

Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association

Affective Labor

Spring 2023, Volume 56, Number 1

“Willing to Do Anything and to Do It Cheerfully”: The Emotional Labor of Wartime Nursing

Meg Albrinck

Abstract: In this essay I situate First World War nursing narratives by Enid Bagnold, Mary Borden, and Lesley Smith within the framework of emotional labor developed by Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Although Hochschild’s study does not focus on wartime nursing, her model of emotional labor can effectively illuminate the ways in which nurses encountered their peers, supervisors, and patients; managed the emotions that attended those encounters; and documented those experiences in fiction and memoir. I focus on three aspects of Hochschild’s framework that directly connect to the affective lives of wartime nurses: establishment of “feeling rules,” strategies for emotion management, and the impact of those strategies. I explore expectations and impacts of emotional labor as revealed in a variety of sources, including recruiting and training materials from the British Red Cross Society, nursing textbooks, and literary accounts. Reading these texts through the lens of emotional labor reveals an apparent mismatch between the idealized feeling rules and the actual experiences of the role, allowing us to understand scenes of emotional estrangement in new ways.

Keywords: cultural studies, feminist studies, healthcare, modernity, prose, war literature, women and gender studies

The Art of Artlessness: Affective Labor and the Black Mask in Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha”

Lauren Bunce

Abstract: In Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha” affective labor simultaneously enables and masks forms of intimacy that may otherwise be considered illicit. Meanwhile, forms of embodied difference become red herrings intended to draw attention away from—while making possible—the forms of homosocial intimacy and knowledge-making that constitute unpaid, gendered labor. While the story of “Melanctha” ostensibly hinges on a young Black woman’s vexed relations of care, it is also a story about modernist storytelling, drawing on and concealing the work of Blackness as it makes possible Stein’s innovations in form. The narrator seems invested in portraying Melanctha as an unwittingly unreliable character, emphasizing that she lacks the knowledge, intentionality, and memory required

to tell stories. That Stein can shape a narrative with apparent artlessness is significant when considering the influence of the African mask on her formal experimentation. This essay contends that affective labor is what binds artlessness, artifice, and embodied difference together in Stein's novella. While others have argued that the Black mask reveals and facilitates the expression of non-normative forms of intimacy in "Melanctha," I claim that by performing its crucial secret-keeping function, the mask—and the affective labor it represents—cannot help but reveal itself. Drawing inspiration from the works of Arlie Hochschild, Silvia Federici, and Sianne Ngai, this essay reframes affective labor as a deliberate and affirmative practice by which people employ their feelings to leverage social interactions, acquire knowledge, and navigate structures of power.

Keywords: affective labor, Blackness, gender, modernism, work

Disappearing Acts

Antonio J. Ferraro

Abstract: The increasing popularity of academic "quit lit" has energized discussions of the affective difficulties of academia, with much of the focus on the topic of grief. This essay asks whether our conversations about the emotional labor of higher education might benefit from a shift away from understanding this grief as unique to the profession. What new pathways for collective action and care might open up if we understood our work in academia, particularly our teaching, as sharing many qualities with the work performed by others? I argue that if we understand teaching as a performance, and ask what it therefore shares with the performances, labor, and work of others, we can gain an expanded and more productive understanding not just of the affective dimensions of our profession but of our grief as well.

Keywords: "quit lit," academia, labor, performance, grief

Are You My Progeny?: Academic Labor as Reproduction

Jon Heggstad

Abstract: There is a long discursive history that addresses academic labor within a metaphorical framework of reproductive labor. This trend has seen a viral rebirth on social media platforms as countless posts have extended this connection, fleshing out the ways in which these forms of labor might equate to or inform one another. Looking to a series of recent online posts, this brief essay examines what results from the continuation of this metaphorical framing.

Keywords: academic labor, feminist theory, gender studies, queer studies, reproduction, sexuality

Embracing a Pedagogy of Care at UW–Green Bay: Covid and Beyond

Ann Mattis and Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier

Abstract: This paper explores how two English and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies professors from the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay embraced the concept of radical care during and since Covid for themselves and their students. Ann Mattis and Valerie Murrenus Pilmaier discuss how they adapted to this situation by combining the idea of “care as a critical survival strategy,” as outlined in Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Kneese’s “Radical Care,” with a community of care approach. They look at how that affected their UW–Green Bay students and themselves. Mattis focuses specifically on theorizing how the affective labor of the professor/student dynamic has increased and necessitated pedagogical strategies that account for the newfound stresses. Murrenus Pilmaier theorizes her course revisions in relation to a trauma-informed pedagogical model.

Keywords: affective labor, care work, community, neoliberalism, pedagogy

Forum: Four Papers on “Academic Labor” from the Modern Language Association’s 2023 Convention

What Don’t You Like about Your Job?

Walter Benn Michaels

Abstract: “What Don’t You Like about Your Job?” argues for a certain tension between the commitment to unionizing faculty and the commitment to what gets called “social justice.” It suggests that even though faculty unions aren’t very radical, they embody a potential for radical political change unavailable anywhere else in the university.

Keywords: faculty unions, human resources, non-discrimination

The Condition of the Intellectual Laborer in Academia

Daniel Burnfin

Abstract: This paper presents a critical-philosophical reflection on the state of working conditions and academic production in contemporary higher education. It addresses the concept of “bullshit”

advanced by Harry Frankfurt and developed by others as it might apply to those domains. The necessity that professional academics either “publish or perish” is a gentler way of saying one must “work or starve.” And this economic condition introduces extraneous motives that undermine the epistemic goals of intellectual inquiry and scientific community. In short, those economic conditions of intellectual work give rise to much of the “bullshit,” as Frankfurt might put it, which academics and even those outside of the academy must now endure, given the current institutional situation. The paper concludes, however, that academic work is not exactly what David Graeber has called “bullshit jobs,” though it does indeed seem inseparable from the latter.

Keywords: academia, intellectual labor, work, capitalism, administration, bullshit, bullshit jobs

The Well-Endowed University: Philanthropy and Financialization in Higher Education

Catherine Liu

Abstract: This paper offers a brief history of the ways in which finance capital and university endowments worked together to produce a fully financialized higher education system, one in which academic priorities are shaped by the imperative to raise funds in an arms war between research universities to promote their own rankings. This paper also provides an analysis of how post-Reagan era tax reforms shaped and strengthened universities as philanthropic, not-for-profit organizations that courted wealthy people for donations in order to bolster their endowments while allowing these donors to benefit from generous tax write-offs. The academic research priorities of prestigious contemporary American universities are driven by the need to increase donations both for targeted public-private partnerships and for financial speculations facilitated by the growth of endowments. An increasingly stratified system of higher education and an increasingly donor friendly institution, the contemporary university has also been indispensable in building the power of private equity in the post-industrial phase of contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: philanthropy, financialization, finance capital, fundraising, the humanities, education infrastructure, capitalism, neoliberalism, academic freedom, austerity

The Political Economy of the Credential Industry

N.A. Peters and Adam Theron-Lee Rensch

Abstract: This paper examines the political and economic role of student debt in higher education. As a result of so-called degree inflation, we argue, graduate degrees became increasingly necessary for academics to distinguish themselves in a competitive and precarious job market. This credential accumulation is a major contributor to the overall student debt balance, as graduate degrees are considerably more expensive and students may borrow the entire cost of the attendance as

determined by the school. The increase of student borrowing, combined with a declining number of available academic positions, has created a highly educated but permanently indebted class of professionals. The political and economic implications of this situation are far-reaching, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: higher education, student loans, debt, political economy, graduate degree