In, Feminist Waves/Feminist Generations. Ed. Jennifer Pierce et al. Minneapolis: U of MN Press, 2007

5. Innovation Is Overtime

An Ethical Analysis of "Politically Committed" Academic Labor

Lisa J. Disch and Jean M. O'Brien

Hyde Park, Chicago, Spring, 1989

A professor strides rapidly out of the Joseph R. Regenstein Library. She crosses Fifty-seventh Street, steps onto the quad, and turns her mind toward class. She is a high-powered academic, famously overworked, but one who appears poised at all times. For this, she is venerated.

How does she do it? She finds time for just about everything she is asked to do—and as a woman academic she is asked to do a lot. The University of Chicago in 1989 is at least ten years behind the times, if "the times" in this context can be defined by its response to feminism. It has yet to create a feminist, gender, or women's studies program and counts few women among its tenured and tenure-track faculty, despite the fact that nearly half of its undergraduate students are women. Under such conditions, a scholar who happens to be a woman is called on to represent women no matter what her research specialization. She has landed a job in a context that makes her an exception.

This means that she will be expected to participate in a unique category of service, service that presents itself as political, over and above that which she is asked to perform for her department. Five or six times a year, administrators tap her to serve on collegewide or university-wide committees as a kind of insurance policy. It doesn't look good to have all-male committees speaking for the faculty as a whole. She nearly always agrees, taking it as her calling to speak for this university's systematically underrepresented. This is a self-imposed duty ("If I don't do it, no one else will do it *well*.") that strikes a familiar chord in so many of us who invest our academic careers with political meaning.

This is how women (and other "exceptional") faculty become role models for more than their scholarship: We are models of how not to say "no" in the face of what presents itself as breaking new ground. We are the ones you count on. To take it on. And pull it off. Seemingly effortlessly.

Jeani O'Brien was crossing the quad that afternoon, just as this high-

powered woman was making her way toward class. She was ABD, and she had great news: she had just been hired to fill a one-year replacement slot as an American Indian historian at the University of Minnesota. An exchange took place.

THE PROFESSOR: How are you?
JEANI: So busy. Frantically busy. I can't wait to get to this job because then things will finally slow down.
THE PROFESSOR: *Laughs. Says nothing more.*

Introduction

"Innovation is overtime." That is really how we thought of our lives as feminists. Paying with our weekends for the privilege—and it truly was one—of being able to work on academic initiatives that meant something to us. Wasn't this what Jeani was meant to take away from that accidental encounter with one of the women professors she had looked up to? Isn't this what her silence meant to say? "You think you're working hard now but just wait until you start your job: you'll be one of the ones they count on not just to get things done but to make a difference."

It was 2002. We had both held tenure for about five years. And we had both learned, to our dismay, that earning tenure puts you on the fast track for administrative service. Jeani did a three-year stint as chair of American Studies and Lisa Disch served a term as director of the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies.

We both took on these assignments pretty much the same way we had taken on our feminism—as something you did without question. That's one of the peculiarities of being neither of the "second" nor of the "third" wave. People were burning bras before we were even *wearing* them. We grew up as feminists, but we were too young to be part of the struggle. We didn't need college professors to introduce us to feminism. And good thing, too, because feminism was not something you studied in the mid-1970s, except at the few places (like Minnesota) that were way ahead of the curve.

This was true for each of us even in graduate school, for different reasons. Jeani chose a field, history, where feminist studies were flourishing but went to a school, University of Chicago, that was (as we have noted) well behind the times. Lisa went to Rutgers, a feminist hotbed, where Catherine Stimson (a founding editor of *Signs*) was a dean, and departments like history and English were blazing new trails. But she

did a degree in political philosophy in the political science department, which had few women faculty and hired its first feminist theorist only as Lisa was on her way out the door in 1987.[1]

We did not have feminist mentors. We barely had women professors. But the few we knew were famously overworked. Now we were too. That is how we came to reduce our lives as feminists in academia to a motto: *Innovation Is Overtime.*

Of course, at the time Jeani could never have formulated such a dictum to describe the life of the venerated professor. Nor could she have anticipated how closely her own academic life would subscribe to it. We started this essay hoping to figure out how she—that is, we both—got there.

Our goal changed over the course of the writing. We discovered that what we were calling "innovation is overtime" is already widely recognized as something that impairs academic advancement, especially for women and members of minority groups.[2] Why bother writing to testify to the truth of an already well-documented phenomenon? How much more interesting it would be to analyze what made us susceptible to this message in the first place. As highly privileged professionals, we were neither coerced into overwork by the mechanized pace of a factory line nor compelled to take on multiple jobs by low wages and poor benefits. Even before tenure, we enjoyed a flexibility that any other worker would kill for (epitomized by the sabbaticals).

Could it be that we were not just exhausted but also *empowered* by the pace of our lives? This suggestion opened up a whole new set of questions for us: How did we come to identify as politically committed academics? How did we get sold on the idea that the university can be a force for progressive political change, and that we should count our politically committed academic labors as overtime? By what institutional rhythms had we come to take pleasure in working to exhaustion?[3]

The result of our writing is that we no longer regard "innovation is overtime" as a simple fact of academic life. We think of it as a subsidy—ethical not financial—that funds programs that are necessary to the university's public mission but that do not materially enhance its profit margins. What we experienced as "innovation" is part of a larger story of the way that corporate funding and corporate logics are restructuring public universities in a time of state budget cuts to higher education.[4] We observe that the University of Minnesota has been reluctant to sacrifice all the programs that are vestiges of its land-grant public mission (at least *so far*). Yet because such programs are not good prospects for corporate sponsorship, their funding needs to come from elsewhere. This is where the labors of faculty and, just as crucially, staff who can be mobilized to work "overtime" come in. Our thesis is that the University of Minnesota counts on the labor that is motivated by the ideal of "innovation" and the commitment to "overtime,"[5] even as those of us who perform it imagine ourselves to be engaged in more or less radical acts of resistance against canonical curricula, traditional pedagogy, and the intrusion of market rationalities into the academy.

We present this not as a generalizable thesis but as a provocation. We recognize that academic reward structures and work loads vary widely. This is true even within the same institution, let alone among liberal arts colleges, research universities, and community colleges, or between public and private schools. We do not claim to be representative. Instead, we hope that our own reflections will prompt faculty, staff, and graduate students to reflect in turn about how their institutions work, and about the inequities that their work habits perpetuate.

Is the University in Ruins?

We begin by considering the structural context in which we acquired our work habits: the transformation of the university by neoliberal privatization.[6] We both started at the University of Minnesota around 1990, which was a moment of multiple contradictions. There was an economic downturn. Academic jobs were scarce, yet innovative and politically radical programs were beginning to have their own tenure lines. In the popular media and on talk radio, there raged a political backlash against "academic radicalism." By this time, liberal had become the "L" word, and students had stopped protesting the military-industrial complex to take on (in their words) the "political correctness" of the campus radicals who were their professors. Conservatism gained momentum outside the academy, yet political critique was being institutionalized within.

We are of "the bust" generation, hired in the trough between two anomalous periods of unprecedented academic growth. On one side, there was the boom of the late 1960s to mid-1970s, a period at the University of Minnesota when political activists-turned-academics found jobs and carried their political commitments with them. Minnesota was among the first wave of institutions to create such innovative programs as women's studies, African American studies, American Indian studies,

and more. On the other side, there was a hiring spike in the mid-1990s that was funded by the astronomical stock market of that time. At the University of Minnesota, 40 percent of the 540 faculty in the College of Liberal Arts were hired between 1998 and 2004; they arrived in cohorts of 40 to 90 not only to fill vacancies but to take up newly created assistant professorships in comparative literature, cultural studies, women's studies, American studies, Afro-American studies, Asian studies, American Indian studies, and more. As "the bust" generation in between, we are a cohort so small we are barely visible as such. The year we arrived, 1990, the college made 9 hires, only 3 of them assistant professors.

Being hired in a recession taught us an important lesson in academic demographics: the vicissitudes of state budgets and political agendas take a toll on department cultures and program innovation. We were among very few untenured faculty in our respective departments—history and political science—for almost a decade. The two-year pay freeze and hiring freeze that followed immediately upon our arrival locked that demographic into place throughout the College of Liberal Arts. Hiring had been so rare that departments had few—if any—systems in place for mentoring newcomers. Sometimes we did not learn that there were protocols, from the very simple (such as how to order books or arrange for xeroxing) to the very significant (such as how to assemble materials for annual review) until we set someone off by violating them. Lacking in-rank comrades, we formed cohorts not within departments but across them. For our first years here, we could name practically every assistant professor. Especially the women, the American Indians, African Americans, and other "targets of opportunity"—hires made to redress social inequalities—who kept turning up in predictable roles on college- and university-wide committees. And we turned up a lot because the ratio of bodies to committees meant that our services were frequently in demand.

In that tight job market, we considered ourselves lucky to have been hired and especially fortunate to have landed jobs at a place that housed so many cutting-edge academic initiatives. But there was a downside. We benefited by that tide of innovation but were too few to assume the mantle of perpetuating it.

Neoliberalism, which has prompted deep cuts in public spending on such social investments as education, health, and welfare, can be made to explain the squeeze on universities, especially state-funded ones. This is Bill Readings's brilliantly provocative thesis: "The University is not just

like a corporation: it is a corporation."[7] For Readings, the emergence of the corporate university marks the end of the nineteenth-century idea of the university as model public, a market enclave that was to provide both an escape from and critical vantage point on competitive capitalism. Its foremost task was to turn students from self-interested individuals into public-minded citizens.[8] Readings argues that the advent of transnational capitalism evacuated this idea of a university in service to public values in favor of a business model organized by "the empty notion of excellence."[9]

What makes our experience at the University of Minnesota so surprising is that the wave of hiring that began around 1995 went *against* neoliberal trends. During this period, the university did invest millions of dollars—many of them corporate-sponsored—in fields capable of generating "potentially profitable information" for a restructuring economy.[10] But this pattern of expenditure did not come at the cost of investing in the liberal arts. The university allocated funds both to shore up traditional liberal disciplines and to create new initiatives such as an Asian American studies program and a women's studies PhD, which are unlikely to bring in multimillion dollar grants or to generate marketable knowledge. If Readings were absolutely right, those initiatives should not have happened. Was Minnesota an enlightened exception or an amendment to the transformation Readings describes?

The Minnesota example suggests that even the "corporate" university cannot afford to altogether abandon its identity as "model public." In fact, the ideological work it has always done for the nation-state may even intensify in a global economy. As Samuel Weber has observed, the drive to global competitiveness generates political and social costs (i.e., "negative externalities") for which profitability simply cannot compensate. There are "important functions left for nation-states, related to the organization of unprofitable but necessary social tasks, as well as to the solution of long-range problems whose temporal dimensions exceed the perspectives imposed upon corporations."[11] Foremost among these "unprofitable but necessary social tasks" will be that to which the university has traditionally been assigned: perpetuating faith in representative democracy. In the global economy, this will mean creating citizens for a multinational, multiethnic, multicultural worldwide public.

The university of the late twentieth century accomplishes this task, in part, by means of such hiring and curricular initiatives as founding African studies, women's studies, or GLBT studies programs, redesigning

philosophy and literature surveys to incorporate an "international perspective," and introducing U.S. and international cultural pluralism requirements into graduate or undergraduate programs. The advantage of such initiatives is that whereas they can be couched to potential funders and administrators in the recuperative language of "diversity," "public service," and "critical thinking," they can be put into practice in ways that work political transformation from within the university. They *can* be radical enclaves provided that faculty, staff, and graduate students are willing to work overtime to keep them going.

What we have observed at Minnesota is that although corporatization does not put an end to such "model public" initiatives, it changes the way they are institutionalized: on unequal terms with new fields that can promise marketable or market-oriented knowledges. The latter will be promoted for "donations or contracts emanating from the private, corporate sector."[12] Those who work on corporate-funded university initiatives enjoy disproportionately high salaries, reduced teaching loads, commodious facilities, and—crucially—generous staffing that spares them costly administrative labor. New fields and programs that cannot be sold to private and corporate donors will not be eliminated as simple market rationality would dictate. They will be subsidized by faculty and staff time instead of by corporate dollars. The result: the creation of a "public sector" within the corporate university.[13]

This rings true with Michael Hardt's observations regarding the dominant position of "affective labor" in the global capitalist economy.[14] Extending the logic of Hardt's analysis, instrumental rationality will not colonize all relations in the corporate university. On the contrary, there will be an increased emphasis on sociability, on community building, networking, mentoring, and the like, all of which produce feelings of purpose, engagement, and passion that translate directly into value for the university. In short, the university's public sector runs on affective labor.

All this is to say that at the University of Minnesota the nineteenth-century ideal of the university is not "in ruins." Our administrators sustain an investment in programs that incarnate the ideal of the university as model public at the same time as they launch initiatives in response to market logics. In fact, they count on the former—the nonmarketable innovations of faculty who practice critical pedagogies in the classroom, who revise their syllabi in light of new critical debates, or who found an intellectual initiative that takes its bearings from a political movement—

just as much as they do the latter. This does not make the University of Minnesota an enlightened exception to Readings's thesis. Quite the opposite. Whereas administrators count on these labors that do not produce commodifiable knowledge, they get away without having to fully *account* for them in the operating costs and reward system of the corporate university. These programs succeed because their costs are offset by the exertions of faculty and staff who invest their academic jobs with political meaning and, so, accept them as an "add-on" to their work load.

In this context, "innovation is overtime" no longer strikes us as a self-evident fact of academic life. It is the ethic that lends inevitability to this practice of subsidy, calls the "politically committed" academic and staff member into being, and lends the university's public sector an aura of resistance.

Work Ethics

It was a real turning point for us to conceive of "innovation is overtime" as an ethic instead of as the phrase that summed up the truth of our lives. Truths can only be testified to; ethics can be analyzed. An "ethic" as we understand it is not a principle. Instead, it is a way of thinking, perceiving, and reacting that takes hold through the "actual tangible procedures" that we perform everyday.[15] Ethical analysis is clearly different from the exercises that pass for ethical thinking in "The Ethicist" column in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine. The idea is not to apply principles to the dilemmas that arise out of everyday life but, rather, to call attention to the habits of thinking and perception that create the "everyday" from which those dilemmas seem to issue.[16] Such an understanding of ethical analysis calls for a break with the *New York Times* format: "Here is my situation, what should I do?" The alternative: "How did I get here?" and "What would it take to see this otherwise?"

As for the labors that we two innovators have taken on, we are reluctant to explain them by recourse to the Protestant "work ethic." No doubt laboring overtime to innovate is a habit of living that we take up as *individuals*. We imagine it variously as voluntary, as a duty, as a means to self-perfection or to political transformation. Our priorities become imbued with the arrogance of the very busy ("Is this the best use of my time?"). We hire people to do our shopping, clean our houses, do our laundry, cut our lawns, run our errands, raise our children—or we impose these labors on our mates—to find time for the work that only we