in this case, its ranking)" (p. 194). To promote their branded, commodified postsecondary education, institutions must create marketing

materials designed to cultivate an attractive image of the postsecondary institution and its offerings, even if that image is potentially false or misleading (Ng 2014).

Neoliberalized postsecondary education deprioritizes collegiate instruction in favor of work enhancing institutional prestige, such as research (Kezar & DePaola 2018). For example, one faculty member recalls an administrator explicitly telling them to spend less time providing students quality teaching and guidance, and more time on research for submission in high-ranking journals (Warren 2017). They insightfully stated, "This pressure to disinvest in teaching in order to commit to research is not new in academia, though it is perhaps a significant feature of the current neoliberal moment" (p. 136). Collegiate instruction is also secondary to other faculty duties, especially when those duties involve securing external sources of revenue for the institution (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004; Washburn 2006). A consequence of the deprioritization of teaching in the academy during this neoliberal era is the ubiquity of pedagogical approaches that train students to fulfill market needs, rather than approaches needed to uphold a democratic society such as engaging in challenging dialogues and critique (Giroux 2010). Another significant aspect of faculty life impacted by the neoliberalization of postsecondary education is the casualization of the faculty labor force (Giroux 2020; Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019). In fact, Kezar and Associates (2019) cited neoliberalism as the main culprit bringing about "The Gig Academy," a descriptor connecting today's academy with aspects of "The Gig Economy" in terms of the latter's lack of stable, full-time, benefits-providing jobs. Today's neoliberalized "Gig Academy" follows corporate models of efficiency in hiring practices, which leads to fewer full-time, tenure-track faculty members and, in their place, more part-time adjunct faculty (American Association of University Professors 2018; Giroux 2015; Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019). This outcome shifts power over university

governance away from faculty (Giroux 2015) and towards administrators, decreasing faculty autonomy and the professionalization of faculty work (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019).

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) fare no better in an increasingly casualized postsecondary workforce. They conduct professional work as classroom instructors, the same type of work as full-time faculty, yet earn a fraction of the salary (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019), leading them to correctly perceive their teaching assignments to be vehicles for exploitation as cheap labor (Grekul & Barkway 2019; Rhoads & Rhoades 2005; Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017). Notably, recent labor force trends (from 2005-2015) in the United States showed the graduate student workforce significantly outgrowing the hiring rate of full-time faculty (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019). Since institutions have few incentives to cease the practice of hiring fewer (more expensive) full-time, tenure track faculty in exchange for accepting more PhD students who become GTAs (cheap labor), the outcomes for GTAs who want to become future full-time faculty members are bleak, as "Graduate school…[becomes] the first stage of a long victimization process that leverages fear of sunk costs to keep highly trained scholars trapped in a casual labor market" (pp. 63-64). This reality would perhaps be less daunting if GTAs had adequate preparation to teach in postsecondary education, but many do not (Fagen & Suedkamp Wells 2004; Heflinger & Doykos 2016; Raaper 2018). GTAs express desire for greater mentorship from faculty with their teaching (Grekul & Barkway 2019) and thrive when they have such mentorship (Starr & DeMartini 2015), but as Warren (2017) points out, neoliberal postsecondary institutions disincentivize faculty from investing time in guiding students.

Neoliberalism also influences professional development opportunities in which GTAs might partake to improve their teaching. One study (Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder 2013) found that the administrative logic driving the creation of a graduate teaching certificate program was that completion of the certificate would aid GTAs in finding success on the academic job market. Not only was there no evidence supporting this logic, but implicit in its reasoning was the neoliberal principle that GTAs should take individual responsibility for enhancing their job prospects (which, in this case, would be completing the certificate) rather than engage in an analysis and critique of an unfair and broken academic employment system. These scholars also uncovered similar assumptions regarding individual responsibility embedded within course outlines of multidisciplinary graduate courses on postsecondary instruction (Aspenlieder & Vander Kloet 2014). Ethnographic observations of a multidisciplinary graduate teaching preparation seminar revealed it to have learning goals founded on neoliberal principles and, in practice, promoted individuality and deemphasized peer community, therefore ultimately limiting students' learning in the seminars (Robinson 2020). When teaching, GTAs noted how neoliberal postsecondary education limited their creativity and agency in both designing and teaching courses, as they felt pressure to follow prescribed syllabi verbatim (Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017) and be compliant to (sometimes unclear) teaching expectations from supervisors (Zhang 2020). The neoliberal university also forces GTAs to navigate consequences from student evaluations framed as customer satisfaction surveys (Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017) and cope with teaching the same content over-and-over again to accommodate a maximum number of students in a condensed timeframe (Raaper 2018).

Overall, there is a robust body of literature demonstrating the many deleterious impacts of neoliberalism on postsecondary education; there is a growing body of literature on the impacts of this ideology and its accompanying practices on GTAs, their labor as instructors, and their prospects in the academy. Nevertheless, greater understanding of how neoliberal postsecondary education can shape GTAs' experiences is necessary, especially in campus spaces outside of where GTAs normally congregate. Outside of the traditional classroom, the academic department, the lab, or other co-curricular settings, how does neoliberal ideology create a campus culture undermining to GTAs? I hope this study can shed light on this question in addition to exploring my own personal experiences.

Study Design

This essay emerged from my dissertation study on GTA teaching development that took place for 15 months at a medium-sized public liberal arts university ("Cardinal State University," [CSU]) located in a rural college town in the midwestern United States. At the time of this study, conducted in the late 2010s, CSU had an enrollment of roughly 16,000 students, the vast majority of whom were undergraduates; the graduate student population on campus was 2,400 and GTAs accounted for about 17% of the institution's part-and full-time instructors (Robinson 2017).

My interest in conducting this study had its roots in my experiences as a secondary classroom teacher. I taught middle school social studies and civics for a short period of time, leaving the profession after less than two full years due to burnout and unresolved generalized anxiety. Years later, my personal history seemed to repeat itself. I taught as a GTA in my Student Affairs/Higher Education PhD program at CSU and experienced significant hardship doing so. I felt completely

overwhelmed and in-over-my head teaching college students. My personal dissonance with teaching up until that point in my life made me want to learn more about teaching, particularly around how graduate students prepared to teach in and for postsecondary settings. During the process of exploring this topic as my dissertation with CSU as my setting, I began to observe, consider, and ultimately theorize about a campus culture influenced by neoliberalism that felt marginalizing to me as a GTA. This feeling of marginalization fueled my desire to explore further, leading me to this inquiry. Guiding this work was a critical paradigmatic worldview. Since a key aspect of this study was to critique neoliberal postsecondary education, it was necessary to explicitly align with a worldview raising critical consciousness and a call to action to address injustice (Jones, Torres & Arminio 2014). I should also note my teaching experiences shaped me into someone who is a vociferous defender of the art and science of teaching, as well as a defender of those who choose to do this important work.

In this personal experience narrative, I illustrated my findings through two confessional tales, or personalized accounts of observations (Van Maanen 2011) made during the completion of my ethnographic dissertation. Both tales borrowed heavily from autoethnographic tenets and principles. Though not a formal autoethnography, an autoethnographic approach to this narrative felt necessary, as it enabled me to construct context rich "…stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture" (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015, p. 1). Moreover, a key goal I had in mind for this research was to convey something both oppositional to neoliberal postsecondary educational culture and empowering to GTAs impacted by such a culture. Thus, Foster's (2017) statement below helps encapsulate my rationale for adopting an approach aligned with critical autoethnographic methodology in this study taking place within a neoliberal postsecondary educational context:

> Because the research practices of autoethnography are indivisible from its moral commitments to empowerment, relationship, possibility, and ontological reflection, it clearly stands in opposition to neoliberalist values of conformity, objectivism, free market capitalism, and protecting the status quo (p. 321)

Scholars are increasingly using autoethnographic approaches to articulate the challenges neoliberalism poses in postsecondary education and showcase different modes of resistance. A recent special issue in *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* (Poulos 2017) and an edited book (Moriarty 2020) both exclusively highlighted autoethnographic works critiquing the neoliberal academy.

I adopted the following autoethnographic practices in conducting and writing about this research (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015):

- Highlighted personal experiences and feelings.
- Showed how I made sense of dissonance arising from my experiences.
- Showed my positionality and reflexivity relative to this research.
- Illustrated and lent criticism to pervasive cultural practices (on a college campus).
- Sought responses from participants also navigating this (collegiate) culture alongside me.

I used three methods of data collection: Field notes, interviewing, and document analysis. During the 15-month ethnography from which this narrative derives, I took field notes in a variety of contexts both on and off the CSU campus. On-campus examples included a graduate student orientation, a graduate commencement, a prospective undergraduate student campus tour, and numerous (over 20) graduate student teaching preparation seminars; one off-campus example was in my personal home. This narrative draws upon interviews conducted as part

of my dissertation study. Interview participants were seven GTAs taking the same graduate teaching preparation seminar. GTAs provided two interviews, each of which primarily emphasized their experiences in the seminar; interviews also touched upon GTAs' experiences of, and feelings around, attending CSU. For the purposes of focus and brevity, this essay specifically uses interviews illustrating the latter (i.e., experiences and feelings). In total, I conducted 14 interviews. Please see Table 1 for more information about participants and their background information[4]. Not all participants listed in Table 1 appear in this manuscript.

Table 1

Study Participants

Name	Major/Degree Sought	Race	Gender
Dolores	Hard Sciences/Ph.D.	White	Female
Ella	Hard Sciences/Ph.D.	Latina	Female
Genevieve	Education/M.S.	Asian	Female
Lantern	Social Sciences/Ph.D.	Asian	Male
London	Health Sciences/M.S.	White	Male
Sidney	Social Sciences/Ph.D.	White	Female
Todd	Humanities/M.S.	White	Male

Lastly, I collected and analyzed documents relevant to the campus culture around GTAs. Documents included handouts from the graduate student orientation, CSU promotional materials, and CSU promotional materials for graduate student teaching preparation opportunities.

Following both confessional tales are analytical interludes drawing upon aforementioned tenets of both theory and research on neoliberal postsecondary education. As such, this narrative contains layered accounts featuring my experiences, reflexivity, and the voices of other GTAs, alongside analysis and references to relevant literature (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). The tales highlighted observations from a prospective undergraduate student CSU campus tour and an experience in my personal home highlighting my reactions to a piece of CSU marketing. I chose these tales because both featured institutionally sanctioned messages that transmitted institutional culture and were consequential to CSU GTAs. My experiences in the events of the tales created feelings of dissonance and alienation for me as a CSU GTA and GTA development scholar; the culprit at the root of these feelings was neoliberalism. As such, I wanted to explore my dissonance further using a neoliberal framework to aid in and deepen my interpretations (Wolcott 2009). The first tale recounts my experiences on the campus tour, something I undertook as part of my dissertation study to better understand CSU. These tours play an important role in conveying campus culture (Magolda 2001), so even though such an event might not be an obvious site for research centered on GTA teaching, attending the event nevertheless had broad value. This tale drew primarily from field notes. The second tale, which drew from a combination of methods, was a story about receiving a piece of CSU marketing material, describing the material, and depicting my (and others') reactions to it.

"The Campus Tour"

I had to take a detour through the old Registrar's building on my way into the new CSU Admissions office. I was running late for my campus tour and needed to take a shortcut. The transition from walking through the older building into the attached, newer office was jarring. There was a clear transformation from the drab,

bureaucratic Registrar's home to the newer, prettier Admissions office. The waiting area in the Admissions office contained several comfortable looking pieces of furniture, bright blue and white paint (the CSU school colors) on the walls, and numerous flat-paneled televisions displaying flattering facts about CSU on a loop. Etched into the paneling of the walls of the room were complimentary quotes about CSU from famous alumni and visitors to the campus. I arrived just in time for my tour. After checking in, I was quickly corralled into a group of 10 people, a gaggle of prospective undergraduates and their families. Our tour guide was a CSU senior. She informed us that our first stop is to the Education building, housing the College of Education (a place with which I had great familiarity as a CSU Education PhD student). We walked the short distance from Admissions to Education.

Once inside the building, we entered a classroom, and sat down in the empty chairs. Our guide, standing in front of the classroom, began a short presentation. She stated: "Cardinal State ranks among the best in the nation in undergraduate teaching." She continued, "Undergraduates build close relationships with their professors, because CSU is primarily an undergraduate school." Her next words caught me off guard: "Graduate students will not be teaching your courses." What? I knew for a fact that was not true. Also, the way she stated this felt belittling to graduate students, as if our teaching was somehow inferior compared to professors. Her short lecture ended, and we left the Education building. The tour continued as we meandered around campus to various locations: the main library, the brand-new student union, the relatively new (and huge!) student fitness facility, the sports arena, a student residence hall, and several campus landmarks that appear in promotional materials. When the walking portion of the tour ended, we returned to the Admissions office and entered the office's adjoining classroom for a short

PowerPoint presentation. A student different from our tour guide facilitated. His first talking point was familiar: CSU is a mostly undergraduate institution; he then follows with the statement, "So no graduate student is going to steal an opportunity from you." I am again caught off guard. It dawned on me that a key feature of this campus tour was to play up opportunities for undergraduate students at the expense of graduate students and their labor as instructors. The presenter continued discussing other notable points about CSU: its high national rankings for teaching, its highly ranked business school, and the institution's excellent "return on investment" metrics (after touching on the cost of attending). Yet, even as I listened and took notes, my mind continued to return to the two statements about graduate students from the tour. As a graduate student myself, and a researcher of GTA development, these statements felt wrong. They hurt. They were alienating.

Analytical Interlude

Exacerbating my feelings of hurt and alienation was the genuine shock of hearing the dismissive comments about GTAs on something as seemingly innocuous as a campus tour. I thought these were supposed to be "feel good" kind of events. To the expected audience of parents and prospective undergraduates, the tour probably elicited good feelings. After all, between the ornate Admissions office waiting room with flattering CSU facts displayed everywhere, to the stops at the newest and most exciting campus spaces, the campus tour reflected what Magolda (2001) observed when observing a campus tour himself: an exercise in public relations in which the audience views a well-produced and sanitized version of life at a postsecondary institution. Within our current neoliberal context, CSU wants to appear to offer a superior educational product to students and their families, who are customers in the marketplace of postsecondary institutions (Saunders 2007; Saunders 2014). Student and family customers shopping for their choice of

institution will feel good about choosing CSU because of, for example, its high-ranking undergraduate teaching described by the tour guide, or the strong "return on investment" metrics highlighted in the presentation after the tour. The CSU tour aims to reassure prospective student customers that if they decide to attend, they can consume their high-quality educational products and redeem them in exchange for lucrative future employment (Giroux 2020; Saunders 2007). In particular, the guide citing CSU's high undergraduate teaching ranking exemplifies the commodification of collegiate instruction. An aspect of the tour strategy to sell CSU to prospective students is to sell its undergraduate teaching reputation in the form of a ranking (commodity). To discuss the educational associations between students and faculty engaging in dynamic collegiate instruction - the challenges of, and possibilities for, learning by working closely with faculty, would overcomplicate the simplicity required to positively represent the CSU brand (Saunders and Blanco Ramirez 2017). Promoting rankings to sell CSU on a tour is much easier.

Of course, the tour did explicitly mention the faculty relationship with undergraduates but did so at the expense of GTAs. To the expected audience of prospective students and families, hearing that faculty would be doing the teaching and that GTAs would not take opportunities from undergraduates probably felt reassuring, maybe even good. With teaching, perhaps conventional wisdom is faculty are better teachers than GTAs, even though there is evidence GTAs provide unique educative benefits to undergraduates through their teaching that faculty do not (Bettinger, Long & Taylor 2016). Furthermore, by invoking CSU's high teaching rankings alongside the (false) statement that faculty do all the teaching, the tour paints the picture that, *because* faculty do all the teaching, CSU has a high teaching rank. A less explicit part of this picture is, because GTAs *do not* teach at

CSU, the teaching quality is better. Tour attendees might be attracted to "opportunities" on campus, even though the tour presenter never really clarified what he meant by "opportunities." Whatever they are, they sound valuable (like a commodity) and GTAs will not take them from undergraduates at CSU. This type of framing implies undergraduates and GTAs compete for "opportunities" on postsecondary campuses, which considering the significant differences between undergraduate and graduate education, is generally untrue. Educational opportunities, which I might define as opportunities for students to participate in activities enhancing their learning and development, typically abound for all students and often will be different for undergraduates and graduate students. Nevertheless, the tour audience, most of whom are likely outsiders to the intricacies of postsecondary education, might take the notion of "GTAs not stealing any opportunities from undergraduates" to mean that these populations *do* typically compete with each other on campuses (but at CSU, the undergraduates need not worry about those thieving GTAs, satisfaction guaranteed). This type of ubiquitous competitiveness is consistent within neoliberal postsecondary education (Saunders 2015). Another way I understood this framing is that GTAs will not take what rightfully belongs to undergraduate students (customers) who patron the university (business). After all, it is the undergraduate population who accounts for the institution's revenue through tuition payments; the GTAs receive funding (which are, in essence, poverty wages) to attend (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019). Clearly, there is a power differential at work between these populations at CSU and this tour exploits it.

To me, the unexpected audience, hearing these messages made me feel both angry and sad. Naturally, I was angry and sad that the Admissions office of the institution, an office that is public facing, would openly insult GTAs (like me) and

their (my) labor as (an) instructor(s). Teaching, whether at the middle school or postsecondary level, never came easily to me. Nevertheless, I always tried hard to improve my instruction. Hearing these words made my efforts seem worthless. I felt angry and sad for the undergraduates too. The notion that faculty will teach their courses exclusively is false, as earlier in this narrative I noted GTAs accounted for almost one-fifth of the institution's part-and full-time instructors (Robinson 2017). Prospective undergraduates deserve to hear the truth about CSU and who will teach them, especially since they are considering making a significant life and financial commitment to the institution. Though GTAs certainly would not attend a campus tour for prospective undergraduates, and thus would not witness these transmissions of neoliberal ideology into the campus culture, these transmissions nevertheless shape the campus environment for GTAs. Prospective undergraduates who attend this tour and matriculate to CSU will harbor an internal message of dismissiveness towards GTAs. Ultimately, the hallmarks of neoliberalism embedded in this campus tour contribute to an oppositional campus culture.

"The Booklet"

It was the early afternoon when I decided to leave my apartment and take the short walk to the lobby area of my building to check my mail. Delivery usually happened earlier in the day, so I thought I would find mail waiting for me. I twisted the key and pulled the aluminum door open. The only piece of mail waiting for me was a booklet with a scenic picture of CSU on the cover with a title "Excellence in Academia." I flipped it over and saw a return address from the CSU Admissions office. "I must have gotten this because I attended the campus tour a few weeks ago," I thought to myself. The booklet was oddly heavy due to the card

stock quality paper. Its pages were all eight-and-a-half by 11 inches in size. It looked nice.

I returned to my apartment, sat down at my desk chair, and opened the booklet. The first page that caught my eye was the table of contents, superimposed over a bright colorful picture of CSU students sitting outside on a campus green space in a circle. On page two, readers could learn "About CSU." I turned to page two. The title of the page, "The Unique CSU Experience," was in blue and white lettering placed diagonally across the top of the page. Below were four small boxes of text, surrounded by more scenic images of the CSU campus. The title of the first box was, "CSU is not a gigantic university." After the title, the text read:

- "This isn't a place with giant research projects from which only graduate students benefit. Undergraduates have opportunities to join research projects as soon as their first year."

Reading this felt familiar. The campus tour used GTAs (and thus, graduate students) as a sort of foil to help paint a picture of the campus experience for prospective undergraduate CSU students. No wonder both the tour and the booklet came from the same place: The Office of Admissions. This slight was just a harbinger of things to come. There were three boxes left. The second box title read "Our classes are not gigantic either." The text following the title explained how CSU does not have large lecture hall courses and prioritizes small class sizes. "That sounds right," I thought, though I did not know for sure. The title for box three, "CSU is not a place where students get by with underwhelming academic work," preceded the following text:

- "CSU professors are experts with professional experience and will know when your work is not high quality."

"This sounds vaguely threatening," I muttered to myself. My eyes moved down to view box four. I scanned the words, and my eye caught the phrase "Graduate Teaching Assistants," an easily identifiable phrase for me considering my deep engagement in research with this student population. The title boasted, "CSU is not a college filled with Graduate Teaching Assistants." After reading this I nearly fell out of my chair. The statement was so absurd one could hardly get angry…but I still felt angry. It continued:

- "Professors at CSU (who are full-time, fully qualified) are great teachers who are heavily invested in the craft."

I did not bother reading the rest of the booklet. Taking the contents of the fourth box together upset me greatly. It not only implied that GTAs were not "fully qualified" to teach compared to faculty, but the language suggested GTAs did not exist in any significant number at CSU. At the time of the delivery of the booklet to my apartment, I was halfway through conducting interviews with participants for my dissertation study. After reviewing the booklet, specifically page two, I needed help making sense of what I read. Was I overreacting? Considering the booklet's relevance to GTAs at CSU, I revised my second-round interview protocols to include my participants' reactions to the booklet. I handed the booklet to each of them at the beginning of their respective second interviews, showed them page two, and asked them to respond. Apparently, I was not overreacting.

Analytical Interlude

Though GTAs' responses varied in intensity, all of them found the contents on page two of the booklet to be ludicrous. Commenting on the first box ("This isn't a place with giant research projects from which only graduate students benefit. Undergraduates have opportunities to join research projects as soon as their first year."), Genevieve, a master's student in Education, remarked "I think that's true. But it also diminishes the worth of graduate students." Her observation made sense to me, specifically because the statement in the first box used graduate students (and thus GTAs) as a foil to emphasize opportunities for prospective undergraduates. Thus, there is a vague, but detectable diminishment of graduate students (GTAs) in contrast to undergraduates. Furthermore, the first box communicated to prospective undergraduate students as though they were customers in ways noted in another study undertaking a similar analytical approach to this one. Specifically, the study (Ng 2014) examined a case of postsecondary education marketing materials that, in its textual representations, indicated students who attended the institution could have the freedom and control to get what they wanted to succeed. The author observed such a message projected "values aligned with the neoliberal knowledge economy" onto prospective student customers through the communication of the institution's brand (p. 401). Content in the first box communicated comparable neoliberalized messages. In particular, it implied prospective undergraduate-customers can choose the CSU brand and receive opportunities to join research projects right away; moreover, they will not need to worry about graduate students (GTAs) getting in the way of that. The neoliberal ideology transmitted through this content in the booklet perpetuated a campus culture undermining to GTAs at CSU.

Content in the first box also conveyed the neoliberal hallmark of commodifying aspects of postsecondary education. The use of the graduate student foil assisted in the branding exercise that showcased the commodified educational object of the "research project." Commodification of the "research project" took place through the messages conveyed in the first box because the messages depicted the "research project" as an object of desire. Prospective undergraduate-customers might then view this object as something with an exchange value, rather than something from which they could learn, grow, or foster educative social relationships; the notion of the "research project" and the social relations encompassing it become abstracted and thus commodified (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez 2017). CSU, in this section of the booklet, used graduate students (GTAs) as a foil to sell prospective undergraduates a product (the research project) that has value with the goal of getting these prospective students to matriculate and thus pay tuition. In and of itself this is dehumanizing to GTAs, who in this case are objects helping CSU to enhance its enrollment. Overall, my view is Genevieve's contention that the writing in the first box in the booklet diminishes the worth of graduate students is an understatement. Though, I admit, her saying that felt validating.

Most GTAs, like me, expressed their strongest ire for the fourth box: "*CSU is not a college filled with Graduate Teaching Assistants*;" "Professors at CSU (who are full-time, fully qualified) are great teachers who are heavily invested in the craft.". Several GTAs correctly noted how the first section (italicized) was deceitful. Ella, a PhD student in the hard sciences, commented: "Our department is pretty big. I agree that it's like, not the majority of the department, but, it's quite big. We are around, maybe, 60 [graduate] students or more." Humanities master's student Todd

replied similarly: “For my department, that's kind of not true. I mean, you know, we don't have any teaching assistants that aren't graduate students. None.” Social sciences PhD student Sidney especially took issue with the first clause, and did not mince words:

> “This is bullshit. All of our most important classes in the…department are staffed by grad students. And I'm talking, like, the statistics...the core statistics classes are often taught by graduate students. This is very disingenuous. And it kind of makes me upset because our department couldn't function without graduate teaching assistants.”

Knowing the challenging teaching I did as a GTA and knowing the hard work my fellow GTAs did in my department, I found myself in complete agreement with my participants. Sidney’s comment especially struck me. Her selection of the word “disingenuous” resonated because it is exactly correct. Myself, my participants, and administrators at CSU (though perhaps nobody in the Office of Admissions?) know GTAs teach a significant number of courses on campus. Prospective undergraduate-customers do not necessarily know this, and are being told something quite different in this booklet. Ng (2014) observed in their study on postsecondary marketing and branding that branding messages conveyed by an institution inconsistent with the reality of what happens at the institution creates the risk of painting a false image to message recipients. As such, there is a similar risk of disappointing those who decide to attend the institution based on such messaging, only to find the reality does not match the expectation (Ng 2014). In the context of this study, the type of messaging in the fourth box creates the risk that students who matriculate to CSU will not only be disappointed that GTAs teach their courses, but also might come to resent GTAs for doing so. As with the campus tour, this booklet places undergraduates and GTAs at odds with each other.

Speaking for myself as a GTA who was once told by a student that they attended CSU to learn from a certain professor, not from me, I had firsthand experience being on the receiving end of student resentment over teaching expectations. Truly, the (student) customer was upset because they did not receive their expected satisfaction. Overall, the disingenuousness of the messaging and branding (again, credit to Sidney on naming it as such) from the booklet, an outcome of being within a neoliberal postsecondary educational context, creates the unnecessary reality of sowing discontent between undergraduates and GTAs.

Todd and I found the second section (italicized) of the fourth box ("CSU is not a college filled with Graduate Teaching Assistants;" "*Professors at CSU [who are full-time, fully qualified] are great teachers who are heavily invested in the craft*.") demeaning of GTAs' labor as instructors. Understandably taking this part personally, Todd stated: "And to advertise that says, well…it's devaluing my experience… I have experience that I know, for a fact, that some of my professors don't have. So..that rubs me the wrong way, to be honest." Like Todd, I felt insulted by this section for the same reason: It implied GTAs were *not* fully qualified to be instructors. Once again, this booklet echoes messages from the campus tour: *Attention Prospective Students! The more qualified faculty will teach your courses, not the less qualified GTAs!* Though it is true that GTAs sometimes do not receive adequate collegiate teaching preparation (Fagen & Suedkamp Wells 2004; Heflinger & Doykos 2016; Raaper 2018), that does not mean they are not qualified in the classroom. As Todd pointed out, he brought experiences into the classroom his professors did not. Speaking personally, this was true for me too. Informing my instruction as a GTA were experiences as a secondary education classroom teacher and student affairs practitioner, a distinctive set of experiences relative to the experiences of the full-time faculty in my department. Further,

GTAs can provide educative value to undergraduate education that faculty do not, as evidenced in a study showing undergraduates taking their first course from a GTA in a given discipline are more likely to select that discipline as their major compared to when they take the same course from faculty (Bettinger, Long & Taylor 2016). This study also notes GTAs who teach more have a greater chance of achieving a timely graduation and obtaining early career employment in postsecondary educational settings. Other literature acknowledges neoliberal postsecondary educational contexts disincentivize faculty from focusing on teaching in favor of prestige enhancing activities such as publishing research (Kezar & DePaola 2018) or securing funding for the institution (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004; Washburn 2006). Therefore, one wonders if every CSU faculty member has the capacity to be "*heavily invested in the craft"* of teaching and/or aspire to be "*great teachers."* It remains true that GTAs do professional work as classroom instructors in a manner like full-time faculty, but earn a fraction of the pay (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019). Thus, the second section of the fourth box adds an insult to the injury of GTAs' exploitation as workers.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

How did the transmission of neoliberal ideology through the CSU campus tour and booklet shape my experiences as a CSU graduate student and CSU GTA doing research on GTA development? Well, before embarking on the ethnographic study informing this work, I generally felt grateful to be part of the CSU community as a student and GTA. I felt welcomed and appreciated opportunities to learn and grow as a scholar. However, after engaging in these works, those good feelings morphed into feelings of alienation because it seemed as though my labor as a GTA, and my research topic about GTA development, did not matter to CSU. At times, I felt that if CSU were going to openly dismiss GTAs to the public, then how could the work

I was doing matter within that campus context? Considering my experiences in tandem with what the scholarship says about GTA exploitation, my stance is research highlighting the lives, development, and labor of GTAs should go beyond mere interpretation, and be critical of the neoliberal capitalist economic and political framework that creates and perpetuates GTA exploitation on postsecondary education campuses. This stands in contrast to the previous and more interpretive approaches I took engaging in GTA research (Robinson 2020).

Connecting the Two Tales

"The Campus Tour" and "The Booklet," illustrate features of, and the consequences of, neoliberalism in the CSU context. One such feature showcased throughout both was the framing of college students as customers (Canaan & Shumar 2008; Giroux 2020; Saunders 2007; Saunders 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades 2004). This feature is prominent in both tales and their subsequent analyses. Another feature of neoliberal postsecondary education the tales demonstrate is commodification, specifically with CSU referring to its high undergraduate teaching rankings (commodified collegiate instruction) during the tour and commodifying educational opportunities such as "research projects" in the form of marketing in the booklet, all to attract prospective undergraduate student-customers. Commodification abstracts the social relationships behind the rankings and opportunities, rendering the labor, educational relationships, challenges, and learning potential of these entities invisible (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez 2017). This commodification served CSU's need to sell to a future student-customer to enhance CSU's tuition revenue while simultaneously erasing the educational value of student-faculty interactions through teaching or the dynamic challenges and learning experienced by participating in university research.

In exploring the connections between the two tales the implications for GTAs regarding the neoliberal ideology enveloping CSU become clear. Specifically, both tales highlight the following consequence of neoliberal postsecondary education in this context: CSU sowing competition and antagonism between campus actors. The tour, framing prospective undergraduates as customers, communicated the message to this group that GTAs would not steal any opportunities from them. This implied these two student populations, in general within postsecondary education, compete for "opportunities," which considering the distinct nature and goals of undergraduate and graduate education, is not accurate. Nevertheless, the tour audience, presumably many of whom are outsiders to the nuances of postsecondary education, might take this to mean that these populations generally *do* compete for opportunities on campuses. However, at CSU, the full tuition-paying undergraduate-customers will always get their way and need not worry about those resource-needy GTAs, customer satisfaction guaranteed. The tour guide citing CSU's high teaching rankings (commodified collegiate instruction) in concert with the falsehood that CSU faculty do all the teaching makes it seem as though CSU's high ranking is *because* faculty do all the teaching. Inversely then, since GTAs do not teach, the teaching quality at CSU must be better. Therefore, when undergraduates matriculate to CSU and have a GTA as an instructor, the relationship between undergraduate and GTA becomes adversarial. In "The Booklet," the first text box stating "This isn't a place with giant research projects from which only graduate students benefit. Undergraduates have opportunities to join research projects as soon as their first year," depicted GTAs as a foil to underscore opportunities for undergraduates, thereby vaguely belittling GTAs in contrast to undergraduates. Messaging in this text box also frames prospective undergraduates as customers, to whom should be sold (commodified) "research projects." The booklet's fourth text box ("CSU is not a college filled with Graduate

Teaching Assistants;" "Professors at CSU who are full-time, fully qualified are great teachers who are heavily invested in the craft") suggests GTAs, when compared to full-time professors, are not fully qualified to teach. These types of competitive frameworks are a result of neoliberal ideology in action in postsecondary education (Saunders 2015) and they enable a campus culture that undermines GTAs.

Dismissiveness towards, and dishonesty about, GTAs' instructional labor is another consequence of neoliberal postsecondary education at CSU and featured in both tales. Messaging on the campus tour completely denied, untruthfully, that GTAs taught at CSU. The tour also subtly implied that CSU's high teaching rankings (commodified collegiate instruction) may have to do with the, again false, idea that faculty did all the teaching and no GTAs did any teaching. The booklet similarly denied GTAs are teachers at CSU. Both tales showed dismissiveness toward GTAs' instructional labor and assumption of the superiority of full-time faculty instruction over GTAs,' even though GTAs bring unique, important, and educative experiences to their teaching and add value as instructors in ways faculty sometimes cannot (Bettinger, Long & Taylor 2016). To deny and demean a key part of GTAs' experience, an experience that is obviously exploitative (Grekul & Barkway 2019; Rhoads & Rhoades 2005; Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017), adds insult to the injury of this exploitation. The constant need of CSU to, as a result of this era of neoliberalism, commodify and sell their educational products for tuition revenue producing undergraduate-customers creates the conditions leading to institutional messaging that is dismissive of and dishonest about GTA instructional labor.

Overall, both tales connect closely. They show how transmission of neoliberal ideology within CSU's postsecondary educational context in the form of framing students as customers and commodification, provide the frameworks and foundations for what are ultimately harmful consequences to CSU GTAs. Said differently, the consequence of competition and antagonism between CSU campus actors that fosters a campus culture demoralizing to GTAs, and the consequence of dismissiveness and dishonesty about GTAs' instructional labor, manifest due to what the literature notes are common features of neoliberal postsecondary education: the constant framing of students as customers and commodification of higher education. In drawing this conclusion, this research attempts to provide an original and unique contribution to the body of literature on how neoliberal postsecondary education shapes the lives of GTAs within a given campus context. Furthermore, its emphasis on how transmission of neoliberal ideology in spaces *outside* of where GTAs traditionally inhabit on campuses (i.e., a prospective undergraduate campus tour) can still be harmful to GTAs contrasts with, and hopefully compliments, qualitative works highlighting neoliberalism's influence on GTAs' experiences teaching (Raaper 2018; Santiago, Karimi & Alicea 2017; Zhang 2020), on broader statistical data and scholarship on GTA labor conditions (Kezar, DePaola & Scott 2019) and on GTA teaching professional development (Aspenlieder & Vander Kloet 2014; Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder 2013; Robinson 2020).

Final Reflections

Something notable about CSU's status as a public liberal arts university in the context of this study is its institutional mission. The mission, in part, seeks to instill in students the importance of being attentive global citizens who work to improve the future of the world by using their knowledge and skills with empathy and in

pursuit of truth (Cardinal State University 2008). As demonstrated in this study, which described CSU's campus tour and promotional booklet for prospective undergraduates as disingenuous and dismissive of GTAs' labor, there is a clear contradiction between CSU's mission for its students and how the institution engages with prospective undergraduates (customers). In particular, the rules of empathy and truthfulness do not apply to CSU when it comes to acquiring more tuition revenue. This contradiction is a byproduct of neoliberal postsecondary education, and it threatens to fully undermine essential parts of CSU's mission and transform it into an institution that operates like a business instead of something that benefits the public (Giroux 2015).

Neoliberalism's manifestation at CSU was particularly blatant and harsh towards GTAs. One wonders what prospective undergraduate student campus tours, or promotional booklets, would look like from institutions unlike CSU, such as private institutions with primarily graduate student populations and more prominent research missions. How would neoliberal ideology manifest itself in a context completely different from the public, primarily undergraduate serving liberal arts institution known as CSU? How would these manifestations shape campus life for GTAs? Future research in such settings addressing these questions would benefit scholars and practitioners invested in supporting GTAs as they navigate contemporary neoliberal postsecondary education.

In closing, CSU's neoliberal culture and the observed practices into which it translated itself were antagonistic to GTAs (myself included). Clearly, this current, more unregulated iteration of capitalism known as neoliberalism is especially severe and cruel (Malott & Ford 2015) towards vulnerable workers such as GTAs. Prospective undergraduates were not spared either, considering how the tour and

booklet deceived them regarding who at CSU would teach their coursework. Conversely, CSU likely benefitted from its neoliberal culture and the resultant practices from a business standpoint: its presentations to prospective undergraduates probably attracted some to attend, enhancing its bottom line. Simply put, it is wrong for a postsecondary institution to behave in ways that harm its students for the purposes of monetary gain for the institution. Though it may be trite, all campus actors who care about postsecondary education broadly, must organize and work together to vanquish neoliberal institutional practices that create competition, antagonism, dismissiveness, and dishonesty.

Notes

[1] I use GTA as an umbrella term encompassing graduate students who serve as teaching assistants (TAs), who plan to serve as TAs, or who seek professional development to learn about teaching even if they are not serving in a TA role.
[2] Pseudonym.
[3] In this study and narrative, I treat neoliberalism as an ideology.
[4] The names of all individuals in this narrative are pseudonyms.

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Author Details

Kirk S. Robinson (krob4385@gmail.com) holds a PhD in Higher Education and Student Affairs. He lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, USA.