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ACADEMIC LABOR IN THE *THIRD SPACE*

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What is academic labor? *Workplace* has had an enormous impact in the last twenty-five years provoking questions about the state of the academic worker and the academic workplace. It has improved conditions, generated policies, identified dignified professional pathways, and created solidarities between various marginalized and minoritized groups. However, this journal and the wider discourses of higher education have problematically assumed the concept of academic labor to be the exclusive domain of the faculty.

This troubling assumption reflects the dominant paradigm of higher education, where labor is neatly organized into binary, class-based categories (Whitchurch, 2013). There is the “academic” domain presumed to focus on teaching and the production of new disciplinary knowledge. Anything falling outside this domain is assumed to be “non-academic.” Essential to maintaining this binary is a false divergence between the “academic” as a space of expertise, thoughtfulness, and critical nuance, and the “non-academic” as the site of non-intellectual and replaceable managerial activity (Stoller, 2021). This binary is assumed as a precondition in most literatures on higher education. It also underpins most aspects of university life, including governance structures, cultural beliefs, human resource categorizations and policies, communication patterns, professional support structures, and employment statistics.

This special issue suggests the traditional, binary way of conceptualizing academic labor is as naive as it is limiting, and it must be reimagined. The issue attempts to expand the theoretical, conceptual, and organizational resources supporting what Celia Whitchurch (2013) calls *Third Space* professionals: a category of academic laborers, invisible in the dominant discourses of higher education, who exist between and disrupt the false distinction between so-called “academic” and “non-academic.”

Working through problems of division and exploitation between so-called First and Third Worlds, Homi Bhabha (1990; 2004) introduced the concept of *Third Space* as a creative, disruptive space of cultural production. Following Bhabha, in social theory *Third Space* has been used to resolve a range of binaries through the conceptualization of identities that trouble conventional ways of being and behaving. Scholars have used *Third Space* to examine disability, race, gender, and sexuality, where fluid identities disrupt rigid social categorizations and the cultural hierarchies that inevitably follow. *Third Space* identities are risky and dangerous because they span and complicate defined cultural categories. They are also spaces of creativity and innovation that open new cultural possibilities (Soja & Hooper, 1993).

Whitchurch draws on this concept to analyze labor in higher education, specifically related to groups of staff who do not fit conventional binary descriptors such as those enshrined in “academic” or “non-academic” employment categories (Whitchurch, 2015). *Third Space* professionals, like faculty, are required to hold advanced and terminal degrees, are rooted in disciplinary modes of inquiry, and engage in teaching, scholarship, and service as central parts of their work. They diverge from faculty in that their labor is praxis-driven and directly applied to improving the conditions of the institutions they serve. They are located in diverse areas of the institution, such as academic advising, writing programs and centers, quantitative reasoning centers, honors programs, first-year experience and transitions programs, women’s and LGBTQ centers, community engagement centers, accessibility resources, and teaching and learning centers, among others.

Third Space labor emerges on college campuses in one of two ways. In some cases, colleges need to adopt new practices or fill gaps to address the shifting educational needs of students, particularly as they diversify their student populations (Boquet, 1999). In other cases, campuses advance their institutions in signature directions and, in doing so, find that traditional, binary ways of operating as inadequate to move in these directions (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). For instance, almost all academic support fields (e.g., first-year and transition studies, writing studies, academic advising) trace their origins to the late 1960s and early 1970s as campuses across the US began to diversify in the wake of open admissions policies. In response, colleges looked for ways to support student academic needs (Carino, 1996) and build stronger connections between institutions and their students (Watts, 1999; Gardner, 2006). Community engagement centers emerged in the early 1990s in response to ongoing social and cultural concerns that universities had grown too insular and needed to devote more effort to directly dealing with the needs of local and global communities (Groark and McCall, 2018). Teaching and learning centers originate in Ernest Boyer's 1990 text *Scholarship Reconsidered*, which reimagined scholarly inquiry as central to teaching practice (Boyer, 1990).

For at least the last fifty years, *Third Space* professionals have been a necessary and critical part of teaching and learning in higher education. But they have also lived a paradoxical existence. However critical they are to the teaching and learning missions of their institutions, as with other non-binary identities, *Third Space* professionals are often illegible within, and therefore marginalized by, the very institutions they support.

Third Space professionals bring tremendous value to college campuses. They are typically the only professionals on college campuses with academic knowledge of teaching and learning in a post-secondary context, increasing the institution's capacity for immersive, engaged, and culturally responsive pedagogies (Ho, 2000; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). They also directly support the DEI missions of colleges and universities - almost all *Third Space* professions developed in response to traditional faculty being unable or unwilling to serve students from marginalized, minoritized, and under-resourced backgrounds (Astin, 1971). Because of their organizational positionality and academic expertise, they uniquely understand the student learning experience and they are positioned to advocate for policy, structural, or curricular changes needed to create more equitable learning environments. *Third Space* professionals work across departmental lines and can identify and develop opportunities for cross-campus partnerships and interdisciplinary collaborations (Bickford & Whisnant, 2010). They create new forms of scholarship (Eatman, 2014) and have pluralistic forms of scholarly impact (Arguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, & Cummings, 2014). They advance multiple university goals, often using scholarly approaches to improve a campus's understanding of an issue and use their knowledge to develop praxis-based scholarship that shapes national and international change movements (Janke, 2019). Because they have advanced degrees and often teach and conduct research, they also enhance the college's portfolio and can enrich its curriculum.

Yet, because they are illegible inside traditional organizational binaries, their work routinely falls within structural and policy "gaps" in their institutions. They are, for instance, consistently miscategorized by human resource offices as being a purely "administrative" activity (Stefani & Matthew, 2002; Green & Little, 2017). This categorization means they rarely have access to institutional support structures for their academic work (e.g., teaching, research, grants, and fellowships), although their contracts often include these activities as part of their professional duties (Bickford & Whisnant, 2010). *Third Space* professionals are also often barred from receiving institutional recognition, such as institutional designations, named professorships, and teaching and research awards, simply because of their class category. Despite their academic expertise and connection to the teaching and research mission of the university, they are also systematically excluded from university governance structures (Bessette, 2020). Lastly, unlike faculty who are seen as members of disciplinary communities and a larger professional community of faculty, *Third Space* professionals, collectively, have no larger national organization such as the AAUP to leverage when developing more equitable policies and advocating for organizational changes.

There are also deep cultural challenges facing *Third Space* professionals. Because their labor often performs a "helping" function, it is often coded as "feminine" and devalued as a result (Tipper, 1999; Leit et al., 2007; Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017). Although they are practicing academics, faculty often frame their professional contributions in oppositional (rather than complementary) terms (Handal, 2008), seeing it as a "bureaucratic" activity or an "illegitimate" form of scholarship (Rowland et al., 1998; Harland & Staniforth, 2003). Because they are not located in "home" departments, their expertise is rendered invisible in the epistemic economy of the university (Solomon et al., 2006). Conversely, because traditional academic labor is culturally assumed to be more desired and desirable, *Third Space* professionals are often coded as "failed" academics (Whitchurch, 2015, p. 86). This cultural denigration of their labor means they are frequently the subject of bullying and micro-aggressions by traditional faculty (Henderson, 2005; Perry, 2020).

The articles in this special issue are aimed at understanding the tensions and paradoxes of *Third Space* academic labor. They seek to problematize and humanize the uniqueness of work in the *Third Space*, and they also propose pathways for creating solidarity and institutional change for *Third Space* laborers both nationally and internationally. Our hope is that this issue ultimately contributes to a larger, growing discourse bringing *Third Space* labor out of the margins to recognize its central value in higher education.

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