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Notes on Academic Labor, Women, and Value¹

A female colleague and friend who has a contract position at a major US university recently explained the difficulty of balancing an academic career and family life. Because my friend has a family and is committed to spending time with her family, she says the time she has for research and scholarship is limited: “the choices I made means I can’t be the golden girl and I can’t do it all.”² The problem for my friend and for other women who have young children is that the dominant model for university work is similar to the one in place when women were excluded from teaching and research positions because of their gender. This model is of a single person or a person who has support at home and who has the time not only to teach but also to do research and scholarly writing. The difficulty for my friend is that to be competitive, particularly in a field like Composition and Rhetoric which requires a lot of engagement with students, the standard for success does not leave time for the work necessary to sustain a family, including childrearing, housekeeping, and other “home” work.

Within the old university system, the exclusion of women was systemic and visible. This system of overt exclusion was challenged by individual women and by feminists who successfully argued—in the courts and elsewhere—that the reason behind the exclusion of women was ideological and political and based in a history of gendered labor segregation. Yet, despite ideological, political, and rhetorical shifts away from this old system of gendered labor segregation, women continue to be excluded from tenured and tenure-line positions. The reasons for this exclusion, I argue, center on structures of gendered labor which have not shifted. Although ideologies and rhetorics about gender have changed as a result of challenges to the system of gender discrimination, women are still excluded from tenure and tenure-track positions.

To understand how and why reproductive labor is devalued and how this uncompensated labor keeps women from tenure and tenure-line appointments, I examine here the corporatization of the university, exploring why gender-based exclusion is less visible in the new corporate university culture. To investigate these questions, I read Marxist feminist accounts of gendered labor and ask the following questions: 1) Why isn’t the work that women do within the family considered work; and 2) How does women’s work in the family get devalued? 3) Although women are no longer systemically excluded from faculty positions, how does their work in the domestic sphere still function as a means of exclusion from these positions?

In the old university system, not only were women systematically excluded because of their gender, but men in this system also depended on wives at home performing the domestic labor necessary to maintain a household. In this system, the exclusion of women was visible; women just weren’t hired into tenure track positions. As women entered the academic labor force in significant numbers, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, this old system was replaced by one in which there is a semblance of equality because women are hired in near-equal numbers to men.³ However, while it looks as though women do fill faculty positions, they often do not occupy higher-up positions or positions at more prestigious universities.⁴ Eileen Schell argues, for example, that in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, women are “disproportionately

channeled into contingent writing instructorships.”⁵ This channeling can be examined through a discussion of the corporate university and its devaluation of women’s reproductive labor.

In *Academic Keywords: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education*, Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt argue that universities have come to resemble corporations in the way that they are administered, in terms of research priorities that are linked to corporate sponsorship, and in terms of their focus on profit. 6 According to Nelson and Watt, this focus on profit creates a “university culture accustomed to keeping costs as low as possible.”⁷ Cost-saving means keeping labor costs as low as possible and, as a result, teaching comes to be seen as an economic drain rather than a resource. In this corporate university, a large profit comes from part-time faculty and graduate teaching assistants (who are cynically called apprentices) who do most of the teaching at a lower labor cost.

What Nelson and Watt don’t discuss is how and why the profit-making, inexpensive, teaching labor in universities is often performed by women and why women still do not occupy more prestigious positions. As universities have turned to a corporate model, they have created a gendered, part-time, underpaid labor force and continue to relegate women to lower status positions.

Schell argues that the relegation of women to lower status positions, part-time teaching and non-tenure line contract positions, occurs because women “are more likely to be geographically immobile because of family responsibilities, more likely to experience overt and subtle sex discrimination, more likely to be unemployed and underemployed after receiving doctoral degrees, and more likely to be stereotyped as those willing to take lesser paid, lesser status teaching jobs.”⁸ Women’s social roles continue to ensure their segregation into lower-paying and lower-status professional jobs. While Schell identifies the ideologies which undervalue women’s labor and segregate women into lower-paying and lower-status jobs, I focus on the capitalist division of labor which, ideologically and structurally, continues to exclude women from tenure-line positions.

The absence of women in higher positions and the prominence of women in part-time positions, I argue, is a mark of the unvalued labor that women perform in the home. Reproductive labor is “the reproduction of the individual within the specific relation to the community.”⁹ This is the labor that sustains the institution of the family; it is work that is necessary for a family to live as a productive unit. Productive labor, on the other hand, is labor which is carried out in the workplace for wage labor. As Leopoldina Fortunati argues, regimes of productive labor give rise to “a specific type of cooperation and division of labor, as well as to technological progress.”¹⁰ In a capitalist economy, reproductive labor is not valued as labor because it is not performed for a wage and does not contribute to the production of exchange value. Thus, the reproductive labor that women do in the home serves to keep them in less prestigious positions or in part-time positions. Women’s unpaid labor, or labor that detracts from the time they can devote to university work, serves as a means of gendered exclusion.

To examine both the ideologies and structures of reproductive labor, I turn to the work of feminist theorists who have investigated the links between gender and reproductive labor in capitalism. In “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” Gayatri Spivak makes visible the definition of value in capitalism. Value is an economic system of equivalences and entails social relations which capital uses and reproduces to control exchange. In the logic of capitalism, use-value is what a worker needs to sustain her life; surplus-value is that which is left over after a worker produces what she needs to sustain her life; exchange-value is the worth an object or idea is given in a system of exchange so it can be exchanged with unlike objects or ideas. As Spivak argues, “use-value is in play when a human being produces and uses up the product (or uses up the unproduced) immediately. Exchange-value emerges when one thing is substituted for another. Before the emergence of the money-form, exchange-value is ad hoc. Surplus-value is created when some value is produced for nothing.”¹¹ The economic is written—it is given social meaning or *value*—so that it can operate as a system of equivalences.

The emphasis on exchange is crucial to the conception of value. Spivak points out that in a system of exchange, value functions as difference: it represents something because it is not that thing. Equivalency is based on difference and is established between unlike things. However, as it creates an equivalency of unlike things in the interest of exchange, value does not represent use-value. The value concept cannot stand for the labor that goes into the production of items for social utility because capital conflates all value with exchange-value. “Marx,” she says, “makes the extraordinary suggestion that capital consumes the use-value of labor power.”¹² As a result, labor that is not part of exchange is neither valued nor figured by the idea of value.

Value, in capitalism, writes reproductive labor under erasure. Non-wage or reproductive labor is not recognizable as labor: it is not representable as work because it is not part of the system of capitalist exchange. Reproductive labor—the labor of women in the home for example—is not given social meaning as labor. Non-waged labor, in other words, is seen as natural because it is associated with patriarchal notions of women’s gender roles and is, therefore, not seen as ‘productive’. The fact that reproductive labor performed in the home is unrepresentable in capitalism demonstrates how patriarchal cultural practices are linked to capitalist modes of production. Ideologies which devalue or naturalize women’s work become part of the structure of exploitation through which capitalism extracts profit. However, the link between gender ideologies and labor practices is made socially invisible by the conflation of *value* with *exchange value*. Women’s work within the family is not represented in capitalist patriarchy because work within the family is not readable as such.

Maria Mies argues in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, that the labor of women (and other non-waged workers in colonies) makes capitalist productive labor possible. Non-waged labor, the reproductive labor that women perform working the home, childcare, healthcare, allows waged labor to be productive. Men who work in factories, in the academy, and elsewhere can perform wage labor because they are supported by reproductive labor of women in the home. Against this limited notion of production, Peggy Antrobus argues that “production is a function not only of capital, technology, and markets, but also of the physical, psychological, and intellectual capacity of the labor force and that these attributes are determined in the sphere of reproduction.”¹³ Because it occurs in the private sphere, the reproductive labor that women perform is not seen as value-generating. This situation exists, Antrobus observes, because of a

deeply gendered ideology which simultaneously minimizes the value of the tasks necessary for social reproduction (women’s traditional roles) while promoting a pattern of economic growth based on the exploitation (by multinational corporations) of the socio-economic vulnerabilities of a female population which bears major responsibility for both nurturance and financial support of children.¹⁴

The institution of the family as a “basic and timeless structure of all institutionalization of men-women relationships” situates it as a site where corporations, in this case higher education institutions acting as corporations, devalue the unpaid reproductive work done within the family, i.e. the work of women. Reproductive labor in the family is devalued because it is coded as female: that is, it is unpaid and not recognized as labor because it takes place within the institutional context of the family. It is considered, as Mies argues, “a natural resource, freely available like air and water.”¹⁵ For women who perform productive work in the academy, the reproductive work they do within the family is not recognized as work. Work that is recognized as labor is work that can be exchanged, teaching, research, and scholarly productions that reproduce knowledge within the university system. Work within the family is outside the mode of production and therefore is not valued.

Given that women’s reproductive labor in the home is not valued, the choices that women have within the university are made within the norm of wage labor which is associated with men. The norm for academic labor in the new, corporatized system is still that of the person who is supported by unpaid, reproductive labor in the home. Because the norm for labor within the university is still a faculty position that presumes

support from an unpaid, invisible domestic laborer within the home, women must either model their careers after this capitalist, patriarchal model which relies on the support of reproductive workers (often women of color, immigrant women, or lower class women who perform household chores and childcare) or ‘choose’ academic work of lower status and pay.

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Notes

1. 1 I’d like to thank Noreen O’Connor, Carol Hayes, and Angela Hewett, for their contributions to my thinking about women and academic labor.
2. 2 Anonymous personal interview, January 18, 2002.
3. 3 Of course, this depends upon what discipline we’re talking about. The number of women in full-time positions in, for example, English Departments is much higher than women in full-time Engineering positions.
4. 4 A new study from the Department of Education entitled “Background Characteristics, Work Activities, and Compensation of Faculty and Instructional Staff in Postsecondary Institutions: Fall 1998” provides statistics that support this argument. The tables on these two pages show in detail how women faculty are close to 50/50 with male faculty in PT positions, but only make up about a third of full-time positions. Another study, “Salary, Promotion, and Tenure Status of Minority and Women Faculty in U.S. Colleges and Universities,” demonstrates that women are tenured at a lower rate than men. For both these studies, see <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nsopf/>
5. 5 Eileen Schell, *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*, p. 9.
6. 6 See chapter “The Corporate University” in Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education*.
7. 7 Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education*, p.

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8. 8 Eileen Schell, *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*, p. 7.
9. 9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook 5, p. 485. First cited in Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, p. 7.
10. 10 Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, p. 8.
11. 11 Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," p. 155.
12. 12 Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," p. 161.
13. 13 Peggy Antrobus, "Letter on the Debt," p. 3. Antrobus is talking about women in the Caribbean in the letter and how they are impacted by IMF/World Bank policies. Although the status of women in the Caribbean is certainly different from women in the first world academy, they are similarly situated by ideologies and practices of gender in the workplace.
14. 14 Peggy Antrobus, "Letter on the Debt," p. 4. My italics
15. 15 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, p. 110.