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Gender, Contingent Labor, and Our Virtual Bodies

Desi Bradley

Though both are bound in the spiral dance,
I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

As a full-time graduate student, teaching associate, mother of two preschoolers, and household business manager, I find myself perpetually having to defend the notion that any of the myriad tasks that monopolize my daily schedule actually qualify as work. This is primarily due to the fact that my work is, in all cases, unpaid. In the domestic realm many of these time drags are invisible hygiene factors: you only notice them when they're missing. That these tasks go unnoticed is, in a sense, a mark of success. As a graduate student, the fact that the economic exchange is reversed by tuition compounds the issue, resulting in the perception of my work as privileged leisure by friends and family outside the academy. Those closest to me don't see my rising debt load or the overall irony of my situation. I am investing significant funds, both in tuition and lost wage potential, toward the achievement of a degree that holds ostensible value in the job market, and yet my labor does not appear as real work. What is more, my time to invest in student work is subsumed by the demands in the domestic realm.

Given that I've chosen to enter a discipline in which these same issues are replicated and amplified, I don't expect that perception to change. An abundance of literature establishes the problem that Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline, and particularly composition instruction, my area, is a marginalized field overwhelmingly staffed by contingent faculty, the majority of who are women. Eileen Schell's *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers* situates the discourse about contingent faculty in composition within a framework of feminist theory, where the discourse of gender connects with academic labor. The "professionalization" of rhetoric and composition—and resulting stratification between rhetoric (scholarship) and composition (undergraduate instruction)—holds additional implications for composition workers in terms of academic community and service work, psychic income, and literal working conditions and compensation.

So I find myself training to join a pool of exploitable mental laborers in the academy while searching for ways to get around the limitations imposed on my work by time and place. And most often I find the solution to my problems in educational technologies. The convergence of technology with issues of contingent labor provides a space for

circumventing temporal and physical boundaries, with implications for the work of marginalized labor including scholarship, teaching, networking, publication, organization, and so on.

Domestic Interlude: Diapers, Dinner, and Dirty Laundry

It is 10:20 on a Sunday morning. Fifteen minutes ago I sat my children in front of Dora the Explorer so that I could carve out twenty minutes to write. The first fifteen have been spent getting reference materials and supplies in order, and booting up the computer. What have I accomplished? What have I produced? The clock is ticking. Respite from domestic responsibilities is about to be cut short. I have barely begun to frame a generative state of mind, yet I have about three minutes left, by my reckoning, before my two preschool daughters recall me to the “real” world—the world Eileen Schell might describe as the world of “caring.”

This scenario stands in sharp contrast to the construct of creating writing time for your typical graduate student who lacks the domestic responsibilities associated with motherhood. For many, the weekend represents an opportunity for creative work like writing. For me, the weekend is when childcare resources go “down,” domestic tasks multiply, and I must put academic concerns aside.

My situation speaks to the problem of interruption from the domestic sphere and subsequent constraints on my professional and personal time. For me, the most valuable resource of all is the scarcest—blocks of time to pursue academic work.

Adherents to the monastic view of higher education might respond that this problem reflects poor life planning on my part. Perhaps I should have completed my degree before having children in order to avoid these interruptions. One might even suggest that I should have opted out of childbearing entirely. But I would argue that these problems persist as women progress in higher education and are channeled into service work and pedagogies of care, and as they are perceived of as pursuing “psychic income” as opposed to being valued as professional scholars.

Gender

Gender inequity regarding domestic labor historically derives from an ideology that situates women in the private realm and delegates private domestic labor to women. In her recent volume *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy and Vulnerability*, Laura Kipnis suggests that despite the policy gains of the feminist movement and despite popular perception “femalehood and motherhood are still united in the sentimental imagination” (75). In reality, however, “the majority of women aren’t mothers anymore, they’re mother-workers” (75). In the academy, too, the ideology of gendered distinction between public roles (professional, male) and private roles (domestic, female) still informs policy, hierarchy, and pedagogy, thereby suppressing and marginalizing the scholarship of working mothers.

A recent conversation with my five-year-old daughter illuminates the perceived value of domestic labor: “Ava, you’re a really good helper, and I enjoyed doing teamwork with you to clean the kitchen tonight!”

“Thank you. When Dad helps—then you’re not mad at him, right?” I am forced to ruefully acknowledge that, yes, when her father helps with the domestic details of our daily lives, we don’t argue as much. “But when Dad’s working, you know what that means?” Ava trails off.

I am curious. What does she think it means?

“Well, he’s making money,” she says. “Like when he goes away. He makes money then, right? ‘Cause he does things that make money.”

The mention of travel is relevant because her father is out-of-town on a business trip. My husband is a small business owner. As such, he spends long hours at the office, sometimes in excess of 70 hours per week, travels frequently, and then works at home as well. Consequently, I absorb the bulk of our domestic labor including household and childcare.

My daughter has inadvertently connected the dots in what is a significant problem in my life—the notion that domestic work is not considered “work”—that is, until domestic work becomes outsourced, at which point it becomes a negotiation, both fiscal and administrative. The division is elementary, in my daughter’s mind. My husband does things that make money, and I do things that do not make money. We are both actively engaged in labor, but what he is doing is “work” because it “makes money.” And so, by process of definition by binary opposition, what I am doing is “not work.”

Given the notion that money exists as a signifier assigning value to time, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that, by implication, my time is without value. My young daughter had cut right to the point. The problem, however, is that this logic results in a fundamentally false premise, and the actual use of my time has considerable value, reflected in the health, general welfare, and disposition of my family, notwithstanding the facilitation of our daily lives, and aversion of major crises in household business. More tension derives from the dissonance between the ostensible value assigned to domestic work, especially parenting and the actual reflection of perceived value in social behavior and recompense (Kipnis 72). Therefore the contract made between “working” and “nonworking” partners with regard to division of labor is borne out with inequity in psychological return as well as economic.

Some conversation in “mommy” circles of popular discourse has focused on this dissonance. The Motherhood Manifesto, for example, advocates providing social security benefits to mothers while they take time out of the workforce for childbearing and childrearing (in addition to advocating for equal pay, flexible work schedules, subsidized childcare, and healthcare for families of “working” mothers.) There are also sources like the one found at Salary.com to assist in calculating the replacement cost of a stay-at-

home parent's time. The value of my own time, according to various such sources, ranges between \$124,000 and \$170,000 annually. Whether or not these figures represent actual wages lost to the mommy tax is irrelevant, since they accurately represent the value of domestic services as they are subcontracted and outsourced. But what is truly problematic is how logic of this sort proceeds from an inversion of the dubious principle that money signifies the value of time.

Labor in Rhetoric and Composition is a Sex-Vexed Issue

I continue to return to the notion that a focus on gendered solutions ends up rationalizing sex differences which is a slippery slope toward reinforcing old stereotypes: circular logic that leads nowhere. The gender question is more one of the gentrification and feminization of the field in line with sexist conceptions of gender roles which, as Kipnis notes, may seem archaic in the popular culture, but are nevertheless pervasive in the subconscious ideology of the general intellect.

Gender and academic labor converge at the point where women are conceived of as a marginalized population based on the social construct of gender, and where the field of Rhetoric and Composition is identified as feminized—and therefore (or concurrently) marginalized—with women comprising the overwhelming majority of its contingent faculty. To identify the issues of contingent faculty in composition as women's issues, Schell cites Theresa Enos's 1991 study which indicates that up to 80% of contingent labor in composition is comprised of women (6) and Sue Ellen Holbrook's "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition" which states the reasons writing instruction qualifies as "women's work" according to an historically constructed gender ideology: "it employs a disproportionate number of women; it has a service ethos; it pays less; it is devalued" (8). Given Schell's argument in light of post-feminist labor policy, one might very well ask: why do we, the generation of post-feminist women who were inculcated with the ideology that our futures offered infinite possibilities and choices, tolerate the gender inequities that persist in the workplace despite theoretical and policy gains to the contrary? In practice, the current consumer climate, resurgence of patriarchal/archaic labor forms, parenting propaganda, and persistent sexist ideology all converge to contribute to the structure of inequity.

It is also problematic that issues of contingent faculty are consistently framed in language that conflates part-time work with full-time work, i.e., as part-time/adjunct labor issues. Considering these distinct subject positions from a conflated perspective results in propositions such as the "Conversion Solution" that Eileen Schell describes in *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers*. According to Schell, the Conversion Solution advocates a moratorium on contingent hiring practices while transitioning currently contingent faculty to full-time, tenured positions. Schell points to arguments that suggest "the eventual abolition of part-time positions will eliminate career possibilities for women and others who seek flexible working conditions" (94). Clearly, converting all part-time and non-tenure positions into full time tenured positions does nothing to address the needs of those contingent workers who either need or want to work part-time, and it in fact would displace a considerable percentage of the composition labor force.

Assuming that the Conversion Solution represents an answer to the contemporary concerns facing contingent faculty obfuscates the valid reasons for preferring part-time over full-time work, and, as Schell saliently notes, “mystifies the structural factors that hold women back from full-time academic careers: a lack of affordable daycare, a spouse who does not share childcare, lack of flex-time positions and job-sharing opportunities, geographic immobility, interrupted career and education patterns because of child-rearing and family responsibilities” (40). In Schell’s estimation, domestic and family responsibilities constitute for women an irreconcilable conflict with the pursuit of professional academic careers (46). It is crucial to attain a measure of gender equity with regard to the private/public vs. domestic/professional dichotomy by restructuring “work” to reflect value of domestic labor without resorting to outsourcing these labors to an underpaid and exploited workforce who are in turn forced to neglect their own households.

Contingent Status isn't a “Choice”

A subordinate issue in this argument is the fact that the choice of whether to work part-time or full-time is, for many, largely motivated by financial concerns. Given the current construct of compensation inequity, part-time work only represents a viable alternative to “moonlighters” and “housewives.” The workforce is bolstered by the myth of “professionalism,” which is supposed to motivate the population of contingent labor in composition by factors beyond pay (“psychic” income) such as professional esteem and collegiality or service ethic (Wills).

In actuality, the composition workforce consists of more “freeway flyers”—faculty who parse together teaching assignments from multiple institutions in order to obtain full-time work, but without the benefits associated with tenured positions such as healthcare, job security, retirement investment, and so on (see Schell, Bousquet). Evaluation of who works part-time and why is complicated by the magnitude of these ranks. The fact is that the demographics of part-time vs. full-time laborers in the contingent academic workforce would likely change if the conditions of inequity were addressed.

Composing Scholarship

Within the academy, I also face opposition to the notion that my work as a student qualifies as real work. Resistance to considering my student work as “work” derives largely from the semantic gymnastics that cast students as consumers, teachers as low-wage labor, and research/publication as “work.” As a graduate student instructor, status as worker and student are both in contest with the “work” that is actually valued by the academy. Somehow the notion that time equals money gets inverted here as well, and it has to do with the informationalization of academic labor, the value of intellectual labor/property, and devaluation of instruction.

The Professionalization of Rhetoric and Composition

As Peter Vandenberg suggests in “Composing Composition Studies, Scholarly Publication and the Practice of Discipline,” the professionalization of rhetoric and composition as a discipline, through the production and publication of a distinct body of research and theory, resembles departmental revolution and the effort to liberate exploited labor of composition instruction. In reality, however, the pursuit of scholarship as a symbol of status and means toward autonomy veils the hierarchical structures that dictate which research projects are conducted, and what scholarship is published and taught—by implication: who controls the dominant discourse and cultural indoctrination that prevails in the managed university. Furthermore, the formulation of a body of research in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, while serving to legitimize the field, reconstructs the very hierarchies of power structure that scholars found “oppressive when used to characterize literary studies” (Vandenberg 54). In other words, research in the managed university is still hierarchically valued above instruction, the knowledge and experience of composition instructors is still devalued, and the working conditions of teachers and students of composition continue to suffer for it.

One salient criticism of the valorization of publication in this field is that the experience and knowledge of writing instructors themselves is devalued, which is a problem that descends from the displacement of writing instruction as a subordinate category in English departments and prevails despite the efforts of scholars to legitimize the field. The issue remains volatile in our contemporary discourse.

Situating Research in Praxis-Teacher Research

I find the notion of teacher research significant to this discourse. Vandenberg points to a movement away from pragmatism and toward theory in composition scholarship to the detriment of the actual conditions of writing instruction for both teachers and students (56). Schell makes the point that in academic stratification, “the message is clear: the ‘real work’ of a professor and professional is scholarship, not teaching” (50). In “Knowledge Work, Teaching Work, and Doing Composition,” Christopher Ferry explores how tenured faculty have a stake in preserving the marginalized status of contingent faculty insofar as contingent faculty subsume their teaching load and free them up to pursue their real work “which is not teaching, but knowledge making” (247). The dichotomy between scholarship and teaching is problematic and diminutive toward teaching. It suggests both that teaching is not work and that teaching cannot contribute to the development of disciplinary knowledge. It is more accurate to suggest that the academy considers “real work” to be publishing as opposed to teaching, a notion that holds considerable implications for both teachers and students.

Domestic Interlude: Random Thoughts Racing on the Margins

Inside my stream of consciousness: week 11, I think, of the 15-week semester. The same point at which, during last semester, I swore I absolutely would not do this to myself again. I chastise myself: how quickly one forgets the pain, just like childbirth. As you

can see, I did it to myself again. With a full-time graduate course load, numerous deadlines are looming. The spring fundraising rush is in full swing at the preschool (read: more volunteer labor, less study time). We're running low on milk, and the girls haven't eaten any vegetables at dinner all week. (For kicks, I wonder just how much mental space it takes to keep track of what the girls eat throughout the days and weeks, monitoring their nutritional profile, all the while fostering their metacognitive awareness of what they eat and why?) The floors are grimy, the laundry unfolded but at least it's clean. The bills are paid, but I still haven't enrolled Ava in kindergarten, made those dentist appointments, or rescheduled her annual physical. Claire's birthday is in 3 weeks and I haven't planned her party yet. But I really can't think about any of these things right now because I have deadlines coming and I need to do some work. My work. When will I find the time?

Childcare is one issue: it is not subsidized; it's expensive even in relatively low-cost centers; and its necessity compounds the notion of my scholarship as leisure—the Happy Housewife myth. It's also an issue of time: the preschool is only open from 9 to 5. Space is relevant here, too, in terms of whether one can actually be in a particular place at a particular time in order to accomplish a particular goal. I, for example, need to make special arrangements to attend the impromptu meeting I was recently invited to attend that will keep me after hours while my husband is out of town. I wish I had a benevolent family member to shoulder the cost of this labor. Fatigue is another issue. In the household, my productive workday extends far beyond “business hours.” Domestic labor is physical labor: cooking, cleaning, feeding, nurturing, lifting, shopping, sorting, washing, scrubbing and so on take their toll on my energy.

It's really about time, though...it's always about time. At the end of the day, despite the magnitude of diversions from the domestic realm, which are already competing for attention with the demands of my student labor, there is also my need to pursue my own intellectual work. I've managed to perfect the art of “compartmentalizing” the various forms of work on my plate, and (whether or not I find this reasonable or equitable,) mental labor is generally relegated to the margins of my schedule. In other words: once the day's business and errands are done, and once the girls are fed, bathed, entertained, cleaned up after, and put to sleep, then I can address my intellectual work. And I have to appreciate how the Internet allows me to do this.

Technology:
Circumventing Time and Place

My own experience suggests that technology provides a tool to address, circumvent, and even to subvert some of the issues of geographical limitation, time constraints, and visibility. Technology provides one answer to the fragmentation of a working mother's time and attention, and subsequent time restrictions. As a mother and a full-time graduate student, the Internet is paramount to my work. I use the Internet as a research tool, as an information resource, as my primary tool of composition, as a primary mode of communication, and as an academic and social networking tool. Online technology suspends limitations of temporality, allowing me to participate in academic conversations

and communicate by email at odd hours, and to access journals, news, and professional information online in my own time.

Beyond issues of temporality, as a mother, graduate student and aspiring professional, the Internet represents the prescient opportunity to both conduct research and represent my professional persona and body of work by maintaining an online profile including representations of my academic work. In other words, Internet technology provides an open access visible platform for dissemination and promotion of scholarship. I have the means to publish my work by associating with various online networking groups, or to seek online publishing opportunities for graduate students. In terms of my development as a graduate student and educator, the Internet represents what (so far) I have identified as the most fertile opportunity for growth. Online journals such as *Kairos* and *Enculturation*, for example, are among the sources most likely to publish work done by graduate students as well as contingent faculty.

Converging with Contingent Faculty

In regard to scholarship, the Internet represents the convergence of technology with the issues surrounding the marginalization of composition instruction. In this respect, the conversation about the value of technology as applied to scholarship speaks to the material conditions opposing the work of contingent faculty, answering to the obstacles posed by exorbitant workloads, low pay, and substandard workspace, tools and training. Self-published websites provide an opportunity to seek a more egalitarian power structure in composition research and instruction. Through its function as an open-access worldwide medium, the Internet constitutes a space in which scholars may challenge the limits implicit in systems governed by traditional dominant hegemony in academic publishing and in social and academic networking: namely the dissemination of information, conducting and sharing of research, and professional and social relationships. Each of these functions provides opportunities to either subvert or reinforce the dominant hegemony informing composition instruction. Arguing that the Internet is a space in which dominant hegemony may be challenged, circumvented, or subverted should not, however, imply a naïve ignorance of its potential to also reinforce the status quo.

Our Virtual Bodies

In 2000, Jennifer Bowie conducted a study of the perception of gender in online writing communities. Her data “indicate that participants bring their cultural ideas of gender to the reading of statements made online” (Bowie). This project points to the ways in which existing gender ideology informs a gendered perception of language that transcends the physical body—in other words, the social construct of gender remains visible through language, remains present in online discourse. In “What’s Missing in Feminist Research in New Information and Communication Technologies?” Micky Lee explores new gender and technology theory, and cites many narratives depicting the Internet as “a misogynist sphere that promotes sexual harassment” (Scott et al., Gatson, Miller, Stewart, Shields & Sen, qtd in Lee 194).

Eileen Schell also examines the “growing role of computing and distance learning” with caution. In terms of the exploitation of contingent labor in rhetoric and composition, there is a very real danger in the potential for technologies to be used as a way to industrialize the composition work force, increasing individual unit productivity, and displacing workers—“cyberadjuncts’ are already becoming the new exploitable subclass of contingent faculty” (Schell 117).

The open-access quality of the Internet inherently, ostensibly means that it is inclusive. It is obvious that not everything published online is reliable, nor can it be said that everything online subscribes to one ideology or the other. Literacy in the information age means that the critical skill to evaluate information is more important than ever. Suppressing literacy and critical thinking skills is consistent with the consumerist ideology that is encroaching upon university policy and driving composition teachers to produce a homogenized, commodified workforce as opposed to a critical citizenry. Ignoring the potential inherent in educational technologies, in essence remaining technologically illiterate, is an ironic and ineffectual response.

In “Educating for Literacy, Working for Dignity,” Gary Rhoades echoes Schell’s cautionary tone toward technologies in writing instruction but argues against the foolishness of “ignor[ing] the way these new instruments of communicating are impacting forms and functions of literacy” and implores scholars in rhetoric and composition to “attend to recent developments in the tools of their trade” (259). I argue that scholars should go beyond “attending” to these recent developments and cultivate ways to actively employ new developments and opportunities afforded by technology.

The global accessibility of information means that marginalized populations may have opportunities to collaborate globally, circumventing the limitations of space and time. The trend toward making traditionally published scholarship available online contributes to the ratification of the electronic medium as a resource for academic research. The proliferation of peer-reviewed journals like *Workplace*, published exclusively online, represents another important trend in this area.

Inconclusive Musing

How does this technology conversation intersect with gender, then? Evasive tactics? Opportunism? Maybe. The conditions of inequity persist even as I seek ways to undermine them. And my work is still being conducted in the margins of time and space. Yet, is it possible to conceive of an alternate reality? One in which gender isn’t invoked, consciously or subconsciously, as a means to naturalize inequity? One in which both family and undergraduate instruction hold commensurate value with those forms of labor that generate revenue and prestige?

If technology compresses time and space, and if management and university administration have already jumped on the bandwagon to take advantage of it, then it is incumbent upon us, the workers, to do so as well. Subversion, evasion, exploitation,

productivity. The Internet is, for me, the catalyst that enables the life of the mind to persist beyond the limits that my labor, in all its manifestations, places on my body. A place to resist.

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