‘Care Work’ and University Scapegoating: Making Social Reproduction Visible in the Teaching of Writing

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At the end of the spring semester this year, another faculty member stopped by my office and asked if I would be willing to take a break. We got up from our grading, walked around our blooming campus in early spring with cups of coffee as students lounged on green spaces with open laptops. We discussed the difficulty of getting into tenure-track jobs, moving around the country because of the lack of these jobs, former miscarriages, current child care responsibilities, and how all of these things intertwine. Indeed, it seems like ‘everyone’ goes through multiple events like these, and yet, somehow, the narrative is that our contingent positions and heavy teaching loads are the fault of no one but ourselves. It certainly feels like we are carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders sometimes: in this one conversation, as we walked around our pristine university campus with old brick buildings and sweeping lawns, we mentioned anxiety, lack of sleep, lack of publications, and wondering if we at all fit in. The strange thing, or perhaps not unexpected thing, is that I have had many conversations like this with colleagues, especially other female faculty, especially other mothers, and especially other contingent faculty.

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In the literature on these topics, and the burden we take on as academic laborers, we often use the words 'care work' or 'emotional labor' to demonstrate the ways in which much of our work is outside the classroom or outside the intellectual piece of our jobs, the many ways in which we care for students.

A more useful concept for explaining this work is social reproduction theory (SRT) which "interrogates the complex network of social processes and human relations that produces the conditions of existence for that entity," (Bhattacharya 2) meaning that as academic workers are constantly produced and reproduced in society, more particularly in universities, we can find certain aspects of their social reproduction highlighted precisely at the university itself and noted in 'skills-based' programs, such as writing programs. Social reproduction theory often recognizes the importance of public facilities that create the possibility of a worker who can come to work: from Marxian thinkers, this means a more specific reading of the word 'economy' that recognizes that capitalism is not just made up of workers and owners, but also generational reproductive labor that occurs in households, schools, and hospitals, which, according to Marx, in turn sustains the drive for accumulation (qtd. in Bhattacharya 2). A feminist perspective that highlights social reproduction is able to explain the contradictions ingrained in the systemic reproduction of capitalism; it serves to expand the understanding of labor, especially relevant to academic labor where we frequently overlook its application through talk of 'fulfilling our passions' or the privilege of intellectual labor. Social reproduction as a concept can remind us that some forms of labor cannot exist without others, that capitalism exists precisely because of these forms of reproductive labor, and that laborers reproduce labor in specific embodied ways.

This social reproductive feminism has been useful to understanding the raising of children and forms of work outside of a traditional laboring body. Certainly, many readers will likely identify with those two faculty members walking around a beautiful campus and yet feeling outside of it. We may think "oh, I do that 'care work' too" or "the emotional labor of my interactions with students and colleagues and service work goes unrecognized." And that is certainly true. But the concept of 'care work' implies that it is natural for women to take on a variety of forms of (mostly) unpaid labor, while social reproduction recognizes the importance of the ways in which this work falls to individuals likely be seen as 'natural' caring laborers, and the ways in which their labor contributes to the ongoing function of capitalism. Teaching work is often seen as a natural extension of a woman's role in the domestic sphere and maps onto the ways in which the neoliberal university operates: removing social supports for students and faculty, relying more heavily on contingent faculty to do this 'care work,' and consistently looking for ways to scapegoat the larger social and political structures to the individual.

A close look at how reproductive labor works can help us identity the ways in which it is not only ‘care work’ and emotional labor. Social reproduction as a category of analysis allows us to consider the role of the writing program in the larger neoliberal university within a global political framework, which in turn urges us to consider the ongoing feminization of work, particularly in the academy, and where it intersects with other social-institutional structures. Sharon Crowley wrote eloquently on the status of these writing programs, which have historically taught mainly first-year composition courses, and the ways in which these courses were ‘supplemented’ in English departments by part-time teachers in the 1950s and 1960s. The first-year composition course is still rarely taught by permanent faculty, which Crowley argued has always been irrelevant to the quality of teaching in such a course (4-5). Rather, the precarious position of both the first-year writing course and the faculty who teach it has more to do with the disciplinary status of writing studies in general and the nature of a first-year course, meaning that those who teach these courses are more likely to be “undervalued, overworked, and underpaid” (5). Writing studies itself is still not recognized as a discipline or a field of study itself, but rather a practice or a skill, and writing programs themselves are often seen as in service to other pieces of the university.

In Marxism or materialist feminism, we posit that the relations of production determine the relations of social reproduction and link the effects of class exploitation and location to forms of oppression predominantly theorized in terms of identity. Materialist feminists have examined the relationship between class, reproduction, and the oppression of women in different contexts, such as the reproduction of labor power, domestic labor, and the feminization of poverty and certain forms of work. A Marxist feminist critique highlights the power of private institutions, like the university in which I work, to exploit the labor of women as a free or inexpensive method of supporting a work force for the continued production of capital. A materialist socially reproductive view of the ‘disciplinarization’ of writing programs would allow room to understand this low status as situated in the struggle of writing program intellectuals for recognition and status, but in the objective conditions of labor created by university officials. Indeed, the control over the campus by upper administration, legislatures, and trustees continues, and we are able to locate the decline of the status of writing programs in the late twentieth century to a time in which the expansion of undergraduate admissions occurred while full-time faculty were reduced by ten percent, and while the number of graduate student employees was increased by forty percent (Crowley qtd. in Bousqet 500).

This story of the precarity of writing programs and the people in them ultimately requires no separation from the larger story of the academy, but the question is why we say that contingent faculty are to blame for their working conditions. The university creates a clear path to these conditions by strategically limiting tenure-track faculty

appointments and creating and enforcing a tiered system in which some instructors (and often all in university writing programs) are 'instructional' or contract. Through low teaching-track salaries, no university child care, and the consistent elimination of jobs with longer contracts (let alone the security of tenure), the university shifts this responsibility to students, parents, and faculty. Social reproduction theory aligns with this blame as a way to combat this scapegoating. Indeed, as the 'American Dream' has become more impossible for more people, universities use scapegoating to deflect blame away from the economic system, the highly paid administrators, and the reduction in tenure-track faculty in order to channel anger in other directions. Even labels like 'full-time faculty' and 'university teachers' (who are never at the same salary level as those who are tenure-track but appear to be) mask undermining and impoverishing economics in the university system. Scapegoating makes it easier to place blame on students themselves or faculty for not giving enough time or energy to individual students or classes, or not making time to do better-compensated research. It makes it easier to divide students from faculty and tier faculty into hierarchical positions, who should be working together to transform academic social and economic policies. The university's answer to this, of course, is to highlight the ways in which there are 'not enough opportunities for everyone' and makes it easier to write off more faculty as not good enough, not smart or talented, and leave unjust economic practices in the university untouched.

The invisibility of this precarity in the university system allows this self-blame, where we complain to each other only when we take much-needed breaks with other faculty in these walks around beautiful campuses. The more people who are in the contingent workforce, the easier it is to blame their poverty on personal failings rather than systemic failings. Recall that universities are not considering low wages, the scarcity of jobs, discrimination in the workplace, or a male model university system that assumes that one can work all day every day and have a full-time caregiver at home, as part of their economic responsibility. Still, these are the major forces driving the increase in contingent faculty with low wages and few benefits. Scapegoating also places the blame on women and helps mask their social reproductive labor, whether at the university or not, by stereotyping parents with added family responsibility who make 'choices' for more flexible labor practices.

The ultimate contradiction is that social reproduction is most evident in education itself, where a variety of teachers and parents and administrators remake the workforce continually. Yet, under capitalism, we view education as an attempt at meritocracy, allowing us to get ahead through education, leveling the playing field by allowing those who are born to lower classes a chance to move up. Of course, this fails in many obvious ways, such as access, cost, and class discrimination in language and culture, but social reproduction theory gives us room to demonstrate

that institutions like universities do not create equal opportunity but are actual mechanisms by which social inequalities are perpetuated.

Political Economy of 'Care Work' of the Academy

'Care work' has been a useful term for describing work that is unpaid in our economy, especially in terms of family and home labor. Parents are certainly no stranger to this concept, nor are teachers, who often care for students both inside and outside of the classroom. This is not limited to these natural extensions of our home and parenting lives, where we do much of our unpaid labor. Rather, reproductive labor is part of a capitalism that prioritizes certain people in certain ways. Indeed, we often call the home and family work 'care work' in a perhaps feminized phrase that describes things we do in response to one another in a loving way. However, social reproduction refers to the structures and activities that transmit ongoing social inequality, in particular, from one generation from the next. This isn't just 'care work,' but in fact offers a larger understanding of who does this reproductive labor that fuels capitalism.

Theories of social reproduction allow us more room to examine the ways in which sets of relations which seem independent, such as teaching in the classroom and 'caring' for students outside of it, are acts of interacting labor that play out in particularly gendered ways. Capitalism works well to constrain and continually impact our capacity to meet our needs, from basic subsistence to physical, emotional, and intellectual needs, and this is highlighted particularly well in recent changes made to the university system. As many of us do increasingly more 'care work' for the university, this is particularly noticeable for certain pieces of the working population, notably those populated with a majority of female professors in 'service' departments, such as writing. When we examine labor as a living, concrete relation that is situated in actual bodies and actual lives in academic spaces, we find that our labor is increasingly becoming more alienated labor. In universities across the country, teaching staff make every effort to push back against the dehumanizing dynamic that is part of these relations; for example, every day we work and labor and are alienated from it, we feel helpful to a particular student and glad to advocate or teach in both intellectual and emotional ways and are often, in fact, fully invested in this labor as part of our unalienating and more human labor, including intellectual (conversations, course design, engagement with course material), practical (teaching), and the extraordinary 'care work' we do outside of the classroom (such as conversations with students, letter writing, planning of academic careers and career support, and even the collegial conversation that started this piece). Without this 'care work,' we couldn't create space for the other labor to be done, the labor that these students will come to perform in the global marketplace, and the more 'intellectual' labor done in other places in the university. Instead of increased care of students, female faculty in service programs are increasingly making up for what is lacking in society

and its microcosm at the university—close, personal attention, mental health care, and emotional and writing support.

A recent academic blog post referred to the university as an MLM (Multi-Level Marketing scheme) (Peterson), meaning the overproduction of Ph.D.s has left us all lower paid, more responsible, and increasingly responsible for increased labor time. At my university, professors outside of the writing program have even been known to demand to faculty inside it: "I have a student who can't write; who taught this person?" One even reprimanded a writing professor for a student's grade. Another colleague said that when she conveyed that she was taking a position as a writing instructor, she was met with: "Don't you want to be one of us? You know, an academic." Indeed, writing programs throughout the country have historically struggled with this divide, and university administration seeing it as a 'skills-based' approach.

The consistent use of graduate student labor in writing programs is particularly noteworthy. My university is guilty of this: most of the teaching in the writing program is done by Ph.D. students in English. Undergraduates are expected to stand on their own two feet, and if they are unable to, on the backs of increasingly low-paid careers. This 'care work' at my university is actually called "CARE," and writing instructors, many of whom teach first-year students have been asked to pay attention to student absences and behavior more than other instructors. We file more 'CARE referrals,' where we send names of students who might be in crisis to mental health offices, than any other program or department at the university because of our small classes and close attention to students and student writing. We are told in multiple ways that this work doesn't really 'count' to the university (we are a department that services the college, and yet it is expected that we will do the bulk of the labor in the service of other programs). It is expected because we are told that students have more trouble than ever, and that our promotions and contract renewals often rely on course evaluations.

With too many people coming through grad school (more than double the numbers of 30 years ago, with fewer and fewer tenure-track jobs), there are too few sustainable academic jobs. This means the market is saturated with many more qualified applicants than jobs, and existing jobs can demand more of applicants (more qualifications, less money, or even unpaid jobs that are part of 'pool' positions without any promise of future employment) while instructors and applicants consistently lower their own expectations. We don't often complain about the compensation, missing benefits, increased erosion of job security, or increase to course load, service, and we sacrifice desired location or family. In writing programs, where the majority of faculty are female, this often looks like increased 'care work' in order to try to receive excellent course evaluations, which in turn have been shown to be skewed against women and people of color. Indeed, my own course evaluations are often high when 'care work' is mentioned, such as "she is very nice and really cares

about our writing," or lower when comments are framed along the lines of not being very caring: "her comments are unhelpful" and only caring about course content (intellectual labor), not student writing ('care work'), in addition to gendered biases they distinctively show. The current attacks on tenure signal major shifts in academic employment. The downsizing of higher education has resulted in a continuing crisis of employment for Ph.D.s, and this is often scapegoated to graduate students themselves. This can be seen in the recent complaint by Colombia English Ph.D. students who felt both "a sense of futility" and "a sense of outrage" that the department was admitting more students than would possibly have a tenure-track job at the end of it, while also criticizing the program for not preparing them for alternative careers (Cassuto). The university responded with a plan to offer professional development, but without an analysis of social reproduction or larger political-economic structures, this is futile theorizing and, again, scapegoating.

Here we divide the writing work as non-intellectual labor, which seems to the university and the academic system as a whole as lower tier work, and non-academic labor that focuses only on the practicality of writing, signaling that no one else at this university wants to do this work, and it is consistently undervalued. In fact, one instructor in the writing program where I teach works exclusively with graduate writing groups, or the ways that the university is not assisting graduate students in the production of (unpaid) academic writing, and therefore takes on additional socially reproductive labor in the form of managing the alienated feelings of graduate students who have higher rates of mental illness than the rest of the population and yet need to write consistently and produce research findings for the university.

Over 20 years ago, in *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*, Eileen Schell provided a critical examination from which to understand the status of non-tenure-track faculty, especially in the field of writing. She articulated a clear goal of providing contingent faculty with an understanding of this university scapegoating, urging us to see the larger political economic structure of the university, and the university's role in attempting to explain this status as individual choice or circumstance, or perhaps even poor life choice (14). Schell also urged composition's rhetorics of liberation, empowerment, and democracy to consider their complicity in the exploitation of part-time faculty--privilege rests on the backs of a large underclass of contingent faculty--and explicitly names "contingent labor" to describe part-time and non-tenure-track faculty because it more precisely names their labor conditions. Still, the socially reproductive labor is not named. Like Crowley, Schell reminds us that these low-status and low-paid workers often teach the most demanding courses (grading writing work closely is not the same cognitive load as counting students responsible for material, but read multiple drafts, conference with students, and hold the burden of helping them become stronger writers and academics) often teach 3-4 classes per semester,

which is double that of tenure-track faculty at my institution, for example, and is often accompanied by missing benefits and low wages (67-69).

As writers like Susan Miller and others have also argued, the exploitation of non-tenure-track faculty must be viewed within the context of both the academy, women's labor, and the history and status of writing programs themselves. A broader perspective by Schell has foregrounded the educational and professional history of women in higher education, and we can further illuminate the political and economic context surrounding women's work as teachers with Schell's analysis of the interrelationship between the industrial capitalism emerging in the nineteenth century and the prescribed female roles those economic changes required. This layer of Marxist social reproduction allows us to point to the historical factors combined to create the political shift in which the professionalization of women meant entering the workforce as teachers, which was viewed as the proper role for the natural motherhood. Teaching was morally appropriate 'care work' for women, seen as an outgrowth of home work, and also cheap labor that allowed women to continue their roles as maternal figures. This 'care work' is more fully formed by social reproduction, which allows us to see the multiple ways we reproduce labor for the academy through care-driven ways.

The history of higher education would seem to contradict this, but, of course, women had a difficult time entering higher education as students or teachers, and still struggle with fitting in and moving up in ranks (Rotolo 84). Other scholars have noted that the 20th century has dual stories of the decline of rhetoric and composition as fields, at the same time that women were not able to attend college and hardly any were admitted to Ph.D. programs. Labor constraints on women coincided with this history, meaning that as female employees are seen as offering a more nurturing, self-sacrificing nature, and it is this maternal 'nature' that led them to low-level work in the first place. This 'natural' fit for women's labor then carried over into early twentieth-century labor practices where women were expected to do ongoing and often full-time 'care work' as an extension of their work at home. As a result, writing programs both began with and continue with a majority female faculty, who were simply thought to be well fitted for teaching writing. The perpetuation of these stereotypes about women's motivations in seeking careers in teaching has continued to keep women in contingent status and scapegoated as making other 'life choices' such as family constraints or leaves. Women are still concentrated in a few disciplines in the academy itself; the higher the academic rank and more prestigious the department or institution, the fewer the numbers of women. Women at every rank in every field still earn less than male counterparts, and women are still tenured less frequently than males, especially in writing. Still, the university, as well as academic publications, continue to perpetuate a reductionist representation of non-tenure-track faculty whose difficultly attaining the

rank and status of the tenure-track can be blamed on no one but themselves.

Feminization of the Academic Workforce

Schell's argument above that the continuing feminization of writing itself is a major factor in the exploitation of non-tenure-track faculty means that women's authority is often still relegated to the home or domestic or personal sphere. The university continues to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies in which women are still positioned as caregivers for writing programs and university students themselves. These understandings of a woman's role in 'care work' reinforces the lower status of writing programs themselves and the people in them. At the university where I teach writing, writing program faculty do work that other instructors are unwilling to do in number of ways: I read student work closely, I read multiple drafts, comment on the writing and the argument, and how it is shaped or not. Barbara Ehrenreich has referred to the increase in female service workforce as its own concept in the economy, or 'pink-collar' workers, and feminist political economists have noticed the ongoing feminization of labor that comes with the increase of women in positions that previously belonged to men. Indeed, universities across the country are employing disproportionate numbers of women in low-paid, mostly non-tenured positions, that have significantly less job security, lower status within the university, and no path to move into ranks that might allow them to be paid better.

Many public policies and universities themselves still assume a masculine model in standard employment relationships and perpetuate norms of female caregiving, both paid and unpaid (Vosko 27). Feminist political economists have connected this scramble to the increased feminization and commodification of labor, noting the "gendered precariousness" (Vosko 14) that exists in many workplaces. Indeed, scholars who happen to be women, and especially women who happen to be mothers, fill precarious, part-time temporary positions in universities throughout the country. This "world of the invisible" (Ennis 177) relies on hidden, temporary faculty, the majority of whom are women, many of whom who have taken 'breaks' for motherhood. Indeed, certain events, such as the birth of a child, can increase all workers' exposure to forms of employment characterized by insecurity (Stanford and Vosko 86).

The market is such that many Ph.D.s do semester-to-semester work by contract for a few thousand dollars a course and no benefits. Feminists have made an effort to understand why this choice is made more often by women in the academy (often mothers) working as contract laborers or "hidden academics" (Ennis 177) who try to combine motherhood and scholarship. In labor studies, this situation is referred to as *flexibility*, a euphemism for the increased disappearance of income support and social security, the relaxation of labor market regulations, and the rising power of private actors—such as universities—to determine and

control the terms of the working relationship. These strategies have been increasingly employed over the past thirty years and have had marked effects on academic workers, especially teaching faculty, leading to greater vulnerability and polarization. In my university, there is a stark divide among contingent 'teaching' faculty and tenured or tenure-track 'research' faculty, which serves well to allow the 'care work' to be on the backs of a mostly female workforce with similar degrees and qualifications. This results from the fact that in universities across the country, flexibility has meant fewer teaching jobs in all fields and a drastic reduction in positions that come with job security and protections.

Marked increases in the rates of precarious employment in the United States impacts the job market in particular ways: wages, working time, vacations and leave, termination and severance, as well as health and safety (Vosko, Grundy, and Thomas 63). This is acutely highlighted in the labor market in the academy, which employs a workforce of 'privileged' people with advanced degrees and is culturally expected to be on par with the top levels of the U.S. workforce. Using David Harvey's analysis, Jesse Priest highlights the creation of labor and value in the academy, and as particularly evident in the writing program. Students are viewed by university administrations as in need of skills in order to allow them further opportunity and ability in other courses; again, work others may see as not having room or time for in classes. Disciplinary professors attempt in many ways to make time for writing but are unable to, and of course someone has to offer student support in this way, especially students who feel intimidated by academic writing and have struggled to communicate their ideas in writing. University practice continues to create greater need for this unpaid and undervalued socially reproductive labor, and the contradiction is that it makes it more and more difficult for instructors who do this work to do it successfully. There are no day care facilities at my campus, for example, or parking with accessible ways to bring a stroller or small child.

The nature of this work is seen as inherently less valuable than work done by research professors, who often articulate their frustration with teaching and their particular frustration with teaching writing and reading student writing. More specific ways to eliminate 'writing instruction' from the core university mission can be seen in university practices of excluding writing faculty from grant-eligibility, meaning that the universities themselves "engage in a constant institutional re-affirmation of this devalued commodification of their [teaching] labor" (Priest 43). This commodification process means that the faculty labor, for universities, exists only on the market and is seen only as a consumer product. Composition studies often highlights this. A recent poor review of my own classes from a current student on the infamous Rate My Professor website scorned my work and attitude toward my own class as something I have been taking "too seriously" for "only a writing course." This is of course an opinion perhaps partially adopted from university

faculty and administrators who see the nature of writing as something to be devalued in terms of practicality instead of intellectual pursuit; again, from our social structures that prioritize intellectual labor over manual labor. We also note that the student does not take the course seriously and the expectation is that it shouldn't be taken 'seriously,' meaning it's not for a major, it's not a serious course, such as perhaps something more useful for math or engineering. Here, writing at the university is among manual labor, or for those who don't think writing is worthwhile to pursue.

As Priest points out with assistance from other materialist interpretations of the university labor market, courses themselves become commodities to be marketed and sold on the university marketplace, and, in fact, I have heard my own course marketed to prospective students on tour with parents outside my office. Tour guides often say, "We have one required course, which is the writing course, but there are many varieties and 20 different topics, even one on Contemporary Social Movements." This advertising of my course with a topic that may appeal to young prospective students solidifies its commodification and mirrors the global marketplace. It is required and therefore less important than one you might choose, but students are able to 'choose' on the marketplace of courses. Of course, the ultimate paradox here is the course is based on materialist theory and radical politics, while remaining on the market for 'choice' among many.

However, as it stands, the invisibility of this process increases the divide between tenure-track and contingent faculty, reinforcing the gendered devaluation and the socially reproductive labor at the bottom of the ranks. This distinction between intellectual (research grants, research projects) and non-intellectual (writing course design, writing group design, support for students) eliminates the actual real-world marketplace of the larger academy and our labor, whether intellectual or not. An April 2019 tweet by Ross Daniel Bullen outlines what actually happened in the past few decades in higher education: they increased tuition, cut mental health support for students, rely mostly on contingent, non-tenure-track faculty, and work to beautify the campus for donors and parents paying tuition instead of increasing education access, like library resources, or, in Bullen's words, "razed the library to build an on-campus lazy river" (@BullenRoss) and use scapegoating on the backs of students and contingent faculty, blaming them, or perhaps even social media itself, for student struggles.

There is some related discussion about what belongs to writing (skill-building) and what belongs to other, more 'intellectual' departments. There is also a gender bias present here ; for example, women who serve as full-time employees are more likely to be in non-tenure-track positions than men (Mitchell and Martin 648), and find that students require women to offer more interpersonal support than instructors who are men, including needing female professors to be warmer and offer a more personality-based evaluation, with lower perceptions of intelligence, and

more emphasis on both personality and appearance. Another recent report notes how much more often female faculty are required to do not only emotional labor for students but also respond more often to favor requests (Flaherty).

We have to hear more from these writing instructors, not only those who make sacrifices for the benefit of the academy and give close attention to students who will become talented workers in the global political economy, but highlight this process and the university's role in it, instead of allowing the scapegoating of the economic problems and larger contradictions of capitalism onto individuals. Using the framework of socially reproductive labor to understand the crisis of the university is not just to thank the people who do 'care work' or compensate or value them, but to see their 'care' as an extension of their natural unpaid labor. It can also be used to anger ourselves enough to make visible these practices throughout the university, highlighting their relationship to the global political economic system that works to support these labor practices, while at the same time making both the people and their labor more visible.

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