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SURVIVAL GUIDE ADVICE AND THE SPIRIT OF ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP: WHY GRADUATE STUDENTS WILL NEVER JUST TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT

Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.

—Foucault 142-43

Introduction

Those familiar with Constitutional and corporate law are aware of how over the last century and a half US corporations have gradually become more *like* individuals, beginning in earnest with the ratification of the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution in 1868 (Hammerstrom; Stiller). However, looking back at the last four decades or so—an era many observers cite as a time of profound changes to US workplace culture (Ehrenreich, *Fear*; Harvey; Wallulis)—it would not be inaccurate to say that the individual has become more *like* a corporation. We are our own marketing “platforms,” continuously engaged in complex processes of self-marketing, self-laboring, and self-governing, and in few occupations is this careerist drive more pronounced than in higher education. Most academics, rather than think of themselves as laborers or as employees working at University “X,” are socialized to see themselves as affiliated “academic entrepreneurs” (Berube; Giroux) who market their products to as wide an audience (or market-share) as possible. The fact that employment insecurity outside the academy has become the norm over the last forty years or so has only intensified the importance of remaining marketable and “employable” within higher education. Indeed, we are more far more “corporate” than we like to think.

This essay examines the largely unexamined nature of academic advice, or what I will call mainstream graduate student “advice-knowledge.” For all the advice offered up to graduate students in blogs, books, and brown bag workshops about navigating the increasingly unlikely transition from graduate school to full-time, non-contingent academic positions, few have scrutinized the nature and function of this advice. Taking a theoretical perspective informed by the later works of Michel Foucault and more recent critiques of neoliberalism and contemporary US employment culture, this article explores how advice-knowledge constructs, constrains, narrows, and normalizes the way graduate students think of themselves as individuals constantly in need of introspective work on themselves in order to remain, if not employed, then at least employable. Like Foucault’s famous image of panoptic power in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), advice-knowledge promotes a “turning inward” that has a way of deflecting attention away from social projects that require collective action, such as how we might make graduate studies and higher education in general more equitable and sustainable for everyone. My central claim is that academic

advice-knowledge espouses a form of self-governance and self-labor that actively works against collective action. Indeed, advice-knowledge as a discourse forms a crucial part of an overall technology of control that keeps the system functioning smoothly *as it is* by constraining individuals' capacities to imagine potential avenues for collective resistance.

I should note at the outset that my focus in this article is on mainstream academic employment advice directed to graduate students preparing for (or in the midst of) an academic job search. By “mainstream,” I mean the advice one can find in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and other websites and publications, as well as in advice books, online forums, and the increasingly significant Academic Jobs Wiki (Cook). I have chosen to analyze artifacts that I think are exemplary of major *trends* in academic advice-knowledge; hence, I make no claims to comprehensiveness, as a thorough examination of academic advice-knowledge in general could easily constitute a book-length project. For instance, I have not included advice aimed at organizing union drives or negotiating directly with administration, though such advice exists and has obvious significance in terms of its socialization of graduate students and academics in general.

Schematically, this theoretical overview of how graduate student advice-knowledge “works” is divided into five separate sections. First, I briefly discuss the notoriously slippery concept of neoliberalism. I then transition into an overview of how and why advice-knowledge as a discourse has been (and continues to be) an overlooked site for critical interrogation, paying particular attention to its “survivalist” tendencies. The next section focuses on how the pervasive language of “fit” shapes and conditions graduate students' experiences of the academic labor market, while the penultimate section discusses neoliberalism's championing of the personal. Here I suggest that a central feature of advice-knowledge—perhaps *the* central feature—is that it privatizes all forms of political, economic, and social struggle. In this way, the personal is rapidly becoming the only site at which politics or even economic or cultural struggles are meaningful to many people. I conclude by suggesting how this overarching discourse, one that concerns jobs, entrepreneurship, advice, and even the future of academic employment in the US, might be engaged differently.

What Is Neoliberalism?

What makes neoliberalism so difficult to pin down is that it cannot be neatly reduced to its functions and effects in a single domain. It is a matrix of concrete economic policies and political tenets concerning taxation, social welfare, and corporatism as much as it is a set of cultural attitudes and beliefs about money, competition, and the inherent morality of free markets. For some of its more enthusiastic acolytes, neoliberalism's tenets even form a kind of secular religion (Frank).

Susan Talburt has called neoliberalism the “dominant logic in higher education policy and practice” (464). A frequently misapplied term (Boas and Gans-Morse; Kawalilak), neoliberalism conceives of modern society as an “enterprise culture,” as Graham Burchell puts it, which means that one of its central features is to encourage individuals to think of themselves as entrepreneurial-economic subjects in *all* facets of their lives (29) and to “render the social domain economic” (Lemke 203).

But, following Jeffery T. Nealon, neoliberalism is perhaps best understood as the “operating system” of contemporary global capitalism (85). Even though its various manifestations differ considerably, the basic, underlying structure of US neoliberal thought remains largely the same: an ubiquitous emphasis on personal responsibility as a prerequisite for success, for example, and the belief that “free,” mostly deregulated markets are the best distributors of wealth and resources. Thomas Lemke makes a crucial (and often overlooked) point when he writes that neoliberalism is not just an “ideological rhetoric or . . . political-economic reality, but above all . . . a political project that endeavors to create a social reality *that it suggests already exists*” (203; emphasis added). Hence, the appropriateness of Nealon's “operating system” metaphor: neoliberalism is not just an ideology—it is an ideology that runs “behind” and “through” specific applications, actions, attitudes, and policy decisions, often blurring the boundaries considerably between more traditional political identities like conservative Republican or liberal

Democrat. In short, what makes neoliberalism “work” so well as an increasingly prevalent basis for economic, political, and cultural attitudes on everything from corporate deregulation to personal finance is that it does not announce itself as an ideology or a program for social thought—much less as a sort of secular religion of free markets and personal responsibility. Like the operating system humming along in the background on your computer, the most significant indicator of neoliberalism’s success as a dominant mode of thinking is precisely that you never have to think about it, even as we are all obliged to play by its rules.

“Survival Guide” Academic Advice-Knowledge

As with neoliberalism, academic advice-knowledge is frequently overlooked as a discourse that warrants critical attention. This is the case for at least two reasons: first, advice and self-help discourse in general have become central features of contemporary US culture, as evidenced by the nearly \$2.5-billion-a-year Americans spend on books, workshops, lectures, kits, seminars, life and career coaches, and other self-improvement measures (McGee 11; Salerno; Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*). Many of these materials are directed at helping people find one of the few well-paying, permanent jobs (and thus, the narrative goes, happiness and fulfillment) in an employment environment that becomes increasingly desperate with each month’s labor statistics. Second, digital culture and social networking have transformed academic advice-knowledge from a small subset of books and the occasional article to a discourse that grows by the day and, increasingly, by the hour. These factors contribute to advice-knowledge’s status as a discourse that simply *is*. It’s not supposed to appear as a discourse or as a collection of artifacts that requires critical attention or interpretation.

Of course, there’s nothing new about advising aspiring academics—some form of advice-giving has been around at least as far back as when Socrates ambled the Athenian perimeter with Phaedrus or when Plato schooled Aristotle on the dangers of persuasive speech (talk about advice as social control). But I would suggest that the nature and function of academic advice-knowledge have changed significantly in the last decade or so. Given the all-too familiar litany of crises facing graduate education, academic labor, and higher education in general, the pace and gravity of this advice have intensified. Whether packaged in one of the many academic “survival guides,” or in one of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s innumerable blogs and columns devoted to hiring, or plastered on the Academic Jobs Wiki with its censured list of “Universities to Fear,” graduate students of the 21st century are never very far from someone who knows exactly what they should (or shouldn’t) be doing. No matter their motivation, discipline, educational background, social status, disability, nationality, race, sex, or gender, there’s a “survival” guide on the market purporting to explain everything one needs to know to survive, as one recent advice manual puts it, their “stupid, stupid decision to go to grad school” (Ruben).

Today’s advice to graduate students also reifies certain cherished facets of 21st-century academic neoliberalism and the constitution of the neoliberal self, with a generous dash of American self-help culture tossed in for good measure. There are three significant components to this advice: (1) the system is just the way it is (i.e., “accept the status quo”); (2) to be a competitive, employable commodity in an ever-changing, ever-more unpredictable labor market, you must imbue every aspect of your life with an entrepreneurial edge (i.e., “the individual as entrepreneur”); and (3) an intense, nearly-exclusive focus on the personal as the ultimate locus of meaning and significance means that individual choices and “personal responsibility” are of the utmost importance (i.e., “the personal is everything”). Each of these facets constructs the *self*, the individual graduate student job seeker, as the epicenter of a capricious, fiercely competitive academic labor market. *You can’t control the circumstances that surround you, but you can always work on yourself*. Like other forms of popular self-help advice, the fantasy that academic advice-knowledge indulges in and holds out to graduate students is that one can—given the right attitude, the right mindset, and the right amount of inward-turning self-labor—make oneself immanently employable, indifferent to the contingencies of the academic labor market, and forever safe from the lottery-like nature of academic employment. It’s an appealing offer.

In *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005), Micki McGee explores this phenomenon through the concept of the “belabored self.” Taking a broad view of American self-help culture since the early 1970s, McGee shows how “changes in the nature of the labor market have made efforts at self-marketing and self-invention increasingly urgent” (16). In the twenty first century, to remain employed and employable requires continual work on one’s self. But this constant reinventing, updating, and revising of one’s professional-personal ethos “can lead . . . [to] a new sort of enslavement: into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly belabored” (McGee 12). For McGee, American self-help culture and its enormous advice apparatus form a discourse that promises to relieve (even as it intensifies) the immense pressures bearing down on the neoliberal ideal of the “masterful, self-governing self” (16). “Paradoxically,” she writes, “the imperative of inventing the self . . . in the literatures of self-improvement is often cast in the form of discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique, and stable self that might function—even thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market” (an important point I will return to in closing) (McGee 16).

What I’m calling “survival guide” advice-knowledge functions according to the same logic, purporting to advise graduate students on how to increase their chances of becoming employable at precisely the moment in academic labor history when such a promise is most likely to be heeded and most *unlikely* to be true. It’s no mistake that “survival” is one of the more prevalent metaphors in academic advice-knowledge; to name just a few titles, there’s the well-regarded *Surviving Your Academic Job Hunt*, as well as *A PhD Is Not Enough! A Guide to Survival in Science*, *The African American Student’s Guide to Surviving Graduate School*, *The Women’s Guide to Surviving Graduate School*, *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Graduate School*, and even *Surviving Your Graduate School Advisor*. Even when it isn’t used explicitly, the operative concept is present in most mainstream academic advice: *it’s a jungle out there, and this book/column/article/blog will give you the tools to “survive” it*.

Take, for instance, one of academia’s most well-known advice-givers, “Ms. Mentor” (Emily Toth), author of several advice books and a regular advice columnist for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* since the late 1990s. Toth’s first book, *Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia* (1997), garnered considerable praise, with one reviewer calling Toth the “ultimate protection for feminism” (Franke 86) and another writing that she “has been one of the loudest in the chorus of women . . . who by calling out for change have helped make it happen” (Stout 130). Toth’s more recent book, *Ms. Mentor’s New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia* (2009), received dust-jacket adulation from such luminaries as Elaine Showalter (“Required reading”) and Cathy Davidson (“At last, Ms. Mentor Unplugged, Uncensored, and Unrepentant!”). Toth’s advice has also received criticism, however, along the lines that it’s too chirpy, a tad anti-intellectual, the humor too one-sided (and relentless), and that it paints academia (and academic men in particular) with too broad a brush (Cohen). One reviewer chided Toth for her “insistence on viewing academia as a morality play with female heroes and male villains” (Stout 128).

The more recent book attempted to scale back the insider’s bombast a bit (as evidenced in part by the inclusion of advice for women and men), but it retained much of the underlying message and verve: the academy is a tough place to survive and thrive (especially for women), and making it into a full-time academic position and then on to tenure (which Toth sees as both the ultimate goal and as a form of revenge) will require “playing the game.” Addressing would-be critics in the Preface to her first book, Toth wrote that a prominent objection to her work intones, “You are a mindless, bourgeois tool of capitalist patriarchy. Instead of encouraging community, you support individualistic solutions. You should be enabling your readers to work to overthrow . . .” (xi). Toth then interrupts this anonymous critic of her book to admit that at this point she “tunes out, for she is not in the business of overthrowing capitalist patriarchy: her aims are far more modest, but much more immediate.” She wants “women to have power in academia NOW” (Toth, *Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable* xi).

On this and other points, Toth’s advice has undeniable appeal. There is something seductive about her insider’s appreciation of higher education and its more cutthroat habitudes and traditions, which she has a way of folding tidily into language about immediacy and practicality and “what works.” Certainly, we

know that discrimination exists in the academy on all sorts of bases, for example weight, gender, sex, orientation, age, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and ability. But what I would like to suggest, without getting bogged down by critique, is that Ms. Mentor's advice inaugurated—or at least popularized for an Internet-nascent academy—survival guide advice-knowledge as we know it today: a portrayal of higher education as a world capricious and wholly inhospitable to its young and its untenured, where advisors are deadbeats, professors are perverts, search committees are evil, and everyone must look out for herself. (The cover art of Toth's more recent book features a young, innocent-looking woman standing forlornly on the wrong side of an alligator-infested moat while Ms. Mentor offers her a cappuccino from high atop a stylized castle.) This almost Hobbesian view of academia should give us pause for what it suggests about the academic labor market for graduate students: while no one can seriously deny the difficulty or capriciousness of the labor market, should "survival" be the ultimate goal? Is this the best we can do? Like Hobbes' "war of all against all," the way graduate students are configured by this discourse is as lone wolves, not as unions of likeminded individuals with the capacity (if not the natural tendency) to come together for the good of all.

Survival is itself an interesting concept. By definition, it means "[s]omething that continues to exist after the cessation of something else, or of other things of the kind," and in contemporary usage, it tends to suggest the triumph of the individual, not necessarily the continued existence of a group or collective ("Survival"). As we know from watching the rise of reality television over the last decade, the group is usually significant only insofar as it can be exploited to ensure the success of the individual. (It's probably no coincidence that *Survivor*, which is widely regarded as the first popular reality TV show, was structured to reward group manipulation in the service of individual success.) There's an unspoken flipside to survival guide advice, which is, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, "cessation." Those who don't survive (i.e., fail to attain tenure-track positions) become, in Marc Bousquet's terms, the "waste products" of graduate education: shunned and forgotten by their departments and advisors ("Waste" 87).

As insecurity increasingly becomes the normal state of affairs, the inward-turning "self" at the center of the advice-dispensing maelstrom becomes not just an easy target, but the *only* target. Describing the "victim-blaming ideology" targeted at unemployed white-collar Americans, Barbara Ehrenreich writes that in the job-hunting workshops she attended even "the timid suggestion that there might be an outer world . . . ruled by CEOs was immediately rebuked; there was only us, the job seekers. It was we who had to change" (Ehrenreich, *Bait* 220-21). McGee calls this the "new survivalism that emerges against the background of a continuing inward turn" (51), and its effects are closer to victim abhorrence than mere victim-blaming. She writes that in contemporary self-help discourse, "[c]haracterizing oneself as a victim—or, worse still, falling into the role of victim—is anathema" (McGee 53).

Like Toth's stiff-arm to her critics in the Preface to her first book, survival guide advice works to deny or ignore critical engagement with extra-individual forces, and its metaphors of *survival*, *jungles*, *contests*, and *games* are singularly effective in an era conditioned to accept competition as an unquestionable, moral good. Nor are these attitudes relegated to survival guides. Even a quick review of the comments section of an *Inside Higher Ed* article or a *Chronicle* advice column will reveal dozens of repetitions of the same logic pinning the difficulties, inequities, and ever-present risks of failure on the victims themselves: get over it (Carroll, *How*), work harder, it's your fault, even "take responsibility for your decision" to become pregnant (Pat).

Between 2001 and 2004, Jill Carroll, a contingent faculty member and self-styled "proud part-timer," penned a popular advice column for the *Chronicle*. Following her self-published guide *How to Survive as an Adjunct Lecturer: An Entrepreneurial Strategy Manual* (2001), Carroll's columns covered topics ranging from the mundane ("How to Hold Office Hours without an Office") to the professional ("How to Be One of the Gang When You're Not") to the political ("Should You Join a Union?"). While her advice columns were addressed to contingent faculty, Carroll (like Toth) popularized an approach to employment advice that would come to characterize much of the survival guide advice-knowledge directed at graduate students over the last decade. One aspect of Carroll's approach that has become a central feature of survival guide advice-knowledge is its insistence that the status quo is just the way it is: most courses will

continue to be taught by contingent faculty and graduate students, most PhDs will never land tenure-track jobs, most universities will continue to devalue the humanities in favor of “technology, health care, [and] business,” and most of us will continue to “whine about it” until it changes or until we find something else to do (Carroll, *How* 3, 5-6). Not content to whine about the system and apparently unable to imagine how it might be changed, Carroll’s brand of survival guide advice, like Toth’s, draws its considerable rhetorical force from the practical, common-sense, bootstraps mentality it so ardently conveys and the temptingly pragmatic solutions she offers at the feet of such complex problems.

Operating in the same wheelhouse as victim-blaming, acceptance of the status quo is one of the hallmarks of contemporary survival guide approaches to advice-knowledge; it is often deployed early on in an advice article or column as a way to prepare the reader for the suggestions the writer is going to give next (*If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em—here’s how . . .*). As in mainstream self-help discourse, the first “lesson” is that it’s naïve and even a bit foolhardy to focus your energies on changing the “system”—which, again, could include anything from being female in a male-dominated discipline to being short or overweight. But, the logic goes, by taking these steps and working on yourself, you will have a better chance of success. Indeed, a great deal of survival guide advice is often concerned with the appearance of individual job seekers, as in Jessica Quillin’s advice column for *Inside Higher Ed* in which she advises academics looking for corporate consulting work how to dress, talk, and act. Quillin’s advice follows a familiar pattern in survival guide advice-knowledge: begin with a broad explanation of the current situation in higher education, which usually has to do with the fact that something about our work has fundamentally changed (e.g., accepting that it’s no longer okay for academics to dress poorly, for instance, or learning how to handle the possibility that your PhD might make your corporate clients uncomfortable). Then comes the advice itself: here’s how to dress well, overcome the negative associations of your PhD, and so forth. Questions of systemic transformation or of why the status quo values what it does are always conversations for another time. Discussions of why we continue to tacitly support an employment system that makes it necessary for women and minorities to be coached on how best to present themselves are continuously delayed to some other venue so that the presumably more important task of advising graduates how to look, act, preen, and “survive” can be covered. This, in essence, is the status quo maneuver.

It could be argued that since we have publication outlets for criticizing systems of all kinds (academic journals like this one, for instance), the function of academic advice is not to critique an existing system or to right a sinking ship, but to help graduate students and other job seekers cultivate a professional ethos, to provide practical, potentially “life-saving” advice to the would-be survivors. To the extent that survival guide advice relies on the status quo-maneuver to work is precisely the extent to which it propagates a feeling of hopelessness and presents a version of the world *as it is*, thereby bracketing-off extra-individual concerns and further delegitimizing the possibility of large-scale change. Given mainstream advice-knowledge’s ubiquity in the digital age, its rhetorical force, and thus its extraordinary ability to shape common attitudes and best practices concerning everything from the job search to navigating your first academic position to managing your finances, we have a responsibility, I believe, to engage with this advice and ask how it serves our graduate students and whether it merely reproduces and legitimates an exploitative system.

As if sensing the tense ethics of this situation, a would-be exception to the status-quo maneuver is advice of the “Just Don’t Go”-variety, whose exemplar is William Pannacker, formerly writing under his pre-tenure pseudonym “Thomas H. Benton.” Pannacker’s now-classic article “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go” concerns who should or shouldn’t go to graduate school and why: only do it if you’re (1) independently wealthy, (2) extraordinarily well-connected, (3) partnered with someone who can (and will) support you, and/or (4) already gainfully employed and looking to earn an extra credential. At first glance, this advice seems to stand outside the professionalization ethos of most other survival guide advice-knowledge. Pannacker’s line is not *You can have this, too, and here’s how . . .* but *No, you can’t, and here’s why . . .* In a series of eloquent, well-argued columns over the last few years, Pannacker (writing as Benton in the following excerpt) has attracted a fair amount of national attention, writing scathing prose like the following:

It's hard to tell young people that universities recognize that their idealism and energy—and lack of information—are an exploitable resource. For universities, the impact of graduate programs on the lives of those students is an acceptable externality, like dumping toxins into a river [or excreting waste from the body]. If you cannot find a tenure-track position, your university will no longer court you; it will pretend you do not exist and will act as if your unemployability is entirely your fault. It will make you feel ashamed, and you will probably just disappear, convinced it's right rather than that the game was rigged from the beginning.

Pannapacker repackaged his advice with some proposals for reforming graduate education in a 2011 *Slate* piece that generated “vigorous debate” and “lengthy responses,” according to the website. One commenter, a PhD candidate at the Ohio State University, accused Pannapacker of blaming the victim, writing that this

blame-the-victim line of thinking assumes that if we graduate students ‘just walk away’ and do other things with our lives, the university system will be compelled to mend its ways. But this is analogous to (and as false as) suggesting that the way to end corporate capitalism is for consumers to stop shopping at Walmart. (“Stop”)

Whether or not this commenter's analogy is completely apt (it seems difficult to deny, for instance, that boycotts can often be effective strategies for generating bad publicity for corporations or educating the public about a company's exploitative labor practices), it is also the case that the “Just Don't Go”-move indulges, in a slightly more insidious fashion, in both victim-blaming and status quo logic. Even as its advocates acknowledge the role of extra-individual, institutional forces in shaping graduate education (*this is the way it is . . .*), they insist on individual autonomy as the ultimate source of personal and professional responsibility (. . . *but you can still walk away*), thereby (re)placing responsibility for systemic transformation squarely on the shoulders of the individual graduate student. Not coincidentally, suggesting that thousands of graduate students simply walk away from exploitation also participates in the neoliberal “supply-side” fantasy of graduate education that has been decisively rejected by Bousquet and others: the notion that by stifling the “supply” of fresh new graduate students to the market god, the “demand” for tenure-track academic positions can be gradually stoked and, magically, expanded (*How* 123-124; “Waste”).

As these examples suggest, the “Just Don't Go”-move has gained significant traction in the last few years. History professor and blogger Larry Cebula, who in 2011 published a post entitled “Open Letter to My Students: No, You Cannot be a Professor,” received over 27,000 hits (an impressive number for a personal blog) and some 73 comments as of the time of this writing. The Academic Jobs Wiki and other social networks have become hotspots for swapping articles and blog posts on how graduate school will ruin your life (Schuman). And who at this point hasn't seen the ubiquitous Xtranormal video that made the rounds several years ago featuring a student proudly announcing to her jaded professor that she wants to become a professor, too? The student, who is portrayed as ignorant and naïve in the extreme, is met with a barrage of cynical, yet familiar explanations as to why she will never become a professor (Alisonles). Just don't go, indeed.

Survival of the “Fittest”?

It's not the world that needs changing...it's you. (Ehrenreich, *Bait* 85)

Armed with this ruthlessly pragmatic approach to academic labor's most intractable problems and bolstered by a kind of hyper-realist ethos befitting our times, survival guide approaches to advice-knowledge fit comfortably within academic neoliberalism's celebration of the individual as self-making and self-laboring entrepreneur: the popular notion that individuals are, in fact, ever-evolving commodities quixotically questing for the right “markets” in which to market themselves. In advice-knowledge discourse, this is known as “fit,” and for the graduate student job seeker, it's as elusive as it is critical. For graduate students about to begin or in the midst of a job search, the nebulous notion of fit takes on

supreme significance at exactly the same moment that any workable sense of what it might mean recedes into blurry platitudes about collegiality and “looking the part.”

A longtime staple in corporate culture, the concept of fit is given the Barbara Ehrenreich-treatment in *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2006). Going undercover to try to find a job as a PR/marketing specialist in the relatively stable pre-recession economy of the mid-2000s, Ehrenreich documents a world turned upside-down, where \$200/hour “Job Coaches” play with *Wizard of Oz* dolls and armies of laid-off executives flock to interstate hotels to recite mindless mantras about positivity and knowing oneself. As Ehrenreich describes it, the baseline of all of her experiences as a white-collar wannabe in corporate America (she never received so much as an interview for a job that wasn’t commission-only sales) is not that people “band together to work for a saner economy or a more human-friendly corporate environment” (*Bait* 85), but that we learn to use self-actualization techniques and other gimmicks to work on ourselves while the corporate machinery blithely grinds on. An individual’s failure to secure a corporate position is then internalized as evidence that one isn’t sufficiently “cheerful, enthusiastic, and obedient” (*Bait* 228) for the corporate world or even, as Ehrenreich herself was repeatedly told, that one’s resume needs to be “dumb[ed] down” (*Bait* 245).

The lesson is never that the system is unjust or exploitative. Most troubling, as Ehrenreich gradually learned, “hard skills” apparently count for little in the corporate world, while lacking squishy personality traits like “positivity” and “passion” could be a deal breaker. Actually “getting a job” seemed to be the last thing anybody on the hiring side of things wanted to talk about. In a peculiarly chilling scene, an investment firm manager downsized after twenty years is coached to repeat at a networking event, “It’s *not* about getting a job. It’s about knowing yourself.... The issue is Allan knowing who Allan is” (Ehrenreich, *Bait* 79; original emphasis).

The pernicious thing about fit, of course, is that in many cases the right fit is *any* fit. But since this is the truism that must not be spoken, job seekers, hiring institutions, and advice givers all pay homage to the concept to varying degrees. In 2011, the *Chronicle’s ProfHacker* blog ran an invitation for commenters to develop a crowd-sourced definition of “fit” (Hara). Most of the eighteen commenters, even those who seemed to view fit as a potentially positive set of criteria, agreed that it was a mysterious, ill-defined term typically used to make distinctions between candidates where no easy distinctions existed on paper (Stuntz). On the more cynical side, one commenter called fit a “capricious tool for maintaining power [that] has too little to do with true intellectual advancement, innovative thinking, or progressive teaching” (glomzx); another respondent with a somewhat more literary bent considered “[f]it . . . the hobgoblin of small minds” (5768).

More seriously, in a 2007 *Chronicle* letter to the editor, Lauren Kamnik wrote that over the last few decades, the Legal Advocacy Fund of the American Association of University Women had seen “a steady increase in the use of terms like ‘fit’ and ‘collegiality’ to mask discrimination toward women and members of minority groups in academia.” On the other hand, Melanie Springer Mock’s recent article on fit describes a colleague who accused her of using the word in a job ad as code for “white men need not apply.” Apparently, fit cuts both ways.

Mock concedes that fit is a term that “frightens job applicants,” and it’s worth asking why. Like Ehrenreich’s discovery that “soft” social traits such as likeability, positivity, and “niceness” are baseline requirements for success in white-collar America, fit reflects the academic version of neoliberal self-governance at work. This is not to deny that different individuals have different academic or professional personalities, or that someone committed to an ambitious research trajectory might have a difficult time managing a five-four load at a teaching-intensive institution; these are important considerations for hiring institutions and applicants to consider. But to the extent that some rather nebulous notion of fit has become central to the job search—as well as to academic advice-knowledge—it is a term that cannot be treated as superficially self-evident. To my mind, job seekers’ anxieties surrounding fit stem from (1) the sense that there’s not even a reasonable degree of predictability in a process that, as one online commenter puts it, is “impossible to game” (“Stop”) (i.e., hard skills and the ability to do the job well are no longer sufficient to gain employment); (2) the knowledge that shaping yourself into the right fit (*any* fit)—

without really understanding in any given case what that might mean—is absolutely crucial; and (3) the growing awareness that fit functions as a kind of cover for the simple fact that there aren't enough good, non-contingent positions to fit the vast numbers of deserving graduates. Add to this the fact that ours is a culture where virtually everyone—fit or not—parrots well-worn platitudes concerning the importance of “fitness” to leading productive lives (whether physical, financial, mental, parental, occupational, or institutional in nature), and it makes perfect sense that fit (like the virtues of “competition”) has taken on this kind of over-determined significance. As Thomas Lemke, Zygmunt Bauman, and other critics of neoliberalism have pointed out, terms like *fit*, *flexibility*, and *leanness* are key components of the neoliberal vision of a social-political-economic order in which the rigid disciplinary mechanisms of control (think the prison or the asylum in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*) are increasingly replaced with the much faster, sleeker technologies of the self by which the “autonomous” individual continually (and quite willingly) practices myriad techniques of self-regulation or self-work. In later works, Foucault called this technology “care of the self.”

In a seemingly odd reversal, however, “fit” can also provide graduate students with a longed-for sense of control. The popularity of survival guide advice-knowledge and the American obsession with self-help culture generally has developed out of the seductive illusion that these discourses hold out to us—that given the right amount of self-care and self-work, we *can* be the exception. It's the undeniably irresistible desire to feel as though there is some order, that hard work, sacrifice, and dedication might just pay off in the end (McGee). Really, nothing could be more American or more appealing to the sorts of bright, capable minds graduate study tends to attract. What today's graduate students have in common with the out-of-work executives and the other unemployables with whom Ehrenreich spends her days in windowless conference rooms is this: the need to feel as though one can, through self-making, self-laboring, and self-becoming, become not just employed, but always-*employable*, immune to unemployment as well as unemployability. It is a tempting offer, and to those for whom failure has never been an option (much less a reality), the logic of “I can always work a little harder (on myself)” takes on an almost moral imperative. To *not* engage in this kind of self-labor would be akin to a moral failing.

Moreover, if a job seeker is spending so much time and energy feverishly figuring out who she is, how to market herself, and how to become the right “fit” through piecemeal tactics of “survival,” then she is probably less interested in (or capable of) expending her energy on forming collectives with other students or advocating controversial positions and risky activities that could undermine her future on the academic labor market. This, too, has a precedent of sorts in American self-help culture. As McGee writes, “In less than thirty years, ‘self-help’—once synonymous with mutual aid—has come to be understood not only as distinct from collective action but actually as its opposite” (19). What now refers almost exclusively to practices of individual self-laboring and self-improvement, she writes, referred just a few decades ago “to cooperative efforts for mutually improved conditions on the part of a community of peers” (McGee 18). As Barbara Cruikshank shows in her influential study of the American self-esteem movement, self-esteem today is less about self-respect or self-worth, and more a technology for producing certain kinds of individuals: a “specialized knowledge of how to esteem our selves, to estimate, calculate, measure, evaluate, discipline, and judge ourselves” (233). In other words, it's a technology that understands the proper measure of the individual as economic, as the measure of the individual's ability to assess and work on herself, to turn herself into a marketable commodity. The cultural-moral-economic imperative that everyone, whether employed, underemployed, unemployed, or unemployable, continually work on themselves so as to remain *employable* and thus imminently available and ready for work “just in time” is a central tenet of neoliberalism and the high (personal) risk, low (corporate) overhead workplace vision it promotes. As Bauman writes, “[i]n the society of consumers, no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity” (12).

Now It's Personal

Given this intensification of economic privatization brought on by four decades of American neoliberalism (e.g., handing over public services to corporations for the sake of the free market, deregulating private interests, slashing social welfare programs, etc.), it makes sense that there would be a similar privatization at work in the cultural realm, too. Nealon traces the privatization of value through such familiar cultural sites as celebrity memoirs, the prominence of the self in indie-rock and hip-hop, and the fact that big-time sporting events like the Olympics and college football have become “orgies of personal revelation” (87-88). He suggests that the personal is not only a fertile site for political struggle, but also that these days it's increasingly becoming the *only* site at which politics “happens” in a way that matters to most people. Writing about Ken Burns' documentaries (and one could easily add the breakaway success of Daniel Day-Lewis's portrayal of Lincoln to the mix), Nealon argues that “history isn't real to ‘the public’ . . . until and unless it's run through the ringer of individual subjects and their interior, private experiences” (87). Even to be politically engaged with ostensibly public issues quite often puts one right back in a private context, both in terms of the types of issues (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, government surveillance, etc.) and the available means of support. Valid modes of support come not so much from a careful consideration of available evidence or public arguments, but from intimate soul searching, gut feelings, and intense spiritual “awakenings,” not unlike that of heavy-drinker-turned-fitness-jogger George W. Bush or actor Mickey Rourke's turnaround from dark side denizen to *Oprah* mainstay. Ronald Reagan once remarked that “all great change in America begins at the dinner table”; today it begins with a more empowered, self-aware *you*.

But the potential dangers of this cultural turn to the personal go beyond a mere allergy to the dubious aesthetics of celebrity culture. The personal now functions as *the* site at which deeply political issues are effectively depoliticized in such a way that makes appeals for collective identification with others—much less collective solidarity and struggle—a difficult sell. Unable to make ends meet on your \$12,000/year stipend? This isn't a structural problem, but a personal one—there's an advice column for you. Want to rant about how the search committee at the University of (insert real school name here) left you stranded at the airport and never reimbursed your hotel? There's a space for that. You can find an outlet to vent or an analogue to whatever anxious worry might be on your mind at any moment, but the Faustian bargain seems to be that the cost of temporarily assuaging your anxiety and unease is abandoning all hope of actually changing anything. This is precisely how, given all of the frank, graphic depictions of the horrors of academic labor mere mouse-clicks away, sites like the *Chronicle*, *Inside Higher Ed*, the Academic Jobs Wiki, and all those survival guides and advice books and blogs are still churning out graduate student advice-knowledge. Or more to the point, it's why so many graduate students are still convinced that they're the exception to what might well be the worst academic employment prospects in American history (Kreuter). In a neoliberal culture where all value is privatized and all struggle is understood as personal, to try to make common cause is perceived as naïve and somehow beside the point.

Because here's the twist. As Nealon also points out, and as this examination of advice-knowledge has attempted to show, the return of the personal is rarely viewed as yet another unfortunate symptom of neoliberalism that we should work to illuminate and oppose, but rather as an *escape* from the very logic of cultural privatization that has produced this situation in the first place. Hence, the ultimate goal of advice-knowledge is to help the advice-seeker uncover that still, small self at the core of her being (the metaphysics is inevitably one of Cartesian depth) that has been papered over with the detritus of practical existence, those “junky” human needs like a living wage or health insurance. As Nealon writes, the “emphasis on the small, private, intimate, noncommodified, seemingly self-empowering moments of everyday life is often thought to offer us a kind of swerve around the logics of the market and its inhuman profit motive” (Nealon 88-89). In advice-knowledge this cuts both ways, from victim-blaming and other instances of impugning the individual (“personal responsibility” increasingly means “you can't blame anyone but yourself”) to hero narratives of graduate students and contingent faculty who “beat the odds” and “survive” the system, like Henry Adams' personal recollections of graduate school in the 14-part series “Academic Bait-and-Switch” or the hundreds of anonymous personal narratives found in the

Chronicle forums. It seems so natural and uncomplicated that advice-knowledge would address itself to the person, the individual. After all, in contemporary capitalism, what else is there that matters?

Advice-knowledge capitalizes upon the personal as yet another domain in which one can pursue a sense of satisfaction and well-being, which, as Eileen Schell, Deborah Louis, and many others note, forms a narrative most often targeted at women. Some critics discuss similar phenomena under the post-Fordist economic rubric of flexible accumulation (Shumar), and Andrew Ross calls it the problem of “mental labor.” He suggests that one of the hallmarks of the global information economy has been the substitution of nonmaterial rewards and perks (e.g., nurturing a dream, having flexible hours, the love of the subject, or even the existential pleasure of thinking oneself a starving artist) for job security, benefits, and a fair (or even living) wage (15; cf. Bousquet, *How* 63, 167). A common feature of survival guide advice-knowledge is to include various “tips for thriving” aimed at graduate students and contingent faculty, most of which have to do with making oneself immanently available for any number of unpaid tasks, such as professionalization workshops and other self-improvement initiatives.

Conclusion

Riffing on neoliberal godfather Milton Friedman, we are reminded of David Harvey’s quip that the intense celebration of the self in neoliberalism means that individuals are always “free to choose” (69), but they aren’t supposed to choose to build strong collectives or form unions. Indeed, as I have tried to show in this piece, the well-documented employment anxieties facing today’s graduate students have intensified a “me-first” mentality that is reflected in the advice graduate students routinely hear and almost intuitively internalize: keep your head down; be “agreeable” and “energetic” (which usually means “smile while you work for free”) (Winzenburg; Ross); work within the system, don’t aggravate (Toth; Carroll); publish and present, don’t organize; pursue trendy research trajectories; avoid controversies and time-killers like advocating for graduate student healthcare; or even “Just Don’t Go” (Pannacker; Cebula). Born of neoliberal platitudes about the virtues of personal responsibility and mercilessly stoked by an environment of permanent austerity, what was once pretty responsible advice for budding intellectuals has taken on a kind of grim, univocal tenor. The underlying message is clear: the only thing that still “counts” for today’s graduate student is the capacity to market oneself within a constantly-shifting index of commodities and market values (i.e., what’s hot/what’s not) and frenetic entrepreneurial activity. Individual successes are trumpeted as proof of the fairness of the system and the inherent morality of hard work. As graduate students are told repeatedly to work harder (on themselves)—all the while publishing, presenting, teaching, mentoring, serving on committees, and performing other high-level professional tasks for what often amount to below-poverty level wages—what is too often left out of the conversation altogether is any sense of how they might work together to reclaim their futures as aspiring members of the professoriate through activism, collaboration, and collective action.

The function of advice knowledge and of neoliberal attitudes more generally is to depoliticize thoroughly political issues, and to privatize and internalize scarcity and inequality, thereby deflecting critical attention away from the existing structures of exploitation, as well as from the complex, seemingly intractable problems haunting US higher education. Whether this advice is “good” or “bad” is even less significant than arguing over whether it’s helpful or unhelpful. As long as it constrains individual autonomy to the point that our capacity to engage in the futures of our workplaces is relegated to determining “fit” or reveling in the triumphs of individuals and their personal revelations or determining how best to contort ourselves in relation to the existing labor system, then academic advice-knowledge works exactly as it’s supposed to work. In the end, the best advice we can give graduate students and contingent faculty alike is precisely the same advice they will never want to accept: that the academic labor system as it currently exists is not a referendum on them or their personalities or even their abilities. For those who are not already extraordinarily privileged, it’s a lottery that only a few can win.

As challenging as this sounds, we need to take a step back and realize that while our jobs are an important part of our lives, people are not—and should not be—reducible to their jobs. As Nora Watson remarks in

Studs Terkel's classic volume of oral history *Working* (1972), "[m]ost of us . . . have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people" (Terkel xxiv). We nonetheless need to do more. We need to make a concerted effort—together—to object to a system that exploits us, wastes resources, and ruins lives. We need to reject the implicit value system that says that people are expendable and that working for ten or fifteen years just to get a shot at a secure, moderately-compensated position in a university is not acceptable. We need to affirm that as workers, as laborers, and as professionals, even though many of us do indeed "love what we do, sometimes to the point of denying that our wages matter at all," we are not "special, but . . . typical" (Bousquet, "We Work").

Most importantly, we need to affirm our commitment to collective action, to unionization, and to organizing those workers who are most exploited by the academy and most vulnerable to its changing circumstances and mercurial whims: graduate students, contingent faculty, those who year after year find themselves in yet another visiting position, and everyone else in contemporary higher education's vast and multi-tiered cheap labor system. The forward movement of the university and of our workplace will not be attained in market-based terms or through a corporate paradigm. By course content, by discourse, by example, advisors and mentors can articulate to graduate students the important message that it is unlikely that they will be the exceptional individuals who will beat the odds. But this needn't sound like giving up altogether. In the here and now, we can work together to make our local institutions more accountable to their students, faculties, and those who live precariously somewhere in between.

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